Successful Program Implementation in Urban Schools

Public clamor over public education's alleged failure to educate has gotten so loud it nearly drowns reports of outstanding urban school programs helping pupils succeed.

New curriculum developments, supervisory strategies and management techniques in 16 major city school systems nationwide are helping thousands of pupils improve their knowledge of basic skills, reach their communities' sociopolitical goals, and gaining praise for school people from proud parents. These new programs also are redefining the roles of supervisors and principals.

Attendance and standardized achievement test scores are up, dropout rates down. Children in Dade County's extended school day Title I program, for example, asked why they stay after school, said they remain for the two-hour sessions, "because we learn."

At an inner city high school in Philadelphia, pupils learn current factory techniques for repairing electrical equipment and appliances. Eighty percent to 90 percent of those enrolled are in class every day, compared with a 55 percent to 70 percent attendance rate in other secondary schools. The drop-out rate is nearly zero. Nearly 100 percent of the school's graduates are placed in jobs with a future.

Three years of research in these and 14 other major city school systems found several common elements contributing to effective educational programs.

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The over-sensationalized problems of large city school districts are real enough, but there is another side to the story. Investigations in 16 urban school systems disclose quality programs helping students learn.

One element is strong leadership combining knowledge of subject with new leadership techniques and a willingness to take risks for children. There was support from school administrators, school board members, community leaders, and other influential decision makers for implementing what frequently began as experimental programs requiring years to show results.

Another common element is a change in traditional school line and staff relationships giving principals more autonomy, authority, and control over how the instructional program is to meet its goals. This logically led to another commonality: school-based management and the freedom of local schools to adapt to change in their own way.

The investigation, called the Urban Education Studies, began in the spring of 1977 under direction from Francis S. Chase, Professor Emeritus and former Dean of Education at the University of Chicago. Operating funds came from a Spencer Foundation grant in 1977 and, the next year, the National Institute of Education.

Programs and renewal strategies were studied in Atlanta; Chicago; Cincinnati; Columbus, Ohio; Dade County, Florida; Denver; Detroit; Indianapolis; Milwaukee; New York; Norfolk, Virginia; Oakland, California; Philadelphia; Portland; and Toledo.

Teams of experienced urban school district personnel and university scholars spent a week in each district. Interviews, observations, and document analysis provided the data. Team members interviewed superintendents, other central office people, program directors and coordinators, principals and teachers, parents, children and youth. They saw meetings, instructional settings, and other interactions. Various planning and evaluation documents provided other information.

The programs investigated reflected a wide range of effort. Most districts implemented elementary and secondary school alternatives similar to those in Milwaukee, Cincinnati, and Columbus. Many, such as Dallas and Milwaukee, have substantially increased programming in the visual and performing arts.

Dade County, Dallas, Oakland, and Toledo inaugurated bilingual and multicultural education programs. Teaching in basic and life skills is another area receiving increased emphasis in several cities, including New York, Indianapolis, and Denver. Early childhood education projects have been implemented in Chicago, Philadelphia, and elsewhere to provide preschool children with experiences to help ensure
Vigorous leadership was evident at all levels of the school systems studied, central and regional offices, and local schools. They were also well-versed in program content. Leaders of the more promising programs took a variety of approaches and had a relatively complete and extensive conceptualization of the content and methodology of their programs. Their thorough understanding of the program enabled them to use formal and informal feedback more effectively and to adjust, modify, and otherwise improve program implementation.

New programs typically create new role expectations for people implementing them. Role expectations, personality, and need dispositions often create conflict and stress. Such conflict is particularly evident when people accustomed to one set of behaviors and rewards have to adopt new behaviors. Learning new behaviors requires time, the opportunity to learn new skills and understandings and technical assistance. Very often the problem in new program implementation is to create rewarding work.

The intrinsic reward of work can be increased by reducing barriers, being supportive in stress, and being sensitive to worker needs. One important barrier is lack of time to implement a new program. Personalizing role requirements reduces stress. One summary of the literature on curriculum and instruction implementation said, “If there is one finding that stands out . . ., it is that effective implementation . . . requires time, personal interaction and contacts, inservice training, and other forms of people-based support.”

In most cases observed in the studies, program directors knew a relatively full and complete implementation of the program would occur over a period of years. This realization allowed them to manage and coordinate resources to reach the desired level of implementation. It also meant system support for additional implementation expenses would not be withdrawn prematurely. Programs with the greatest degree of implementation, such as the Detroit Objective-Referenced Test (DORT) program in reading and Norfolk’s Designated Gifted Alternative Program, had been operating long.
enough to permit modification and distribution within their school districts.

Program users must have a thorough understanding of the program's conceptual basis, a mastery of its technical skills and knowledge to implement it. Initial and follow-up institutes and workshops systemwide and at school levels provide the opportunity to acquire and reinforce understandings and skills. School district specialists and consultants conducted these sessions, complemented by daily or weekly technical assistance. Teachers and principals were especially appreciative of this support. Denver's Instructional Improvement Project and Atlanta's Research Associates illustrate these approaches.

On-the-spot assistance helped with daily program operations and also provided a way to monitor implementation informally. Such technical assistance is being provided increasingly by specialists and resource teachers. They serve more than one school weekly, providing important communication between schools and transmitting practical knowledge. These specialists exchange information, too, when they meet for inservice training and planning sessions, improving their practical knowledge even more.

Paradoxically, such day-to-day service is going on in spite of a general reduction of supervisory personnel. Aggressively seeking and securing external funding for specific programs has contributed to these districts' ability to provide such support. Another contributing factor is the increased responsibility for educational and instructional programs taken by school building administrators. As a result, technical assistance is targeted to new and/or mandated efforts, rather than the "regular" program. These role changes have been supported and encouraged by top leaders. They consistently have supported the principals and directed former supervisors to support them.

Another important stress-reducing kind of support was available by virtue of personalized role expectations. Program leaders and principals understood not all people have the same levels of desire, understanding, and ability to implement a program, and they allowed for these differences. While expectations of the programs' implementation remained constant, the time taken to realize them varied.

Large urban schools for several decades have had a relatively large curriculum supervision division or department. This organizational arrangement has been modified in several of the districts, studied and disbanded in others. Principals have been given increased responsibility in these areas. Supervisors are being assigned as facilitators, resource teachers, and specialists.

In Detroit, Denver, Atlanta, and Dade County, principals are responsible and accountable for curriculum and instructional leadership. New York City's School Improvement Project encourages principals to create effective schools.

A combination of new roles for former supervisors and increased curriculum and instructional responsibilities for principals creates a potential for conflict and confusion. Principals in the most promising programs readily accepted the increased accountability. People in new roles understood and accepted their responsibilities to provide assistance and help obtain resources.

State and local initiatives in response to pressures for greater accountability led many large urban school systems to implement various forms of school-based management. This technique and its processes require all systemwide and site-specific goals and objectives to be included in action plans for an academic year. Test scores, as well as other data, and judgments by the professional staff are the basis for such plans. Regular meetings provide for monitoring school progress during the year.

It is common for such building-level planning to be conducted by teams, as in Detroit, Atlanta, and New York. Plans are developed by principals, teachers, parents, and, sometimes, students. An important benefit is increased communication and knowledge about performance.

More impetus is provided when professionals meet regularly and interact on substantive matters. Such planning structures provide personal and informal coordination and evaluation, thus reducing the more bureaucratic aspects of administering a large organization.
Several school systems investigated in the Urban Education Studies program provide alternatives to traditional education by varying instructional methods, course content, or both. Many of these "magnet" schools are designed to increase voluntary attendance as part of a school district desegregation plan.

Milwaukee offers its students the most extensive alternative school program among the urban systems studied. Milwaukee has schools specializing in creative arts, foreign languages, and "open education," as well as Montessori schools and schools for gifted and talented students.

At the secondary level, students go to regular classes half the day and specialized classes the other half. Available courses include visual and performing arts; law enforcement; medical, dental, and other health services; transportation; diesel mechanics; agriculture as a business; marketing; word processing; tourism; recreation; and food preparation and handling.

Students in Milwaukee's creative arts schools score higher on achievement tests than those in conventional schools. Administrators attribute this to higher motivation and greater energy. Two deputy superintendents in key positions say schools now called "unusual" will become usual.

Detroit offers open education programs in elementary and middle schools. Its Burton International School is multiracial, multicultural, and multilingual, and students get a mix of fresh ideas. Junior high students, for example, learn banking procedures and prospects for a career by working in a bank that has adopted their school.

Still another variation on the community involvement theme is played in Philadelphia, where businesses invest in materials, tools, and equipment to train "high risk" students (those most likely to fail or drop out) in educational facilities run like businesses.

In one academy factory students punch a time clock after regular class hours and work on an assembly line repairing electrical appliances. Students seek and then work on contracts to rehabilitate electrical components.

Research shows higher attendance rates and fewer dropouts at such schools compared to more traditional facilities.

The three-year study concludes that alternative schools serve several purposes successfully. They improve academic achievement, reduce racial isolation, provide a way to desegregate schools voluntarily, and increase social integration. They also respond to and fulfill community desires and interests.