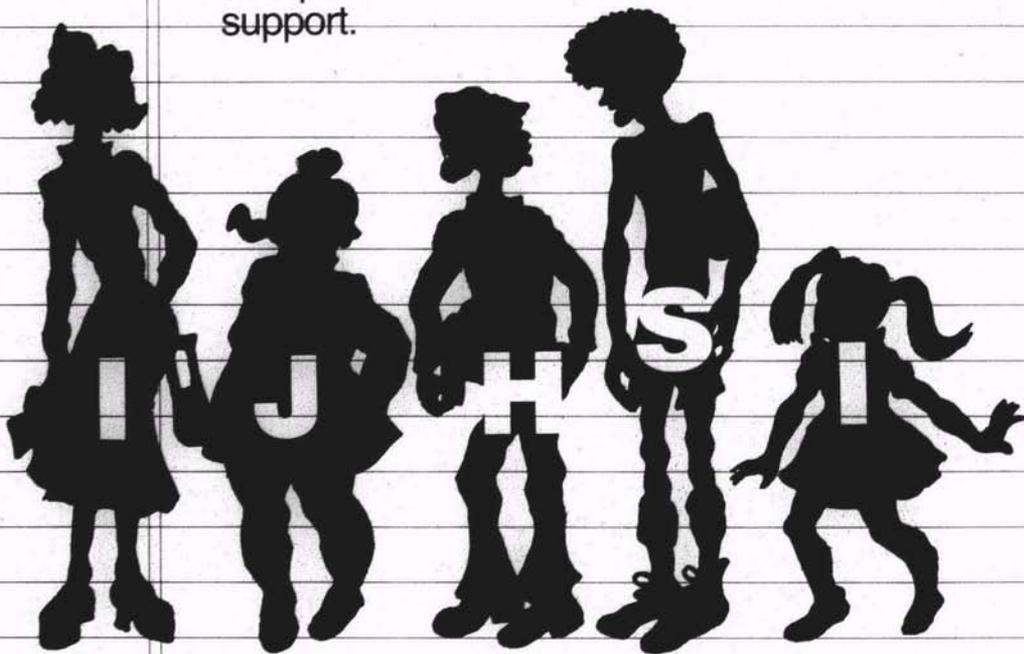


Turning Around Junior Highs in the District of Columbia

This superintendent-mandated program has improved test scores and brought about teacher, student, and parent support.



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Something had to be done about the junior high schools in the District of Columbia. The grade equivalent scores of ninth graders, which should have been 9.8 on nationally standardized tests, had been around 7.0 since 1973. These low scores were causing many higher achieving students to abandon the public schools to enroll in private schools—something no school system can afford in these times of declining enrollment and shrinking budgets.

As an imperative response in 1980, the Division of Program Development in central administration designed a plan for improving the junior high schools that year. The month was August and there was time only for a "top down" model, a program mandated by the superintendent, then Vincent Reed, rather than developed at the school level. It was hoped that if a program had the authority of the superintendent behind it, the junior high schools could begin their own "bootstrap" improvements.

Without additional resources, personnel, or time, what could be done? The best analogy is the story of "Stone Soup," in which some villagers don't believe they have the food to prepare a meal for a wandering visitor. The visitor, who produces a stone, says he'll make soup with it and whatever bits of vegetables and meat the villagers can add. Pulling their resources together, the villagers make a fine soup. Central administration offered little more than a stone in the form of an idea.

Their first step was to consider the opinions of junior high school principals and teachers. One teacher suggested that seriousness about study was a key requirement, in addition to smaller classes, enough books for students to take home, higher expectations, more

homework assignments, and more student writing. The most common complaints were the lack of discipline and low attendance. Research studies indicate, however, that discipline and attendance are secondary effects and not the causes of problems.

"Effective schools" studies showed that those schools that stated their goal to be achievement, and supported this goal with teacher emphasis, courses offered, and administrator rulemaking, had better test scores, regardless of the school's community and economic base.

After gathering opinions, test scores from each junior high school were examined to perhaps discover a local "effective" school. Several schools had scores above the national norm, but only one was located in a less affluent neighborhood.

This school, Jefferson Junior High, was located in a southwest Washington experimental community of new condominiums interspersed with subsidized row houses and apartment buildings. The school's students were similar to those from other neighborhoods in the city, but they had participated in prior years in a special program to improve achievement. The program had ended, but some of the personnel involved had remained at Jefferson and had developed their own strategies for improving test scores. Between 1978 and 1980 students' scores rose from 6.8 to 10.4 for ninth graders in reading and from 6.0 to 10.2 in mathematics. Clearly, something good was happening.

Over those years, Jefferson's assistant principal for instruction had analyzed each student's learning needs using the District of Columbia's own criterion-referenced tests. She provided this information and appropriate materials to each homeroom teacher. Students working below acceptable levels in mathematics and reading were targeted for two periods of reading and two periods of math, priority skills emphasis, small group instruction, peer tutoring, peer counseling, monitoring by the assistant principal, and parent feedback and participation.

Jefferson's program was chosen to be a model for the plan to improve all junior

high schools. This focus on improving achievement in reading and mathematics would alert schools and parents that learning, not time-passing, was the purpose of the junior high experience. The plan was called Intensive Junior High School Instruction or IJHSI.

IJHSI began by examining the number of students enrolled in elective reading and mathematics classes in School X and Jefferson. The contrast was glaring: School X, which had hardly any students enrolled in either remediation or advanced classes, had ninth-grade scores of 6.9 in reading and 7.5 in mathematics; Jefferson, however, had virtually as many students in such courses as communication skills, reading fundamentals, or creative writing, as enrolled in the required English. The same was true of mathematics.

The plan then called for review of the major areas of student weakness on standardized tests. The areas were vocabulary, comprehension, spelling, writing, grammar, fractions, algebra, and reasoning.

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Principals and teachers were reminded that students were entering junior high schools with better skills, due to the city's new competency-based elementary curriculum, and that many had mastered basic reading and computation, but needed more work in comprehension, analysis, and thinking. It was suggested that students were being held back because administrators and teachers weren't expecting enough of students or themselves.

Attention was then directed to the findings of the Beginning Teacher Evaluation Study in California and its findings on Academic Learning Time (ALT), which were adapted for our schools to increase student learning:

- Reduce all distractions and activities that take away from instruction, including time lost changing classes, announcements over the PA, assemblies, and other disruptions
- Provide more time for students to practice those things at which they succeed
- Continue to diagnose individual student skill levels and prescribe appropriate tasks; whole-class presentations are successful, but continue to give students as much individual feedback as possible
- Spend extra time to make sure all students understand the procedures when presenting a new task
- Encourage a learning environment characterized by student responsibility for academic work and by cooperation on academic tasks
- Provide more structured learning environments where students have less free time, more teacher direction, and each student seems to know what is to be done
- Share with the students the teacher's own value system and emphasis on academic goals

- Give students homework assignments as often as possible in order to extend Academic Learning Time

- Ensure that all students have books in all their subjects that they can take home.

General reaction to the Intensive Junior High School Instruction program was mixed. Several schools had already begun their own programs and IJHSI simply reinforced their activities. Other schools saw it as an imposition on their own prerogatives to design programs. Most schools though began to adjust their programs, inform students, and train teachers to support IJHSI concepts.

Training for principals began in December with a half-day workshop. Each principal was given the book, *Time to Learn*, prepared by the National Institute of Education, which discussed all aspects of Academic Learning Time. One monthly faculty meeting at each school was required to focus on IJHSI. A half-day workshop on ALT was given for two teachers and the principal from each IJHSI school. And all IJHSI interventions were enforced through individual teacher and administrator evaluations.

Parents Support IJHSI

One fall activity was the preparation of Parent Agreements, which had been used successfully by other school systems in the nation. Parents were asked to agree to support IJHSI by providing a learning environment and certain educational activities at home, to sign the brochure, and return it to school. At four schools over 90 percent of the parents signed and returned the Parent Agreements; the average return rate was 45 percent.

Other activities were designed to maintain the IJHSI momentum. Decals for students to affix to their notebooks,

with space for the student's name and school, were printed at a vocational high school specializing in graphic arts.

When James Guines became acting superintendent in January 1981, he continued to support the program and initiated new activities to attract community attention. Arrangements were made with the public libraries to register students for library cards at their schools, and a popular disc jockey interspersed his commentary with a feature called "IJHSI Spotlight."

The measure of success was the city-wide test scores for ninth-grade students. In spring 1981, achievement was up to 7.7 in reading, an improvement of 0.4 over spring 1980, and up to 8.0 in mathematics, an improvement of 1.0 over the previous year. The reading grade may have built on a moderate improvement over the past three years; the mathematics score, however, was a radical departure from prior years.

In 1981-82, the District of Columbia's new superintendent, Floretta McKenzie, endorsed the IJHSI program, and members of the school board publicly supported it. Parent Agreements were again sent home for signatures, training in ALT was given to two teachers from each of 15 schools, and schools developed their own strategies for raising achievement under the IJHSI rubric. Student scores continued to improve to 7.9 in reading and 8.7 in mathematics.

IJHSI presents a model for those interested in determining whether a program initiated at the top of a school system hierarchy can, in fact, be accepted and successfully implemented at the local school level. Without a careful study, it cannot be shown conclusively that IJHSI brought about the achievement; however, no other interventions occurred that might have caused the scores to rise. □

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