

Reconfiguring the Traditional School

JAN UMPHREY, 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 fad 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.