Reconfiguring the Traditional School

JAN UMFRAY, the editor of Principal Leadership, noted in the February 2001 issue that principals and teachers don’t have the luxury of waiting “for the next reform or faddish to be debated” for improving schools. “They must teach and lead today.” But this issue of the magazine of the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) also acknowledges that rethinking basic assumptions about schools and their structures can help. The theme of the issue, “Reconfiguring the Traditional School,” brings several models and restructuring ideas to light. Among the articles on that theme are two contributed by authors from CRESPAR/Johns Hopkins.

“‘Virtually every principal I interviewed displayed signs of clinical depression,’ observed a friend of ours whose dissertation studied a ‘year in the life’ of many middle school principals who are leading high-poverty schools in large U.S. cities.” That’s how Douglas J. Mac Iver and Robert Balfanz open their article “Committing to High Performance,” and how they acknowledge the daunting challenges of such leadership.

But based on their review of current research and their experience with the Talent Development Middle School Project, they articulate several principles that can “help all middle level leaders avoid common mistakes and realize broad-based, sustained achievement.” These principles include a deep conviction that students can learn and achieve at high levels; a relentless building of consensus around a shared vision of high performance; close attention by the principal to the curriculum; making sure that adequate materials are available on time; commitment to adequate instructional time, particularly in core subjects; ongoing, high-level professional development; attention to strong, personal bonds and relationships; and the establishment of meaningful school-family-community partnerships.

James M. McPartland and Will J. Jordan, in their article “Restructuring for Reform: The Talent Development Model,” hold that “nothing short of major restructuring of space, time, and role relationships” will rescue many large U.S. high schools from their circumstances of high dropout, low attendance, poor academic performance, and weak school climate. Working from the Talent Development High School (TDHS), a comprehensive reform model, they propose principles of that restructuring.

The large, anonymous high school should be broken into smaller units that are not only academically functional but supportive of nurturing, personal environments. The Ninth Grade Success Academy, several upper-grades career academies, and an after-hours alternative program contribute to these ends.

The rescheduling of time and extra help is essential to TDHS. Block schedules of two 18-week terms, with four 90-minute courses each term, are the norm. Ninth grade students who need it get “double-dosed” in English and math, with “catch-up” courses in these subjects during the first term.

The delegation of authority is important, from the general principal to academy principals, and from academy principals to faculty teams. The creation of mutual responsibility and support within each school-within-a-school is built through open communication and adequate time for planning.
FINDING THEIR VOICES

By Kathleen Kennedy Manzo
Education Week

PHILADELPHIA. Had anyone asked students at Jay Cooke Middle School a few years ago, “Does your voice count?” or “Can you make a change?” the definitive answer for most would have been “No!” For years, their blighted neighborhood on the north-central edge of Philadelphia has been a forgotten wasteland, suffering from gang conflicts, crime, and poverty. In its midst, the land, suffering from gang conflicts, crime, and poverty. In its midst, the school was no exception. The 80-year-old building was deteriorating, teacher morale was low, test scores lingered well below the state average, and more than three-fourths of students lacked basic skills in reading and mathematics.

But life within this school has been changing. Many of Cooke’s 950 fifth through eighth graders are finding a powerful outlet for expressing their concerns and frustrations, and, in the process, they’re discovering new motivation for learning.

Now, students seeking to answer those very questions are responding in a loud and resounding “Yes!” “I never thought anyone would listen to us,” says Leonard Bryant, who graduated from the school this past spring. But the youth’s view changed dramatically after a yearlong project based on the themes from a book about the civil rights movement. As part of the project, he and his classmates set out to evaluate the problems that plague their own community. They interviewed residents, conducted an inventory of abandoned houses and cars, and presented their findings, shy but sure, to the city’s mayor.

“We started to figure out which ways to get action,” Leonard says. And, he adds, “we started believing in ourselves.” Teachers at the school have started believing, too: that all students, despite difficult and varied backgrounds, can learn challenging academic content; that teachers can take charge of the classroom, collaborate with colleagues, and find creative ways to reach students; and that the administration cares about instruction and will provide much of the support they need to improve their teaching.

A three-year-old effort to revive Cooke Middle School through a more rigorous curriculum and student-centered teaching has enabled many here to flourish. Teachers no longer work in isolation, and their conversations are now more likely to concentrate on pedagogy and course content than on their frustrations with administrators or students. Children appear more interested in school, evidenced, educators say, in higher attendance, fewer discipline problems, and significant gains on state and other standardized tests.

“When I came in this school, it was dim and drab, and there was nothing going on,” says JoAnn Caplan, who is in her fifth year as principal. “[Now] there is a seriousness that kids regard school with,” she adds. “I’m seeing kids engaged in a way I haven’t seen them engaged before.”

Action-Based Curriculum

Attaining such results has been a challenge for middle schools in general, but especially for those beleaguered by urban woes.

At Cooke, 72 percent of students are African-American; 17 percent, Asian-American; 9 percent, Hispanic; and nearly nine in 10 are considered poor. A good number of incoming middle schoolers read below the 2nd grade level. And the latest scores on state tests indicate that, although results are improving, most students still lack basic skills in reading and math.

When Caplan, a seasoned middle school educator with a disdain for nonsense attitude. In an effort to reverse years of academic and financial mismanagement, she looked for an aggressive plan for change. Teachers also were eager to stimulate the academic life of the school. More than 90 percent of them approved Caplan’s selection of the Talent Development Model, a program for urban middle and high schools created by researchers at Johns Hopkins University’s Center for Social Organization of Schools.

Coupled with other efforts—the National Science Foundation’s urban systemic initiative, grants for educational technology, the division of the school into three small learning communities, and a computer-assisted remedial program in math and reading—the Johns Hopkins initiative got off to a quick start. It was enough to satisfy administrators of the Philadelphia district when they targeted Cooke for outside assistance three years ago. As an academically substandard school, Cooke had to respond to the district’s demand for a cohesive improvement plan.

“This is a school that realized it needed some serious help before the district said officially that it needed some serious help,” says Douglas Mac Iver, a principal research scientist at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore. “They were committed to a fully developed [improvement plan].”

The Johns Hopkins model combines standards-based curriculum, hands-on instructional techniques, and intensive teacher professional development to enable all students to master challenging subject matters. The goal is to have all students taking algebra, reading and analyzing high-quality literature, conducting science experiments, and researching historical documents by the 8th grade.

Teachers at the school have access to as much as 38 hours of training in their subject areas and in teaching their students test-taking strategies. While the after-hours training is paid, attendance is optional for teachers under their union contract. All but one staff member has attended the workshops, which are held on evenings and weekends and during the summer. Johns Hopkins has an agreement with St. Joseph’s University in Philadelphia to give interested teachers graduate credit for their work.

Consistent and extensive professional development in each subject area is critical.
to this school’s attempts to move forward, according to Mac Iver, who helped design the model. Professional development “is even more crucial in a high-poverty school where many teachers without good professional-development opportunities find it very difficult to offer solid content at all,” Mac Iver says. “Students in those schools have lost years” of learning because of inadequate teaching, he says.

‘Clutch and Grab’ Assistance

Though Cooke Middle School has a cadre of seasoned teachers, many others are not expert in their disciplines or have limited teaching experience. In what local education advocates have called “Philadelphia’s predicament”—a term that characterizes the plight of many urban schools—Cooke officials have trouble recruiting and retaining qualified teachers, especially in mathematics and science. Last school year, Caplan was unable to fill three vacancies until February, and two of those teachers, feeling overwhelmed, left before the end of the school year. Four of her 65 teachers were not certified, while four others were considered long-term substitutes. Most of the science and math teachers did not have adequate backgrounds in their subjects.

That’s when Debbie Ryan and other instructional coaches assigned by Johns Hopkins and the district make the biggest difference, Mac Iver says. Ryan, a teacher on special assignment for the district, visits math teachers in the school one day a week. She helps teachers write lessons, incorporate carefully crafted games that help students learn basic concepts, and become familiar with the Everyday Mathematics and Transition Mathematics programs devised by the University of Chicago School Mathema-tics Project.

But Cooke teachers aren’t entirely satisfied with prescheduled, topic-specific coaching sessions. They have perfected what Ryan calls the “clutch and grab technique.” It is the rare occasion when she can walk through a hallway without being spotted.

“If they know I am in the building, teachers constantly peer out of their classrooms and grab the support they need,” Ryan says. “They’ll say, ‘I need help teaching this,’ or ‘Do you have any ideas for that?’”

Ryan obliges with a mini-lesson, a suggestion for applicable materials, or a promise to come back with more ideas. Coaches in other subjects are in similar demand. The attention to teacher support and curriculum is paying off.

After Cooke struggled to phase in algebra over the past two years, all 8th graders are taking the subject, seen as a “gatekeeping” course for higher-level studies. Some will be ready to take a placement exam allowing them to enroll in advanced math in high school. A tracking system, in which some students were steered toward easier courses, has all but disappeared at the school. Teachers say they are excited again about teaching, and are more confident that Cooke is preparing students for a promising future.

Many of the teachers praise the Talent Development initiative for giving structure to the curriculum and consistency to teaching throughout grades and subjects.

“It completely changed our approach to teaching,” says Joan Pasternak, an 8th grade reading/language arts teacher.

Pasternak’s class used The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963 as the basis for the year-long project. The book, selected from a list of suggested titles from Johns Hopkins, chronicles a black family’s road trip from Flint, Mich., to the mother’s ancestral home in the South and the impact the region’s racial turmoil has on the parents and children.

After reading the book, students designed art, English, and community-service activities around its essential questions: “Do our voices count?” and “Can we make a difference?” Pasternak’s students, who fall under the Business Entrepreneurship Service Training, or BEST, small learning community, also used computers to research and compile their information.

“It was an amazing experience,” Pasternak says. “They saw how people make a difference ... and they saw how they can make a difference in their communities.”

Gaining Ground

They’ve made a difference within the school as well. After two years in the program, students at Cooke showed twice as much achievement growth in reading and math as students at a similar school used as a control group. The Cooke students gained an average 14 percentile points.

In 1997, the average 5th grader entering Cooke was reading below the 7th percentile, according to results of the Stanford Achievement Test-9th Edition. By the 7th grade, after two years of participating in the Johns Hopkins program, those students scored in the 27th percentile. The increase puts them on track to read on grade level by the time they graduate from 8th grade.

While some of those gains may be attributed to teachers’ efforts to familiarize students with different types of test questions—in the past, many students simply left unfamiliar open-ended questions blank because they found them intimidating or confusing—the bulk of the improvements can only be chalked up to genuine achievement, Mac Iver says. “You can’t fake the kinds of longitudinal gains we are seeing in their students,” he says.

Teachers here are making their own recommendations for improving the Talent Development model. One group is writing a teachers’ guide for the program that adapts the model for students who are learning English as a second language. Cooke educators have also conceived and implemented ways to head off potential academic and discipline problems.

Students discuss a variety of social issues—from anger to health matters—in a daily “instructional forum,” which is incorporated into the lunch period. The forums provided an outlet for the boys and girls last school year when students were injured in gang wars off campus. The sessions have also helped extinguish student conflicts.

The school’s Golden Attitude Club, which accepts students committed to responsible behavior on the recommendations of teachers and parents, has swelled from a handful of members three years ago to one-fourth of the student body. Club members are rewarded with special privileges, field trips, donated prizes, and discounts to local restaurants and retail stores.

But the rising expectations here have provided longer-lasting rewards for students as well, teachers say. “These students had pipe dreams before,” Pasternak says. “They are now real dreams. They’ve shown themselves for what they can do,” he adds. “Now, they really see that there is an option open to them.”

This article, which appeared in the October 4, 2000 issue of Education Week, was reprinted with permission. The article can also be found at www.edweek.com.
JHU to Host Spencer Postdoctoral Fellowship Program

THE JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY Center for Social Organization of Schools (the Hopkins host for CRESPAR), in partnership with the Department of Sociology, has been awarded a Research Group Fellowship Program by the Spencer Foundation. Three postdoctoral fellows under this sponsorship will come to JHU in 2001, and another three in 2002, to work on CRESPAR and related research and development on improving education for students at risk. Each postdoctoral appointment is expected to last two years.

The Research Group Fellowship Program was awarded competitively, after Hopkins and other universities and research centers undertook six-month research and planning processes for the program. Karl Alexander of Sociology and James McPartland of CSOS will direct the fellowships. In addition to these individuals, the research and proposal effort was undertaken by Geoffrey Borman, Robert Cooper, Marc Cutright, Joyce Epstein, Will Jordan, Elizabeth Kemper, Edward McDill, and Stephen Plank.

Fellows will be drawn from a variety of social science disciplines, and are required to be within five years of the awarding of their terminal degree. In addition to a salary, fellowship benefits include research and conference funds, among other support.

The proposal that won Spencer Foundation support proposed a twenty-point model for postdoctoral sponsorship and the expected outcomes of the experience. Research that supported the proposal included visits to exemplary social-science postdoctoral programs around the country.
SYMPOSIUM ON AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE ACHIEVEMENT

CRESPAR/HOWARD UNIVERSITY, in partnership with the National Institute on the Education of At-Risk Students presented a “Symposium on African American Male Achievement” at Howard University on December 4 of last year.

The symposium sought to enhance dialogue on improving educational outcomes for African American males among government officials, researchers, foundations, and the policy community. More than 150 people were in attendance.

The presenters and their papers included: Oscar Barbarin, National Center on Early Development and Learning, University of North Carolina, Early Childhood Education of African American Males; Pedro Noguera, Harvard University, The Role and Influence of Environmental Factors on the Academic Performance of African American Males; James Davis, Jr., Temple University, Elementary Schools and African American Males; Margaret B. Spencer, University of Pennsylvania, The Impact of Cognitive and Affective Developmental Transitions on Achievement: An Identity-focused Cultural Ecological Approach; Ronald Ferguson, Harvard University, The Black-White Achievement Gap; Melissa Roderick, University of Chicago, What’s Happening to the Boys? A Close Look at the Early High School Experience and School Outcomes of African American Adolescents in Chicago; Jomills H. Braddock II, University of Miami, Athletics, Academics, and African American Males: Beyond the Myth; Will Jordan and Robert Cooper, CRESPAR/Johns Hopkins University, Racial and Cultural Issues Related to Comprehensive School Reform: The Case of African American Males; Olatokunbo (Toks) S. Fashola, CRESPAR/Johns Hopkins University, Developing the Talents of African American Students During the Non-School Hours.
RECENT RESEARCH ABSTRACTS

NATIONAL EVALUATION OF CORE KNOWLEDGE SEQUENCE IMPLEMENTATION:
Final Report
Sam Stringfield, Amanda Datnow, Geoffrey Borman, Laura Rachuba

This is the final report of a three-year evaluation of Core Knowledge Sequence implementation in 12 schools nationwide. The Core Knowledge Sequence, a whole-school curricular reform model, provides a planned progression of specific topics to teach in language arts, history, geography, math, science, and the fine arts for grades K-6. The major goals of this evaluation were to determine (a) the conditions under which Core Knowledge is likely to achieve reasonably full implementation, and (b) the effects of Core Knowledge Sequence implementation in a variety of contexts. The 12 Core Knowledge schools (six promising or new implementation sites and six advanced implementation sites) in this study are located in seven states (Colorado, Florida, Ohio, Maryland, Tennessee, Texas, Washington) and are situated in various community (urban, rural, suburban), racial, and socioeconomic contexts. Approximately half of the schools serve a majority population of students who are eligible for the federal free- or reduced-price lunch program. CRESPAR 49 (December 2000)

CORE KNOWLEDGE CURRICULUM:
Five-Year Analysis of Implementation and Effects in Five Maryland Schools
Martha Abele Mac Iver, Sam Stringfield, Barbara McHugh

This is the final report from a five-year, matched-control study of five Maryland schools that began implementation of the Core Knowledge Sequence in the fall of 1994. This report provides both longitudinal implementation and outcome data. The data allow for a few guarded statements regarding the extent to which Core Knowledge can assist schools in improving student achievement as measured by multiple achievement tests. The data are more valuable for examining the contexts and conditions in which a particular reform can/cannot enjoy relatively full implementation. CRESPAR 50 (January 2001)

EFFECTS OF SUCCESS FOR ALL ON TAAS READING:
A Texas Statewide Evaluation
Eric A. Hurley, Anne Chamberlain, Robert E. Slavin, Nancy A. Madden

This report presents analyses of data from the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) reading measures. It sought to evaluate the Success for All program’s outcomes in all of the 111 Texas schools that began the program from 1994-1997. TAAS reading scores are collected in all elementary grades starting in grade three, so the analyses presented here evaluate the effects of Success for All in the upper-elementary grades. This analysis is by far the largest evaluation of Success for All (in fact, it is the largest evaluation of any comprehensive reform model ever conducted), and it is the first large-scale study to examine results separately by student ethnicity. The Texas statewide data reported here show that Success for All schools are significantly and substantially closing the gap in TAAS reading performance between themselves and the far less impoverished schools in the rest of the state. CRESPAR 51 (January 2001)

ACADEMIC SUCCESS AMONG POOR AND MINORITY STUDENTS:
An Analysis of Competing Models of School Effects
Geoffrey D. Borman & Laura T. Rachuba

Based on national data from the Prospects Study, the authors identified the individual characteristics that distinguished academically successful, or resilient, elementary school students from minority and low-socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds from their less successful, or non-resilient, counterparts. They also formulated and tested four distinct models of the risk factors and resilience-promoting features of schools: (a) the effective schools model; (b) the peer-group composition model; (c) the school resources model; and (d) the supportive school community model. The results suggest that minority students from low-SES backgrounds were exposed to greater risks and fewer resilience-promoting conditions than otherwise similar low-SES White students. In general, though, the results supported the applicability of uniform individual and school-level models of academic resiliency to all low-SES students, regardless of their race. CRESPAR 52 (February 2001)

Full text versions of these and all CRESPAR Technical Reports can be found at our web site—www.csos.jhu.edu—or ordered from our Publications Department (see page 11).
States, Districts, and Schools Receive National Network's Partnership Awards

Two states, five school districts, and six schools received the first annual Partnership Awards from the National Network of Partnership Schools at Johns Hopkins University. The awards recognize excellence in developing and sustaining comprehensive programs of school, family, and community partnerships for at least two years.

Key contacts from sites in California, Connecticut, Illinois, Maryland, Michigan, Ohio, and Utah submitted applications that documented how they implemented essential elements of good partnership programs. They described and gave evidence for teamwork, leadership, plans for action, implementation, evaluation, and connections with the National Network of Partnership Schools. Applications were reviewed by six readers for the comprehensiveness of responses and strength of evidence.

The following states, districts, and schools received Partnership Awards for 2000: Connecticut State Department of Education, Bureau of School-Family-Community Partnerships; Ohio Department of Education, Office of School, Family, and Community Partnerships/Office of Partnerships and Public Engagement; Francis Polytechnic/North Hollywood Cluster, Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), CA; Grand Blanc Community Schools, Grand Blanc, MI; Los Angeles County Office of Education, Los Angeles, CA; Naperville Community Unit School District 203, Naperville, IL; Southern Area of Baltimore City Public Schools, Baltimore, MD; Bouquet Canyon Elementary School, Sau- gus, CA; Florence Nightingale Middle School, Los Angeles, CA; Franklin-York Learning Community, Massillon, OH; Mount Logan Middle School, Logan UT; Westlake Elementary School, New Carlisle, OH; Woodridge Primary School, Cuyohoga Falls, OH.

Dr. Mavis Sanders, Assistant Director noted, “The Partnership Award schools, districts, and states demonstrate that structures and processes can be developed to ensure that school, family, and community partnerships are planned, ongoing, and productively linked to school improvement goals.”

Summaries of approaches and activities of the Partnership Award recipients, as well as the award criteria, are on the Network’s web site, www.partnerships.org. Click on “In the Spotlight” and “National Network Announces Partnership Awards.” (Or, click to go directly to the list of Partnership Award recipients.)

NNPS congratulates the Partnership Award recipients for 1999-2000. The criteria for the awards set standards that all schools, districts, and states in the Network are expected to achieve. Applications for the 2001 awards will be issued in January.