

Miracle on Main Street: The St. Louis Story

St. Louis' conversion to middle schools improved test scores, discipline referrals, and attendance.

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How are effective schools developed today in the nation's urban areas when retrenchment, decline in enrollment and resources, decaying buildings, and despair are the watchwords? Should we begin to write the epitaph for large city school districts in America? Where can we look for hope?

We think the answer can be found right on Main Street in Middle America—in the St. Louis City School District to be exact. Faced in 1980 with all of the problems listed above, along with court-ordered desegregation and a total district reorganization, St. Louis has indeed produced “A Miracle on Main Street.”

The St. Louis story is worth telling because success was not achieved through a massive infusion of dollars (actually school funds were dramatically reduced) or through isolated “media-hyped” programs, but through good old-fashioned curriculum planning and development, much hard work, and a total commitment of teachers, administrators, and board members. We feel the lessons learned in St. Louis can be helpful to other urban districts as they attempt to develop effective schools in the 80s.

Background

Prior to 1980, the St. Louis School District was organized into grades K-8 and 9-12. During the 1980-81 school year, the school board, as part of a desegregation plan, reorganized the district into grades K-5, 6-8, and 9-12.

At a top-level planning meeting attended by board members, the superintendent's staff, and consultants, a commitment was made not just to reorganize schools, but to develop effective school programs at all levels with initial efforts aimed at the middle school program.

The board, led by then superintendent Bob Wentz, made a commitment to a comprehensive three- to five-year middle school plan that would include a needs assessment, total program devel-

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opment and articulation, and a systematic inservice program. The plan's major goals were to produce school programs that improved student achievement, student attendance, school discipline, and racial harmony in newly integrated schools. While the development of the new middle school program was under way, the K-12 instructional program was to be reviewed and totally revised by 1985.

Thus the St. Louis School District, faced with all of the obstacles found in other districts, undertook an ambitious program designed to create effective schools at all levels. Key elements were total involvement of teachers, students, administrators, and parents in the development of the plan; an extensive needs assessment; and a written Comprehensive Plan to be followed in the next five years.

Planning and Development

Because the "new kid on the block" was the middle school, the major emphasis in planning began with board appointment of a Middle School Coordinating Group composed of parents, students, teachers, administrators, and district personnel. Since middle schools were implemented in the fall of 1980, the Group began its work during the first year of the new middle school organization. It is interesting to note that a new integration plan was implemented on September 2, 1980, the day of the first meeting of the Coordinating Group. Other major city school districts have experienced problems on that first day of desegregation, but St. Louis schools opened calmly. As reporters cooled their heels outside the superintendent's office waiting for a statement about the first day of busing in St. Louis, Superintendent Wentz was across town talking to the Middle School Coordinating Group about building a quality middle school program. St. Louis was off to a good start.

The first year of planning included development of goals for the middle schools; orientation and awareness sessions for middle school teachers, administrators, parents, and community persons; a massive needs assessment effort reaching all teachers and administrators in the middle school along with many students, parents, and community persons (over 1½ million pieces of information were gathered), and forma-

tion of broadly based committees to develop the major components of the Comprehensive Plan for Middle School Development. Those components were:

- Overall Design
- Program Development
- Staff Development
- Evaluation.

Progress of the work of the Middle School Coordinating Group was published in three reports that were distributed to all interested persons in the school district. Oral reports were also made periodically to the school board and Desegregation Monitoring Committee.

Results

Results of the Comprehensive Plan for Middle Schools in St. Louis include the following:

1. The successful organization of 25 middle schools that feature middle school concepts such as family teaming, extensive guidance and advisory experiences, interdisciplinary instruction, a broad extensive exploratory program, and an intensive basic skills program.
2. The development of program descriptors and standards. Each school faculty develops a school plan yearly to achieve standards not yet reached. The St. Louis Middle School Standards are the most comprehensive standards ever written for middle schools.
3. A Staff Development Plan based on the needs assessment that is intended to reach every middle school teacher and administrator as well as support personnel.
4. Total subject area revision beginning with language arts and mathematics. This K-12 effort involving large numbers of teachers is being led by the Division of Instructional Planning and Program Development. The result will be a totally revised K-12 curriculum.
5. Formation of a St. Louis City League of Middle Schools designed to provide self-help and support for program improvement. Schools share teachers and administrators to improve teaming, related arts, scheduling, activity programs, and teacher-advisory programs.
6. A revised reporting system emphasizing developmental progress of students.

The evaluation of progress toward the goal of exemplary middle schools has



included both process and product measures, and results are promising.

California Achievement Test results indicate dramatic student improvement, especially at the middle and secondary levels. Particularly promising is the fact that eighth graders are reaching national norms; April 1982 test scores in reading comprehension were 8.5; in language, 8.7; in math, 8.7—gains that far exceeded expectations.

Other evaluation measures indicate better student attendance, fewer discipline referrals, and fewer student suspensions. Fourteen of the 25 middle schools demonstrated increases in attendance. In 1980-81, attendance was at about 90 percent and, in one year's time, increased to 92 percent.

There were 2,848 discipline referrals from the middle schools during the 1980-81 school year. As the middle school program was implemented and refined, referrals fell by more than half to 1,345 in 1981-82.

Implications

In spite of severe budget problems, court-ordered desegregation, and a new district organization, St. Louis is moving ahead in the development of truly effective schools. Visitors to St. Louis can find middle schools housed in depressed areas, yet discipline problems are few. Schools are clean; students are all in class and learning; enrichment opportunities are provided for every student; good teaching and administration exist; and pride in school, self, and others is evident.

What makes St. Louis successful is a belief that the talent and inspiration for helping students still exist in city school districts and good planning can help harness existing resources to make schools work. Perhaps that is the real "Miracle on Main Street." EL

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