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AUTHOR Karr, Jo Ann; And Others
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ABSTRACT

At Mozart Elementary School, a predominantly Latino pre-kindergarten through grade 8 Professional Development School in Chicago that is linked with Northeastern Illinois University, the upper grades have been transformed in a way that has proven beneficial to the students and the university's teacher candidates. Frustrated with their inability to pool their professional skills and problems, the teachers began a process of innovation that created a middle school within the school, with curriculum changes that include thematic unit projects, interdisciplinary approaches, performance-based assessment with redesigned report cards, and service to the community as part of the curriculum. Five circumstances that made this transformation possible are: (1) teacher dissatisfaction with the status quo; (2) well-informed and up-to-date internal leadership; (3) bureaucratic support for change; (4) funding from the State Board of Education; and (5) university partnership. (SLD)

HOW SCHOOL REFORM AND A SCHOOL/UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIP CONTRIBUTED TO CURRICULUM CHANGE

HOW SCHOOL REFORM AND A SCHOOL/UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIP CONTRIBUTED TO CURRICULUM CHANGE

Jo Ann Karr
Nancy Green and
Marilyn Koulogeorge

At Mozart Elementary School, a predominantly Latino Pre-K-8 Professional Development School in Chicago linked with Northeastern Illinois University, a fortunate series of circumstances led to the transformation of the upper grades in a way that has proven beneficial both for Mozart students and for university teacher candidates. In 1992 the upper grade department consisted of four teachers, sixth, seventh and eighth grades (ages 11 to 13 years). The children switched classes each period to receive instruction from the teacher specializing in math, science, social studies or reading. Language arts instruction was provided by a resource teacher. Teachers relied heavily on textbooks, made no effort to integrate subject matter across disciplines, and rarely consulted one another on content. Since the entire staff saw all one hundred and thirty-two children every day, they did share the profile of children not achieving the goals but there was rarely a forum for joint problem solving.

Frustrated with their inability to pool their professional wisdom and dilemmas, the teachers began a process of innovation that reflects a national trend in the development of middle schools (Turning Points, 1990; Bean, 1993). What is remarkable about the changes they made is not their content but the fact that they occurred among a group of self-proclaimed traditional teachers, and that they were carried out with unusual speed. These teachers created a middle school within a Pre-K-8 school.

Changes designed for this two-year project include the following:

- Sixth, seventh and eighth grade social studies, science and language arts are scheduled in a block of time. (Only reading and math taught by homogeneous group with literature based program instead of basal.)

- Thematic unit projects integrated into three or more disciplines are taught by the homeroom teacher. Children have input into these thematic units. Community partners have become part of the school day activities. Textbooks are used as references, not as curriculum.

- Portfolio assessments are used instead of end of chapter tests.

- Report cards have been redesigned with pass, no pass and pass with honors; language arts is evaluated as a whole.

- Service to the community is part of the curriculum and is integrated into assessment.

- The three grades, (6th, 7th, 8th) go on field trips, conduct interviews with community partners, and share results together across the grades.

- Sixth, seventh and eighth grade teachers are excused from many school-wide meetings so they can focus on needs of their team. They wrote a new curriculum in weekly planning meetings. Ancillary teachers (library, PE, remedial teacher) were included in the thematic unit planning and implementation.

All changes were begun in the first year, refined in second year and ready to be recorded in the third year. There were many changes in a very short time.

This paper will attempt to explain what made this transformation possible. In an analysis of the situation at this school, five circumstances emerge as having been significant for change.

1. *Teacher dissatisfaction with the status quo.* Dissatisfaction arose from both the frustration of upper grade teachers with poor achievement and pressure from other teachers in the school and from parents concerned with negative aspects of adolescent behavior on the part of 6th, 7th and 8th graders. Teachers acknowledged that it was difficult to accommodate the wide range of adolescent academic and social capabilities. Rapid body changes, resulting in awkward movement and clumsy reactions often caused tension in the hallways as the children passed to the next instructional period. Loud voices, play fighting, and growing awareness of the opposite sex with accompanying behavior was often seen as inappropriate around the younger children in the building. The parents expressed anxiety about the adolescent choices affecting future educational options. Would their children choose to join gangs, get in trouble with the law, or have babies too soon or would they choose a route leading to a trade or profession with the ability to sustain a comfortable life style? The children were distracted by so many outer forces that even the most able children had difficulty focusing for a period of 3-4 weeks on a topic, performing well on a test and incorporating old information into the next topic.

2. *Well-informed, up-to-date internal leadership.* One teacher, the language arts resource teacher, was a risk-taker, yet was trusted by the others because she had been in the school many years and knew the children. She provided a communication channel between outside influences and the other teachers. She had attended many whole language conferences and workshops and her background in drama and literature allowed her to see the utility of incorporating language arts into the content areas. She had ordered classroom literature sets and the children begged to have more titles and more time to read them at school. Journal writing and composition took time to do

properly and she only had a 35 minute instructional period. Over a three year period she saw the children's state goals assessment scores go up ever so slightly then level off, with reading achievement still below the state's and school's standards. During the brief department meetings, the teachers began to repeat the same message. They felt that fundamental changes in organization and instructional strategies had to occur to bring up achievement levels. The social and emotional needs/demands of the children had to be placed at the core of the curriculum to get their attention long enough for learning to take place. The resource teacher made a bold proposal to literally reinvent the teaching approach. She outlined the basic components. The teachers brainstormed a list of changes they felt had to take place. While wishing her well, few thought the plan could become operational. The resource teacher, familiar with the school's improvement plan, budget, labor contracts, the administrative demands and style, plugged ahead with determination.

3. *Bureaucratic support for change at both the building and the state level.* The 1985 Illinois educational reform legislation amended the school code to include a definition of schooling and a requirement that goals for learning in six areas be identified and assessed. As part of the legislation, all public schools were required to participate in a statewide assessment beginning in 1987-1988. Shortly after the first schoolwide scores were published, additional requirements to modify the curriculum, where standards are not being met, were announced All accreditation renewals will now include a close look at the outcome scores on this state assessment and adjustments planned to bring the scores at the expected level. This last stage of reform had administrators increasing the pressure on teachers to seek out alternative curriculum.

The reform act as applied to Chicago established local school councils at the building level with power to set policy. Parents and community leaders could now observe their schools performance in comparison with schools in the city as well as the state. Parents wanted technology in the schools, more support for children with delays and under performance, and a caring attitude about the larger community concerns. Teachers and principals had to get approval of their school improvement plans. Budgets were to be linked to restructuring curriculum and professional development of teachers to implement change.

In this context, the upper grade teachers approached their principal. Her response was, "Let's face it. What we have been doing hasn't worked. The scores are terrible. We can no longer continue to use the same instructional practices. Research says there are more reflective ways out there. We must find them, try them, refine them and make them work for our children. The state law requires it, the parents demand it, and we want the future generation to support us after retirement. We must do it."

4. *Funding from the Illinois State Board of Education.* The principal had heard the resolve of the upper grade teachers and urged them to apply for an Urban Education Partnership Grant from the State Board of education. The proposal, written with the assistance of the PDS's university partner, was funded in 1992. The grant paid for cross-grade, cross-discipline curriculum planning; activities for students with five community partners; student service to the community; and university consultation and evaluation.

   While the funding that supported these activities was important in itself, it was particularly significant in terms of accountability and follow-through. During the winter of the project's first year, one of the five teachers was absent for ten weeks as a result of a health problem and another was seriously hindered by a broken ankle. Throughout this difficult time, the guidelines the team had created in planning the grant, which outlined goals and projects to be completed within appointed periods of time, kept the group from giving up on innovations. The substitute teacher was drawn into weekly planning and the implementation of new learning experiences. On her return the regular teacher was able to make a smooth transition into her classroom. Though team members were sapped of physical and mental energy as they struggled to keep the project moving, they persisted, supported by the university consultant, by their pledge to the principal, and by the nature of the reorganized structure of the "school within a school." And then too, the state evaluator for the Urban Partnership Grant would be upset if the team had spent the budget and not completed the plan submitted. They vowed to stick it out, make adjustments where needed, and complete the project in the spirit of their renewal effort.

5. *University partnership.* A two year effort at establishing a university/school partnership had set the climate for a university professor to be part of the middle school initiative. The university had provided workshops, group facilitators, site-based management observers, technical assistance in changing the classroom environment, seed money for curriculum materials to field test pilot programs and a reflective ear. After reading the four pages of grant specifications, the teachers sought help in putting their program into the application while complying with the grant in the short turn around time. After all, they were teaching and had scant time to write, rewrite, layout and concisely describe why their project would qualify for funding.

   The principal approached the university team to assist the teachers in developing their proposal. The university team, consisting of a professor in the Curriculum & Instruction Department, Professor in Educational Foundations, and specialists in graphics and proposal writing at the Chicago Teachers' Center met with teachers to brainstorm goals and

activities. Baseline data was requested for each goal but none was available for the service to the community component, so the teachers suggested items for a student survey, and the professors designed them into a quick read, quick tally format. Planning the activities raised a number of questions: How would all these many projects be tied together in a theme? What community activities could a cross-age group do? What materials, services and consulting would be needed? After a brief meeting to brainstorm activities, the team put the ideas together in the format. The upper grade teachers resolved these questions and their representatives met with the university team to tie the ideas together in the proposal format.

The university team, the school principal and teachers had begun the process of redefining the upper grades. Rapport, trust, and a bridge had come into play in this project. The curriculum and district professor had a background as a consultant in the school, working with individual teachers, and had been trying without success to find a group of teachers interested in working with her as a team. She was eager for her pre-service education majors to see curriculum design being done by classroom teachers to fit the needs of the students and reflect the whole language/middle school philosophy. The middle school project thus served her needs as well as those of the teachers.

Though the Middle School at Mozart Elementary continues to face challenges--curriculum development in particular is far from complete, teachers feel that in spite of difficulties they are working as a team and that the new organizational structure is firmly in place. Children surveyed at the end of the first year reported that it was really exciting to do things in the community to help people and that this had been their best year of school. parents were at first confused by the change in the report card but after reviewing the portfolios reported that they understood what was expected and could see how the portfolios revealed each child's progress. University professors, concerned that their teacher education students become familiar with the process of school change and teacher development as a model for their own career growth, feel that students have had unusually productive experiences in the Middle School.

The level of success of the Mozart Middle School experiment has been frankly surprising to observers of the school scene. That this group of self-proclaimed traditional teachers could have accomplished so much in such a short time is a heartening example for other schools. Our analysis suggests that the crucial factors contributing to their success are those described above: teacher dissatisfaction with the status quo, strong internal leadership, bureaucratic support, external funding, and university involvement.

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