BLOWING THE TOP OFF URBAN EDUCATION: EDUCATIONAL EMPOWERMENT AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

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Many recent reform efforts are based on an underdeveloped notion of the relationships among culture, ideology, and school success, faulty assumptions about the organization and structure of schooling, and a questionable relationship between schooling and larger economic issues. In general, the reform movement has ignored the social construction of knowledge and classroom relationships in the context of power and privilege. Students and teachers mediate these social constructs to serve particular interests in a context informed by issues of race, class, gender, and ethnicity. Within the boundaries established by the recent educational reform movement, a structured silence has fallen over the links between schooling and the development of civic courage, educational equity, and a democratic society. Consequently, traditional efforts at school reform have yielded, at best, limited solutions and results.

What type of framework, then, will create the possibility for truly transforming public schooling into the engine of democracy? First, school reform needs to focus more explicitly on the democratic purpose of public education and the plight of the educationally disadvantaged students who are greatly underserved and whose growing dropout and illiteracy rates are a threat to the continuing struggle for democracy. Second, school reform needs to

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2The term *educationally disadvantaged student* is used to signify how the schooling process devalues the knowledge, culture, and experience that many children bring to the classroom so as to place them at an educational disadvantage. In no way does it suggest that these children do not have the ability to succeed and achieve. It suggests quite the opposite, that schools have been traditionally structured for them to fail.
provide alternatives to the existing organization and structure of public schooling that allow for change and build on the strengths of each school. Next, school reform must include the voices of teachers, administrators, parents, and students in developing programmatic solutions to the problems in their schools. Finally, teachers and administrators need to be educated as professionals who can diagnose problems, analyze existing theory and research, and conceptualize potential solutions. Thus, an educational framework must transform the organization and structure of schools, teacher-preparation programs, and educational policy to serve the needs and interests of a democratic society and the new underserved majority of educationally disadvantaged students. To be truly successful, the effort must emerge from the bottom up.

Educational reform needs to address the problems most apparent in urban centers where the educationally disadvantaged student population is rapidly replacing the previous middle-class majority. Educational reform must, therefore, provide a structure that enables teachers, administrators, parents, and community members to begin to address the problems facing their community. One such structure is Project SHAPE (Scott High Accelerated Program in Education), representing a cooperative effort among The University of Toledo, the Toledo Public Schools, the Toledo Federation of Teachers, and the Toledo Association of Administrative Personnel. This article identifies the problems that led to the need for educational reform at Scott High School, outlines the framework for Project SHAPE, and discusses the initial results.

PROBLEM IDENTIFICATION

The Toledo Public Schools face many problems identified in recent studies of urban school districts. High suspension rates, below-average attendance rates, low academic achievement scores, and serious reading deficiencies all point to the underachievement of disadvantaged students in Toledo's urban schools. During the 1986-87 academic year, 7,259 students were suspended a total of 12,521 times, resulting in an estimated 46,600 days of missed classes. Moreover, in a 1987 study of 3,312 school districts in the United States, Toledo ranked 10th in suspension rates when compared with the 100 largest districts. By the 1988-89 school year, the suspension, in-school suspension, and expulsion rates for the Toledo Public Schools had increased to 18,751. In the Toledo Public Schools, as in school systems throughout the nation, the

\[\text{\cite{Raywid87}}\text{,} \text{\cite{Sizer84}}\text{,} \text{\cite{Levin87}}\text{,} \text{\cite{Raywid87}}\text{,} \text{\cite{Sizer84}}\]
degree to which these educational problems affect a particular school building correlates closely with the socioeconomic level of the building's student population. Educational problems generally increase in quantity and severity as the socioeconomic level of the student population declines.

Jesup W. Scott High School and its feeder elementary and junior high schools offer examples of the correlation between low socioeconomic levels and school problems—academic underachievement, poor attendance, and disciplinary action. In 1987–88, 59 percent of the students from Scott High and two representative feeder schools fell below the 36th percentile on the nationally normed Iowa Test of Basic Skills or the Riverside Tests of Achievement and Proficiency (TAP), compared with only 39 percent for the entire school district. In 1989–90, the percentage of students falling below the 36th percentile on the Metropolitan Achievement Test (MAT) at these schools increased to 65 percent.

The average academic achievement levels of Scott's students have been consistently assessed as at least one standard deviation below the national mean in reading comprehension, mathematics, written expression, and use of sources, as measured by the TAP. On the average, more than 65 percent of Scott's students fall below the 25th percentile, compared with national averages on the TAP. Students from Scott and its feeder schools have higher absence rates than students at other schools in the district, so they receive less instructional time. During the 1987–88 academic year, there were 1,676 suspensions or expulsions of the 2,205 students enrolled in these schools; in 1989–90, there were 2,171 suspensions or expulsions of the 1,912 students enrolled. According to the school district's most reliable determinant of poverty, eligibility for free and reduced lunches, the student bodies of Scott and its feeder schools have a poverty rate of more than 60 percent. More than 65 percent of the students at these schools are living in single-parent homes or are not living with either parent. The minority population of these schools is 97 percent.

Research indicates that cultural continuity or its absence has an important effect on the educational process in schools. Underachievement has become the norm rather than the exception at Scott and its feeder schools because of various factors: poverty, cultural discontinuity, teachers' lack of opportunity to link classroom materials conceptually either within or across the curriculum, teachers' insufficient preparation to integrate reading and writing instruction into their content areas, and students' and teachers' low expectations. Students entering Scott generally regress in academic achievement measured in normal curve equivalence (NCE) by the 10th grade. Furthermore, in terms of grade equivalence, most students enter Scott High School below the 7th grade level in reading and often leave below the 9th grade level. An increase of only two grade levels in four years leaves these students seriously ill-equipped to participate in the wider society in either post-secondary education or the world of work. Follow-up surveys have indicated that in the first year after
graduation, only 14 percent of Scott High School graduates enter full-time employment, and only 20 percent are full-time students.

The research on urban schools and the information available about Scott High School suggest four areas of concern:

- differences between the background experiences that students bring to the classroom and the material used
- the absence of a comprehensive reading program that would enable teachers to integrate reading and writing instruction into their content areas
- material and structural constraints that prevent teachers from working together to address the problems identified, thus contributing to teachers' and students' poor motivation
- inadequate teacher preparation in the use of strategies to link materials conceptually either within or across the curriculum

To address Scott's problems, representatives from the Toledo Federation of Teachers, the Toledo Board of Education, and the Toledo Association of Administrative Personnel formed the Scott High School Task Force. It issued a report that was accepted in June 1987 and implemented in August 1987. The report focused on seven areas: (1) student discipline and attendance, (2) academics and the curriculum, (3) the physical plant, (4) equipment and supplies, (5) teaching personnel, (6) administrative personnel, and (7) student activities. A five-year timetable was established for implementing the report's recommendations. The timetable suggested addressing academics and the curriculum during the 1988-89 academic year.

Concurrently, representatives of the University of Toledo College of Education approached the school district with a plan for restructuring urban education. The plan focused on empowering teachers and administrators at the building level to develop and design a program to improve the academic achievement of educationally disadvantaged students. The plan provided a conceptual framework for transforming the curriculum, instructional strategies, and organization of the school day to meet the needs of urban populations. The teachers and administrators at the building level were responsible for developing the program's specifics. The university would provide the teachers and administrators with research and development on a variety of options that they could use to construct a program to meet the educational needs of their school.

Project SHAPE evolved from the efforts of the Scott High Task Force and the interests of the College of Education to effect change in urban schools. This cooperative effort between The University of Toledo and Scott High School to improve the academic opportunities for Scott students has been funded, in part, through grants from the Chicago-based Joyce Foundation, the Toledo Public Schools, and The University of Toledo. The Toledo Federation of Teachers and the Toledo Association of Administrative Personnel strongly
support this bottom-up effort to accelerate student learning and improve the learning environment.

PROJECT SHAPE

Project SHAPE is a two-year intervention and enrichment program for underachieving and educationally disadvantaged 9th and 10th grade students. It addresses the problems that face these students through a systematic program of teacher empowerment, curriculum development, structural reorganization, and student, parent, and community involvement. SHAPE has two primary goals: (1) to develop an academically accelerated curriculum for educationally disadvantaged students and (2) to transform the educational delivery system and link curriculum materials to the different experiences that urban students bring to the classroom. This student-centered, teacher-directed program empowers teachers to develop curriculum materials and instructional strategies that enable students to move at an accelerated pace from their present level of academic achievement to a level acceptable for success in life.

Project SHAPE has enabled the teachers and administrators at Scott High School to create an academic program based on the integration of research, program development, and theoretical work in urban education, as well as the positive characteristics and strengths of students, parents, and the local community. Scott teachers and administrators developed Project SHAPE along with a cadre of university faculty as part of the professional teaching, accelerated learning (PTAL) model. It builds on the positive characteristics and strengths of students and the local community to forge a more promising future. SHAPE’s curriculum and instructional strategies enhance the positive behaviors, attitudes, values, expectations, and experiences that students bring to the classroom and provide the steps for academic achievement. The program also creates a positive family climate where students can achieve their academic and life goals.

Each 9th grade student who enrolls in SHAPE is assigned to a pod of no more than 100 students. Within this pod, students are divided into sections of no more than 25 students. The students are assigned at random, not on the basis of ability or prior achievement. These students remain together for their four academic classes during the 9th and 10th grades. Four teachers—one each in math, science, social studies, and English—also work with the same pod over the two years of SHAPE. One SHAPE teacher serves each section as the group mentor to assist with problems the students might encounter and to maintain contact with their families.

Each SHAPE teacher has volunteered for the program and has completed the university courses specially developed for the PTAL model. Through the PTAL courses, SHAPE teachers have mastered the professional skills to create curriculum materials and implement instructional strategies that help motivate
students and accelerate student achievement. These courses gave SHAPE teachers access to recent research, theory, and program development in urban education. They also provided a specific focus on critical and reflective thinking, multicultural education, the teacher as researcher, tracking and cooperative learning, the hidden curriculum, and other topics related to teachers' professional experience.

The SHAPE curriculum structures experiences to instill in students the confidence, academic skills, cultural tools, knowledge base, and vision needed to face today's challenges and to strive for a better future. The program is based on the ideals of dignity, self-worth, respect for self and others, and the ability to work with others to develop and achieve common goals. The curriculum integrates reading and writing across the four content areas. The program specifically focuses on relating curriculum materials and classroom instruction across disciplinary boundaries. Teachers use general themes—for example, energy, population, discrimination, and the environment and pollution—to integrate different content areas without sacrificing academic rigor. Then, to promote motivation and concept formation, teachers relate these themes to the knowledge and experience students bring to the classroom. Each theme is structured to develop the skills of critical, reflective thinking through the process of observing, questioning, interpreting, and changing.

The students, teachers, parents, and administrators work together as a team to improve academic achievement. Strategies like cooperative learning, group work, and peer tutoring help all students achieve academic success. By using academic themes, teachers relate the course content in the four academic areas. Teachers also provide tutorials and monitor study time before and after school for students who want extra help.

Parental involvement is a key to the success of the academic team. The SHAPE teachers work together with parents in developing parent workshops and community projects. The teachers also communicate with parents about their children's homework assignments and academic progress. Parents who have time can participate with students in school projects, classroom activities, or special projects. For all students to succeed, teachers, students, parents, administrators, and the community work together as a team to improve academic achievement.

RESULTS

With SHAPE, teachers work together to (1) analyze the barriers to academic achievement for their students, (2) examine educational research, development, and theory relevant to the problems they identified, (3) develop solutions to the problems based on educational research, development, and theory, (4) implement their solutions, (5) examine the results, and (6) propose new ideas and modifications. This professional development aspect has the
ultimate goal of designing an educational program to accelerate student achievement and provide a conceptual model for urban educational reform. Because of the hard work of SHAPE's teachers, administrators, and students, Scott High is quickly realizing this goal.

Results from standardized tests administered during the 8th grade showed no significant differences between the SHAPE students and the non-SHAPE comparison group. After only two months of the program, SHAPE students performed significantly better than the comparison group of non-SHAPE 9th graders on the MAT (Figure 1) in vocabulary ($p < .05$), reading ($p < .05$), spelling ($p < .01$), and total language ($p < .01$). These findings are highly significant because the program focused primarily on reading and writing across the curriculum in all four academic classes during the first few months. SHAPE students also did significantly better in school attendance and had fewer suspensions during the first semester. SHAPE students missed an average of 12.5 days of school, compared with an average of 19.66 days for the comparison group ($p < .001$), and were suspended an average of 0.69 times, compared with 1.75 average suspensions for the comparison group ($p < .01$).

The results from the pre- and post-tests given to the SHAPE 9th graders further demonstrate successful effects in several key areas (Figure 2). In

![Figure 1. SHAPE Freshman ($n = 120$) versus Non-SHAPE Freshman ($n = 58$) Grade Equivalence on the MAT, November 1989](image-url)
Figure 2. SHAPE Freshman MAT Grade Equivalence on Pre- and Post-tests, November 1989 and April 1990 (n = 94)
the six-month period between tests, the SHAPE students made significant improvement in grade-equivalence scores for reading (+ .88, \( p < .01 \)), language usage (+ 1.43, \( p < .01 \)), total language (+ 1.1, \( p < .01 \)), math concepts (+ 1.65, \( p < .01 \)), problem solving (+ .92, \( p < .01 \)), computation (+ .51, \( p < .05 \)), and total math (+ .92, \( p < .01 \)). Slightly higher pre-test scores are reported in Figure 2 because only students who took both the pre- and post-tests are included in that analysis (94 students opposed to 120 students). Comparisons with the non-SHAPE group were confounded because only 13 of the 58 students in the comparison group were available the day the post-test was administered. However, the results from the 13 students indicate substantially lower gains in achievement.

Historically, the average NCE scores of Scott High School students have declined steadily and dramatically and have exacerbated the achievement gap between Scott and the district averages. For example, moving from 10th grade (1987–88) to 11th grade (1988–89), the average NCE scores for students at Scott in reading comprehension dropped 5.6 percentage points, total math dropped 4.8 percentage points, and total language dropped 10.3 percentage points. For 10th graders, the differential between Scott student averages and the district averages ranged from −15.9 percentage points in total math to −22.4 percentage points in reading comprehension. Results from the pre- and post-tests indicate that Project SHAPE has not only stopped the decline in NCE scores but has begun to close the achievement gap. The pre- and post-test results from the MAT administered in November and April show that SHAPE students have made significant gains in NCE scores:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>Gain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
<td>+ .38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>+ 2.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spelling</td>
<td>+ 1.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language usage</td>
<td>+ 7.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total language</td>
<td>+ 5.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math concepts</td>
<td>+ 10.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem solving</td>
<td>+ 4.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computation</td>
<td>+ 2.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total math</td>
<td>+ 3.37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The test results in language arts are somewhat lower because the pre-test was administered after two months of intensive work by the SHAPE teachers and students to integrate reading and writing across the curriculum. Because the school district changed from the Iowa Test of Basic Skills and the TAP to the MAT between the 1988–89 and the 1989–90 school years, and because a low number of students from the non-SHAPE group took the post-test, a reliable comparison is impossible now. More definitive results will be available after the MAT and several state and local competency tests are administered in the fall to all 10th grade students.
CONCLUSIONS

The PTAL framework that provides the theoretical and philosophical grounding for SHAPE was developed to improve the quality of education in urban schools and to provide conceptual guideposts for reforming public education and teacher education. The program is organized around several major guiding themes. First, educators need to reconceptualize the nature and function of professional teachers around the ideal of teachers as intellectuals in the context of a transformative pedagogy. Second, the organization and structure of public schools and the school curriculum must change to link curriculum materials to the knowledge and experience that students bring to the classroom and then build on that foundation. This transformation should focus on providing the material conditions that promote accelerated learning for previously marginalized populations. Finally, teachers, students, and parents need to develop a sense of democratic empowerment so they can begin collectively to take control and responsibility over the production process that occurs in schools. These interrelated themes broadly define a set of necessary but not sufficient conditions for beginning to achieve lasting urban educational reform from the bottom up.

Teachers and administrators must have time and the material conditions to develop curriculum materials, instructional strategies, and organizational structures that address the needs and interests of the various groups involved in schooling. Teachers need time to plan collectively, to meet with parents and community members, and to work as mentors with students. Planning also includes developing philosophical continuity in setting the goals, objectives, and strategies for schooling. Teachers as intellectuals must actively question culture, ideology, and power to create an atmosphere of cultural justice in the schooling process. Cultural justice includes voices that represent the multiple centers from which differing groups operate on the basis of the interrelationship of class, race, gender, ethnicity, and age. In this context,
culture is celebrated for its strengths, and those strengths are used to critique weaknesses or shortcomings. As intellectuals, teachers must engage in a reflective process, develop curriculum and instructional materials, establish teacher-student relationships, and foster parent and community involvement to promote democratic empowerment and critical literacy. SHAPE’s PTAL framework creates the possibility for educational reform that focuses on teacher and student empowerment to blow the top off urban education.

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