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AUTHOR Mei, Dolores M.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

The effectiveness and equality of the admissions process of the 1988-89 New York City cluster program is evaluated in this report. The cluster program consisted of 13 separate school clusters that offered career-related curricula, each headed by a different principal and facilitator. Program goals were: (1) to ensure equitable student access to special and optional programs by providing a uniform curriculum among schools that share related career interests; and (2) to allow development of students' special interests. Methodology consisted of interviews with principals and facilitators of all 13 clusters and a mail survey of 40 cluster members. The majority of interview subjects felt that the clusters had successfully achieved program goals, and expressed satisfaction with a collaborative cluster member forum. Recommendations were made for: clarification of program guidelines; concentration of responsibility for cluster organization and communication; prior dissemination of program information to prospective high school students; and consideration of student attitudes and interests in the admission screening process. (LMI)

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OREA Report

HIGH SCHOOLS CLUSTERS
 1989-90

A 022 164

Office of Research, Evaluation, and Assessment
Robert Tobias, Director
John E. Schoener, Chief Administrator

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HIGH SCHOOLS CLUSTERS
1989-90

Prepared by the OREA
High School Evaluation Unit

Dolores M. Mei
Evaluation Manager

Ellie Zak
Evaluation Associate

Barbara Dworkowitz
C. Edwin Brewin
Robyn Goldstein
Evaluation Consultants

New York City Public Schools
Division of Strategic Planning/Research and Development
Robin Willner, Executive Director



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Summary

The cluster process was established to ensure students equitable access to special and optional programs by providing a uniform curriculum among schools that shared related career interests.

The 1988-89 cluster program was made up of 13 separate clusters, each headed by a principal leader and facilitator. For the most part, clusters were organized informally and relied heavily on volunteers. Principal leaders tended to be more involved in the day-to-day planning, while facilitators perceived their role as providing support. Other cluster members included principals, assistant principals, coordinators, and teachers. Each cluster met on a regular basis, alternating meeting locations at participating schools. Most clusters (84 percent) organized sub-committees to more efficiently cope with responsibilities.

Sixty-nine percent of facilitators and 62 percent of principal leaders agreed that curriculum development was most often on the agenda. Staff development was the next most important topic while standardized admissions and budget planning were also addressed.

The vast majority (92 percent) of both facilitators and principal leaders agreed that the existing curriculum was reviewed and revised by the cluster. Sixty-two percent of the facilitators and 50 percent of principal leaders observed that the clusters also dealt with the the development of uniform admission criteria. However, only one facilitator thought that the criteria worked well in screening students.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The majority of those interviewed agreed that they succeeded in developing a much needed forum among members of the respective clusters. All clusters worked on curriculum and made revisions when necessary. Participants were impressed with the professionalism they experienced, and the sense of self-determination that prevailed. Ninety-three percent of respondents felt that the clusters met their goals. However, the process needs strengthening. Stronger guidelines must be established for clarity of purpose.

An important concern among cluster participants was the inadequacy of the admission process in helping students make appropriate choices. It was strongly felt that the screening process should take into consideration the special aptitudes and interests of student applicants, and possibly include interviews.

The following recommendations were made:

- Establish clear program guidelines to help define the purpose and goals of the cluster process.

- Consider giving one person in each cluster responsibility for the general organization and communication of cluster activities.
- Establish a central location for cluster meetings.
- Offer middle school students and their parents complete information on all high school programs. Students should know what to expect before attending a special school.
- Screening of students for programs should take into consideration students' special aptitudes and interests.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
I. INTRODUCTION	1
Program Background	1
Evaluation Methodology	2
Scope of the Report	3
II. IMPLEMENTATION	4
Organization of Clusters	4
Cluster Meetings	5
Strengths and Weaknesses	10
III. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	13

I. INTRODUCTION

PROGRAM BACKGROUND

In February 1986 the Chancellor's office asked a panel of university based consultants to review the admission process of New York City public high schools. The purpose of the study was to find ways of encouraging students from diverse backgrounds to apply to special and educational option* programs while improving overall school effectiveness. In their report, High School Admission and the Improvement of Schooling: A Report of the University Consultants, the consultants strongly recommended creating a cluster program "to serve as a real driving force for school improvement and reform." The intent of the program was to ensure students equitable access to special and optional programs by providing a uniform curriculum and/or replicating features of successful school programs, and to allow both teachers and students opportunities to develop special interests.

In order to help achieve these goals, programs with a shared interest in related career areas, but located at different high schools, were organized into "clusters." The program, now in its second year, currently includes 13 separate clusters:

1. Architecture, Building, and Construction
2. Communications
3. Ecology
4. Electronics and Technology
5. Fashion Industry and Design

*Educational option programs are offered in academic-comprehensive high schools throughout the city. These three to four year programs prepare students for entry-level jobs as well as for higher education. In addition, eight New York City high schools are total educational option schools.

6. Health and Human Services
7. Law
8. Business
9. Performing and Fine Arts
10. Transportation, Culinary Arts, Hotel/Restaurant
11. Math/ Science Research
12. Humanities
13. Alternative.

Each cluster determines admission requirements and is responsible for developing an appropriate curriculum and staff development plan. Collaboration efforts began by establishing individual clusters headed by a principal leader and a facilitator from either the area superintendency or the central board.

The New York City Division of High Schools hopes to offer students and teachers opportunities to develop their special interests as a way of improving overall school effectiveness. The cluster concept, in addition to the special schools and optional programs attended by a third of all students, is a special effort to enhance the scope and the quality of these programs. The primary focus of this evaluation is to identify the kinds of activities that have taken place within clusters, and whether or not equitable access to programs has occurred through the coordination of curriculum and development of consistent entrance criteria.

EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

In the fall of 1989, the Office of Research, Evaluation, and Assessment (OREA) interviewed the principal leaders and facilitators of all 13 clusters. Questions concerned the general organization of clusters and sub-committees, special

responsibilities, meeting agendas, outcomes of collaborative efforts, curriculum, and future planning. In addition, a sample (40) of cluster members were similarly queried through mailed survey forms.

SCOPE OF THE REPORT

This report describes the cluster program as it was implemented during the 1988-89 school year, and the subsequent planning process for 1989-90. Chapter II examines the organization of the clusters and to what extent the goals of the program have been achieved; and Chapter III draws conclusions and makes recommendations.

II. IMPLEMENTATION

ORGANIZATION OF CLUSTERS

More than 50 percent of the principal leaders interviewed indicated that their clusters were organized informally and relied mostly on volunteers. As one principal said, "members volunteer." Another stated that the cluster was organized according to cluster members' interests. The responses received from a sample of cluster members indicated that, indeed, 25 percent asked to be assigned, another 25 percent joined because of their school's participation in the program, and 22 percent felt that the cluster was their area of responsibility. Only 14 percent said they were assigned by a principal or superintendent, eight percent indicated they were representing the principal, three percent said they joined by invitation, and another three percent said they simply inherited the responsibility.

The majority of sample cluster members were principals (55 percent), and to a lesser extent assistant principals and coordinators. Sixty-nine percent of those who responded were cluster members for three or more years.

The majority of clusters (84 percent) established sub-committees that met throughout the 1988-89 school year. Principal leaders and facilitators indicated that sub-committees were most often made up of assistant principals and teachers. Other staff participating in the sub-committees were principals, guidance counselors, department chairpeople, program coordinators, and members of the area superintendent's office.

Sixty-one percent of the members who responded indicated that they belonged to one or more sub-committees and most had volunteered or been elected. Thirty percent of these members participated in committees that dealt with specific occupations, 23 percent belonged to committees working on curriculum and/or admissions, 15 percent worked on planning and agendas, 11 percent on comprehensive examinations, and seven percent on staff development. Other sub-committees mentioned included those dealing with membership and meetings.

On the whole, principal leaders tended to respond to questions on cluster organization by giving precise details, while facilitators more often responded in general terms. It would seem that principal leaders were more involved in the day-to-day organization of the clusters than facilitators were.

CLUSTER MEETINGS

Principal leaders and facilitators indicated that the entire cluster met six to eight times during the 1988-89 school year. Facilitators, however, did not always attend these meetings. In fact, only four of 13 facilitators (31 percent) stated that either they or their representative attended all or most of the meetings. One facilitator indicated that neither he nor his representative attended any of the meetings. However, the majority of facilitators attended between two and five meetings. A little more than a third of the cluster members who responded said they attended all cluster meetings, while another third attended between three and eight meetings. It is interesting to

note that 11 percent said they attended nine or 10 cluster meetings, but another 11 percent indicated they attended only one or two. It is possible that some members included sub-committee meetings in their estimation.

Cluster meetings were usually held at the schools of principal leaders, alternating locations to accommodate as many people as possible. Nonetheless, many participants found they had to travel long distances to attend meetings. Eighty-five percent of facilitators thought that meetings were organized around an agenda while 54 percent also thought that principal leaders had the most to do with organizing these meetings. Indeed, the majority of principal leaders stated that they either set the agenda or were responsible for communication and organization of meetings. Cluster members agreed that principal leaders played an important role in various aspects of the cluster program. Only two principal leaders thought their role was primarily as observers at meetings.

Often the first cluster meeting was dedicated to brainstorming. Thereafter, 69 percent of facilitators and 62 percent of principal leaders agreed that curriculum development was the topic most often on the agenda. Approximately one-third of both facilitators and principal leaders stated that staff development was a topic that appeared on the agenda as well. It would seem that these items were addressed first in general cluster meetings and then in sub-committees. In fact, principal leaders, facilitators, and cluster members agreed that working on

the curriculum was also most often on the agenda of the sub-committees, followed by the planning of staff development programs. Discussions on the future direction of sub-committees reflected the same priorities. Other important agenda items some sub-committees concentrated on were budget planning, standardized admissions, and student recruitment.

The majority of facilitators (85 percent) believed that the participants either chose the agendas or had some part in setting agendas for cluster meetings. Most facilitators were satisfied with their own input into setting agendas for meetings. Strangely, this included one facilitator who admitted having no involvement in this process because he knew little about the subject area. Most facilitators (77 percent), however, perceived their role as providing assistance and support even though 64 percent of cluster members felt facilitators were active members of the cluster.

While there was no clear consensus among principal leaders with regard to how agendas were chosen, they tended to fall into three categories. Approximately one-third indicated that the agendas were chosen by the participants, another third believed it was decided by principal leaders with help of sub-committees, while the remaining third thought agendas were chosen in response to Board of Education initiatives.

The vast majority (92 percent) of both principal leaders and facilitators agreed that the existing curriculum was reviewed and revised by the cluster. In most cases (70 percent), it was clear

that both the facilitator and the principal leader knew when a change had been introduced and what the change had been. However, in two instances, the principal leaders had indicated that a new curriculum had been written but the facilitator from the same cluster apparently was not aware of any changes. Cluster members overwhelmingly agreed that the review of curriculum resulted in changes. Respondents indicated that curriculum was often improved, updated, and introduced by subject area.

Changes in curriculum was reported as an outcome of the 1988-89 sub-committees by 75 percent of the facilitators and about 50 percent of the principal leaders. Close to a third of the facilitators indicated that funding recommendations were also an outcome of the sub-committees, but none of the principal leaders felt this was the case. Additional outcomes of the sub-committees mentioned by either facilitators or principal leaders were course standardization, development of resource materials, establishment of staff development programs, determination of uniform criteria for publicizing the program, and the creation of student recruitment programs.

Sixty-two percent of the facilitators observed that the cluster dealt with the development of uniform admission criteria. Of these, 75 percent indicated that uniform admission criteria had been developed. However, only one facilitator thought the criteria worked well in screening students. Four facilitators believed the criteria to be inadequate noting lack of uniformity

throughout the city and little attention given to special aptitudes and interests. The remaining eight found the question "not applicable." Of those cluster members who answered this question, 67 percent felt that the admission criteria adequately screened students. Nevertheless, it should be noted that 16 out of 40 respondents chose not to answer the question.

Of those principal leaders who answered similar questions on admission criteria, 50 percent said the subject was addressed at cluster meetings while 50 percent stated it was not. Thirty-nine percent thought the screening criteria were inadequate. The remaining principal leaders did not feel the question was relevant. When asked to explain why, one principal leader indicated that his program was not a screened program* but should be. Another explained that "under equity** in access, screening has been done away with resulting in youngsters applying for the wrong reasons (to avoid going to neighborhood schools) and discovering it's not what they wanted." Finally, one principal leader basically agreed with the facilitator from the same cluster when he observed that "just looking at a computer form is

*Screened programs are those programs that select students on the basis of a review of the student's record, an audition, a portfolio, a test of art skills, or in the case of the special science high schools, a written test. In unscreened programs, admission is based on a random computer selection of applicants.

**In order to increase student diversity in educational option programs, an "equitable access" admission policy was established. This mandates that 50 percent of all students who passed an admissions test will be selected by computer, and the other 50 percent selected by whatever criteria a school usually employs. However, students who scored in the 98th percentile or above on the admissions test must be accepted into the program.

not sufficient to determine a particular student's interests in a particular area, it is important that an interview process be established for a student to explain his/her decision, and for the student to be made aware of those areas that were not explained adequately in junior high school."

Only three principal leaders and five cluster members identified topics they would have liked to see addressed at cluster meetings. These included the consideration of teachers based on their commitment rather than on experience only, developing community service programs, establishing better communication with guidance counselors, and the need for more courses reflecting current technology.

The clusters' agenda for the 1989-90 school year closely reflected that of the previous year's work. Sixty-nine percent of facilitators believed that the clusters should continue to focus on curriculum. Cluster members agreed and also wanted to address staff development, and concerns about structure and guidelines for the program. Principal leaders showed interest in setting specific goals and objectives for the school year.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

The majority of principal leaders (92 percent) and facilitators (85 percent) believed their cluster succeeded in providing a forum for staff members from different schools to share important ideas, materials, and experiences. Ninety-three percent of cluster respondents agreed that their cluster met these goals.

The strengths of the cluster program that were most often cited by principal leaders and facilitators were the ability of participants to share knowledge, problems, solutions and the decision-making process. This was felt to be particularly important in the areas of math and science. Cluster members were also impressed by the sense of professionalism they experienced, and the feeling of self-determination that prevailed. Most felt that they were able to effect curriculum development and admission requirements.

Again, principal leaders, facilitators, and cluster members agreed that the major weaknesses of the cluster process was that there was not enough time and not enough money to get everything done. Other weaknesses mentioned were the absence of a monitoring system, the lack of a clear set of guidelines, difficulties-with communication, problems with traveling to meetings, and insufficient recognition of the cluster process by the Executive Director of High Schools.

Suggestions for improving the process focused on the need for better communication among schools. This included the appointment of a full-time staff person to organize activities, establishing a system of interaction between schools, and more involvement by school principals and superintendents.

All facilitators and close to 50 percent of principal leaders commented that the support received from the central board was primarily financial. However, 85 percent of the principal leaders and close to 50 percent of facilitators

observed that they also received assistance and advice from various resource people at the board. This support was received in the form of program guidelines, technical help, supplies, and planning aids.

III. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The majority of those interviewed agreed that they succeeded in developing a much needed forum among the members of the respective clusters. All clusters worked on curriculum and made revisions when necessary. Participants were impressed with the professionalism they experienced, and the sense of self-determination that prevailed. Ninety-three percent of respondents felt that the clusters met their goals.

However, the process needs strengthening. Those involved have many other areas of responsibilities and often found it difficult to find the necessary time to devote to cluster activities. Stronger guidelines should be established for clarity of purpose. Often people work more efficiently when a direction is defined, and they are given the flexibility to make changes that would reflect the particular needs of the school. Also, if cluster members are expected to meet on a regular basis, meetings should be planned well in advance at a central location in order to alleviate travel problems.

An important concern among cluster participants was the inadequacy of the admission process in helping students make appropriate choices. Many students attend schools with special programs to avoid going to neighborhood schools. Once in the program, they often find that they are not suited to the particular school. It was strongly felt that the screening process should take into consideration the special aptitudes and

interests of students, and maybe include interviews as well.

Based on the findings set forth in this report, the following recommendations are made:

- Establish clear program guidelines to help define the purpose and goals of the cluster process.
- Consider giving one person in each cluster the responsibility for the general organization and communication of cluster activities.
- Establish a central location for cluster meetings.
- Offer middle school students and their parents complete information and counseling on all high school programs. Students should know what to expect before attending a special school.
- Screening of students for programs should take into consideration students' special aptitudes and interests.