

Learning From an Outcomes-Driven School District

By reorganizing all aspects of schooling, the Johnson City, New York, schools have raised both standards and achievement in a community historically beset by low academic expectations.

In Johnson City (New York), the school system has systematically reorganized to achieve extraordinary student outcomes.¹ Students in Johnson City achieve at a level significantly higher than the modest expectations "appropriate" for a lower middle class community with virtually no managerial or professional citizens. Despite a free or reduced price lunch population of over 20 percent, a sizable Asian immigrant population with limited English proficiency, and the second highest poverty rate of the 10 urban districts in Broome County, district students steadily increase the margin by which they exceed the national norms on standardized tests. By the time students complete the 8th month of the 8th grade, they score, on average, at grade 11 or above in both reading and mathematics. By the time they finish the 8th grade, at least 75 percent of the students are at least six months above grade level.

Laudable test scores such as these, however, do not adequately reflect the district's goals. As its mission statement says, Johnson City's goal is for all students to learn well what the schools want them to learn. Many districts could subscribe to that mission statement and would measure the achieve-

ment of that learning primarily, if not exclusively, through standardized tests. But in Johnson City five exit behaviors further define this mission:

1. Students are to have high self-esteem both as learners and as persons.
2. They will be able to function at high cognitive levels, not just at the

lower levels expected on standardized tests.

3. They will be good problem solvers, communicators, and decision makers; will be competent in group processes; and will be accountable for their own behavior.

4. They will be self-directed learners.

Photographs by Wayne Barlow



When the former head of the shoe factory periodically reminded youngsters they did not need further education, he created a community norm now being overturned as school district leaders emphasize achievement and opportunity.



In Johnson City, New York, a factory town, students consistently score above national norms on achievement tests despite the second highest poverty rate among urban districts in the county.

5. They will have concern for others.

Mastery Learning-Based Instruction

The restructuring which is the point of this article is most obvious when one looks at the instructional program. Over time Johnson City has developed a clear and consistent definition of the instructional process. Based on mastery learning, that process ensures, first, that there is a high degree of correspondence between instructional objectives, what is taught, and what is tested; and, second, that more time for learning and more instruction are available for those who need it.

The district begins by assessing whether students have the prerequisites for the unit. If they do not, then the teacher provides instruction on the prerequisites. Then comes cue setting, a brief explanation of the unit's objectives, and a description of what students will be able to do and will know after mastering the unit. Next comes the "best shot" instruction; this is large-group instruction that the teacher thinks has the best chance of enabling all the students to achieve mastery. Following this instruction is guided practice in which the teacher informally evaluates how well each student is do-

ing. The emphasis is always on successful practice; no child, for example, is asked to do homework that he or she does not know how to do.

When the teacher is confident that most, if not all, students can demonstrate mastery, he or she administers a formative test on the unit's objectives. Students who have mastered the objectives then work on enrichment activities, while the others receive corrective instruction. Thus, students who need more time and instruction re-

ceive it, and those who do not are freed to work on other things. Before the teacher goes on to the next unit, students take a summative test on the current one.

Instead of being graded on each unit, students are certified either as having mastered the unit's objectives or as not having completed the unit. The latter students are responsible for completing the unit at a mastery level after school or at other available times before the end of the course. Even though the class moves on to another unit, the teacher continues to work with students who have "incompletes" on previous units. Course grades are given every 10 weeks. The lowest level of achievement for which students can receive credit for a unit is 80 or 85, depending on the subject and level. If a student scores lower than that, he or she gets an incomplete, not a failing grade.

Restructured Responsibilities

An important part of the teaching-learning process is the restructuring of responsibility. Students, for instance, may not take a second summative test on a unit until they can prove that they have engaged in additional learning activities designed to help them achieve the unit's objectives. A student who has not done his or her homework hardly qualifies for extra consid-



In a setting where subsidies and company benefits were taken for granted, students are now learning to take responsibility for their own preparation.

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eration; rather it is up to the student to prove that he or she deserves corrective instruction by cooperating in the instructional process.

Not only does this procedure reduce demands on teacher time, but it also reinforces the district's stated goal that students will become self-directed learners accountable for their own behavior. Students know that if they assume responsibility for their part of the teaching-learning process, then they will receive additional time and instructional help. When students do not achieve—because of a lack of cooperation and effort, poor attendance, or a discipline problem—a districtwide policy based on William Glasser's Reality Therapy is uniformly applied to help them take responsibility for their own behavior.

The instructional process does not prescribe or preclude any particular teaching strategy. Rather it is the teacher's professional responsibility to select from a wide range of instructional practices those that accommodate the learning styles of different students: lecture, discussion and interaction, reflecting on and analyzing experience, integrating reflective analysis into concepts, practicing clearly defined concepts and skills, adding something of oneself to that which is being studied, and so on. Here is where staff development programs in—for example—Reading in the Content Areas, Cooperative Learning Groups, and Reality Therapy are most important: they expand the teacher's repertoire of instructional tools.

Efforts to achieve the district's exit behaviors have led to a restructuring of the total curriculum. Programs such as Talents Unlimited increase student creativity and self-esteem. Other programs help all students learn to pursue through independent investigations those higher cognitive goals that students have identified as important. Through Cooperative Learning Groups, for example, students gain process skills, and through volunteer community activities, they learn to express their concern for others. For example, two years ago the district's

2,700 students raised \$15,000 to help the town's senior citizens build a center. And last year at Thanksgiving, the students collected more food for the needy than did the students from all 11 other school districts in the county.

Instructional Leadership Is Central

Leadership in the district is first and foremost *instructional* leadership. Every aspect of school life is subject to change if that change increases the probability of achieving the district's desired outcomes. It is not enough to introduce a new instructional process; any innovation must be supported by a curriculum, by school practices, and by organizational structures, all intentionally aligned toward achieving the same outcomes. And that intentional alignment does not stop with school support systems but extends to the whole administrative system and to the board of education. School board policy requires all decisions to be based on the best research literature available. Central administration is responsible for seeing that this intentional alignment of school practices with each other and with the research literature extends to staff development; to teacher evaluation; and to efforts to improve climate, solve problems, and manage the change and communications process.

For example, the attendance policy should support the instructional program; certainly it must not work against it by allowing a student to escape responsibility for his or her own learning. And the same is true for the system by which students are advanced from grade to grade. School board policies must be consistent with these efforts. Conscious attempts are made to develop and use models of change and communication that ensure that nothing is left to happenstance. Here and elsewhere instructional leadership from the superintendent and consequently from the rest of the administrative staff clearly is central to the district's success in promoting excellence in learning.

Typically, teachers are inundated with reading material about problems or practices. Then, loaded with new information on theory and research, they are given risk-free opportunities to develop programs consistent with that research and with district goals. Someone—a teacher or an administrator—will identify an instructional practice that promises to solve an existing problem or to improve achievement in some way. If it is consistent with the beliefs and practices of the district, then several people will learn all they can about it, usually by going to a training program at district expense. Then, with better knowledge of the practice, district staff will evaluate it in terms of its appropriateness for the district. If it is deemed appropriate, then the person or persons trained in that practice—called *core people*—make a presentation to the district's staff, inviting anyone interested to join them in its implementation. Core people thus become in-house trainers, gaining both expertise and a strong sense of ownership.

Staff Development Mastery Model

Johnson City School District also operates on a mastery model in staff development. Thus, innovations are not implemented districtwide simultaneously; rather, staff members learn and deploy at their own rates. The rule is "You don't have to cooperate, but don't get in the way."

The district has a clear procedure for career development. As a learner, a staff member first must master the facts about an innovation being implemented. Then comes application of the practice in controlled and predictable situations, as in implementing a unit guide prepared by someone else. Third, the teacher applies the practice in additional areas. And fourth, the teacher designs new courses or new units based on the practice.

As a teacher of teachers, he or she must first know the theory underlying the practice. Next comes modeling the practice for others. The third step in-

volves the planning, say, of unit guides to help others learn to apply the practice. Finally comes the coaching of other teachers. Teachers whose proposals to assume leadership in solving a district problem are accepted receive released time and any other resources needed to enable them to function in their new roles.

Although all teachers in Johnson City are on display every year when hundreds of educators visit the district, a second aspect of the staff development program places a number of teachers and administrators even more in the public eye. They are encouraged to become district spokespersons, serving as consultants to other districts that wish to learn about and perhaps adopt an outcomes-driven mastery model. All staff are encouraged to become experts in the instructional process; those who serve as consultants are those who, in addition to gaining expertise, also become adept at explaining the program and at helping others try it out. Although becoming consultants gives teachers and administrators motivation to become experts at what they do and provides them with both status and financial rewards, it costs Johnson City nothing. Any school employing the staff member pays not only a consultant fee but also for the substitute replacing the staff member while he or she is a consultant.

Overcoming Historical Obstacles

All this is not to say that the Johnson City School District has achieved perfection. Formidable problems still must be overcome. Johnson City bears the imprint of George F. Johnson, once head of the Endicott-Johnson Shoe Company, whose family name graces the town, the school district, and three of the four schools. Until his factory closed in 1960, George Johnson used to come to the high school to dissuade students from any aspirations for college; if his shoe factories were good enough for their parents, he told them, they were good enough for them. Johnson was a pioneer in pro-

"Students' aspiration levels are rising, as reflected in the number who take advanced placement courses and college admissions tests and in the number who win New York State Regents' scholarships."

viding medical benefits, parks, and subsidized housing and food for his workers, but he had no use for unions or colleges.

With such a history, the district has faced the challenge of finding ways to see that high school graduates have both the competencies and the credentials to go to college, whether or not they do so. Staff members must influence the values of both the community and the students so that their graduates will attain equality both in their post-secondary aspirations and in their achievements. In this long and difficult process, results are already being seen. Almost 70 percent of the district's graduates earn the more difficult Regents' diploma necessary for admission to the many campuses of the State University of New York, compared to a statewide average of less than 50 percent. That record is comparable to two of the three upper-middle class districts in the county and about

15 percentage points higher than the third.

Students' aspiration levels are rising, as reflected in the number who take advanced placement courses and college admissions tests and in the number who win New York State Regents' scholarships. The patterns of college attendance are also changing. More students are attending four-year institutions, and a greater number are sending transcripts to MIT, the University of Pennsylvania, Harvard, Stanford, and other high-status schools.

Pursuing Excellence

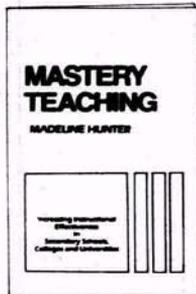
Johnson City is a shining example of a school district that has been systematically reorganized to raise both standards and achievement. Leadership has become, first and foremost, instructional leadership; and staff development has become a means for sharing both leadership and responsibility for solving problems. It is a lesson in

what can be done when a district commits every aspect of schooling to the pursuit of excellence. □

1. Johnson City's program has been recognized by the National Diffusion Network for its excellence and for the Outcomes-Driven Development Model the district created to restructure all aspects of district life in its objectives.

Author's note: The following research reports are available from me: "Excellence in an Outcomes-Driven School District: A Validation Study of the Schools of Johnson City, New York," September 1985; "Changes in Variance Under Mastery Learning" (with Maritza Moreno de Suarez), report presented at the Annual Meeting of AERA, Chicago, 1985; and "Evaluating a Mastery Learning High School," report presented at the Annual Meeting of AERA, Washington, D.C., 1987.

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