

FINDING THEIR VOICES

By Kathleen Kennedy Manzo
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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 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 indifference and ineptitude, was assigned to Cooke, she came in with a no-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 a standards-based curriculum, hands-on instructional techniques, and intensive teacher professional development to enable all students to master challenging subject matter. 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

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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 Mathematics 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 peek 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 sup-

port 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.

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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 their 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." □

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