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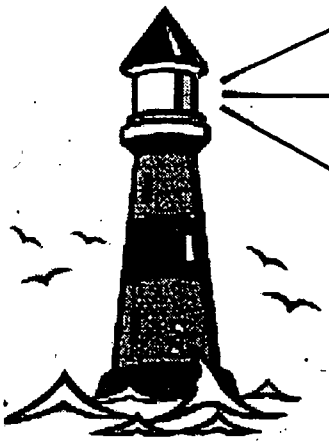
ABSTRACT

A two-issue volume presents articles describing innovative schools, classrooms, and alternative learning arrangements found in some of today's schools. Issue one contains three articles offering glimpses of an elementary school committed to the Core Knowledge curriculum of E. D. Hirsch, a renovated school devoted to early childhood learning programs, and a middle school experiential learning program. The three articles contained in the second issue highlight the Minnie Howard School in Alexandria, Virginia, a learning environment exclusively for ninth graders; "The Center for Communications," a high-tech learning environment in Henrico County (Virginia); and a case study of Gildersleeve Middle School in Newport News, Virginia that follows the school's creation from initial conception to final construction. (GR)



# Spotlight on New Learning Environments





**Issue I**
**Winter, 1997-98**

*A Journal by the Thomas Jefferson Center for Educational Design*
*University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia*

# SPOTLIGHT ON NEW LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

*A Journal of the Thomas Jefferson Center for Educational Design at the University of Virginia*

ISSUE I

Winter 1997-98

## STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

SPOTLIGHT ON NEW LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS is intended to provide educators, policy makers, designers of learning environments, and interested citizens in general with descriptions of innovative schools, classrooms, and alternative learning arrangements. The Thomas Jefferson Center for Educational Design is committed to monitoring these new developments and determining their strengths and weaknesses. The inclusion of a particular innovation in this publication does not constitute endorsement by the Thomas Jefferson Center for Educational Design or the University of Virginia.



## INQUIRIES

Inquiries regarding receipt of this publication or submission of manuscripts for consideration should be directed to the Editor, in care of the Thomas Jefferson Center for Educational Design, Curry School of Education, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia 22903. The phone number of the Center is (804) 982-2866 and the fax number is (804) 924-0747.

## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

It is with great pride that I present the inaugural issue of SPOTLIGHT ON NEW LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS. A publication of the University of Virginia's Thomas Jefferson Center for Educational Design, the journal is an important component of the Center's mission. The three articles featured in this issue have been researched and written by doctoral students at the Curry School of Education. They offer glimpses of an elementary school committed to the Core Knowledge curriculum of E. D. Hirsch, a renovated school devoted to early childhood learning programs, and a middle school experiential learning program. I join my colleagues at the Center in hoping that readers will find the material in SPOTLIGHT informative.

Daniel L. Duke, Editor

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

# The Origins of Core Knowledge

*by Gassia Gerges*

Linden Kent Memorial Professor of English at the University of Virginia. Father. Grandfather. E.D. Hirsch Jr., the Yale University-trained expert on the English Romantic poets, is also a vocal critic of America's schools. He is convinced that public school performance is lagging because the majority of schools are miseducating kids. Hirsch has spent more than ten years trying to help schools out of the wilderness. In his 1987 national best-seller *Cultural Literacy*, Hirsch provided a rationale for undertaking a program of educational reform to produce a high level of cultural literacy. Cultural literacy, defined as the "network of information that all competent readers possess" (1987, p. 2), is termed a national imperative essential for the continued economic competitiveness and the exercise of democracy. He argues that the nation's democratic institutions are threatened by a citizenry that lacks a shared cultural vocabulary. To correct the problem, Hirsch and his colleagues identified the names, phrases, events and other items that should be familiar to most literate Americans.

While Hirsch's message was not blatantly ideological, the Reagan White House embraced his message, helping his book climb to the top of the best-seller list. Hirsch's call for schools to increase attention to core curriculum content and reduce emphasis on skills and process curriculum is reiterated in his latest book, *The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them*. Hirsch argues that the "learning how to learn" approach to education has produced generations of students who are ignorant of geography, history, literature and other content. Too much attention to skill development, he asserts, hurts disadvantaged students most, depriving them of the ability to participate fully in American democracy. Poor students who are not given access to cultural knowledge

also cannot compete on a level economic playing field with students from middle-class and affluent homes whose parents supplement what is learned at school with books, travel, trips to museums, and other cultural advantages. Without a shared body of common knowledge, society divides into two classes of people: those who are culturally literate and those who are not. Students who lack a core knowledge base rarely catch up with their peers.

Hirsch criticizes progressive teaching methods that stand in the way of the acquisition of cultural knowledge. Over-emphasis on progressive techniques like interdisciplinary instruction, ungraded work, "hands-on" and "discovery"methods, and "cooperative" learning, has led to the neglect of core content. Hirsch stresses the importance of recitation, memorization, standardized tests, and other traditional methods. He does not reject multisensory learning, but cautions against reliance on any single kind of teaching.

Furthermore, Hirsch questions the value of the "child-centered" curriculum in which subjects like world history and science are displaced in the early grades by material associated with the students' world. "The presumption that the affairs of one's neighborhood are more interesting than those of faraway times and places is contradicted in every classroom that studies dinosaurs and fairy tales," he argues (1996, p. 10). Too often child-centered learning means that children are not taught the content they need to advance in school.

Hirsch rejects the claim that delaying learning until the child is "ready" will speed up learning in the long run. "Developmentally appropriate" implies that education is a natural unfolding; for each child there is a natural and best time for learning certain subjects and skills. Hirsch claims, however, that much of school learnings are not natural processes like physiomotor development and the learning of the mother tongue. "The most striking evidence against the naturalness of reading, for instance, is the brute fact that alphabetic literacy is extremely rare among the historical cultures of the world, whereas oral language is universal" (Hirsch, 1996, pp. 220-221). Psychologists have found that the learning processes involved in the unnatural skills of reading, writing and math are slow at first, but they speed up as time passes. Because of the cumulative nature of school learning, students who are held back until they are "ready" most often do not catch up. When elementary schools withhold demanding knowledge and skills during primary grades, all students are deprived of important content; however, the impact is especially harmful for disadvantaged children. Hirsch's content-rich Core Knowledge (CK) curriculum--which introduces children to a sequenced body of basic knowledge--is meant to correct the problem.

In 1986, Hirsch founded the Core Knowledge Foundation to help schools implement his program. The heart of the program is the Core Knowledge Sequence, a bare-bones outline of the content to be taught at each grade, along with suggested titles of books, poems, and stories that might be useful. "The sequence is not meant to outline the whole of the school curriculum; rather, it offers specific guidelines to knowledge that can reasonably be expected to make up about half of any school's curriculum, thus leaving ample room for local requirements and emphases" (Hirsch, 1991, p. 4). The non-profit organization, funded in part by Hirsch's

book royalties, is now working with 350 schools in forty states, including Charlottesville's Paul Cale Elementary School (Jones, 1996). The remainder of this article describes the initiation and implementation of the Core Knowledge Sequence at Cale Elementary School.

*Initiation*

Every year since 1994, Alice Gibson's second grade students at Cale Elementary become pioneers and Native Americans, reliving the struggles of the westward movement. They also take on the identities of Abraham Lincoln, Sitting Bull, Geronimo and Annie Oakley. They read stories about Peter Pan and Robin Hood, Hansel and Gretel and Paul Revere. They create art projects with Zeus, Athena, Hermes and other Greek gods and goddesses as themes. They weigh and measure the geometric figures they construct; find their way to principal Gerry Terrell's office using a compass; and distinguish between a cell wall and cell membrane using microscopes. In later years, they will reenact the American Revolution, read abridged versions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Julius Caesar* and the *Iliad*, debate immigration issues, construct a model of the circulatory system, and participate in Shakespearean plays.

Six years ago, the 515 students at Cale Elementary School might have studied these topics in their classes, or they might not have. As long as Cale teachers taught the skills dictated by the Virginia Department of Education--skills such as those used to decode written language (reading skills), identify cause and effect, and locate places on a map--they could teach any content they desired. A first grade teacher might teach about fairy tales. So, too, might a second grade teacher. The history and geography units often were determined by the trips teachers took during their summer vacations, not by curriculum guidelines. The main goal was for students to acquire skills; content was not of central importance.

That all began to change in the spring of 1993. County principals, including Cale's Gerry Terrell, were invited by the chairman of the Albemarle County School Board to meet with members of the Core Knowledge Foundation to hear about the cultural literacy movement. Impressed by what he heard, Terrell shared his experience with all Cale teachers at a staff meeting. Refusing to *force* his teachers to adopt CK, he *requested* that the teachers review the CK guidelines and share their impressions. To Terrell's surprise, the overwhelming majority of the staff showed tremendous interest in becoming a CK school. Six Cale teachers approached Terrell with a request to submit a grant proposal in order to pilot various CK strands. The proposal was accepted; and in the fall of 1993, CK language arts was piloted in the second and fifth grades, social studies in the first grade, and science in the third grade. "The teachers worked with the various strands and talked with the rest of the staff throughout the year about what they were doing," relates Terrell. During the spring of '94, we had to make a decision as to what we wanted to do with this curriculum. It wasn't easy because there were a few teachers vehemently opposed to the Core Knowledge Sequence."

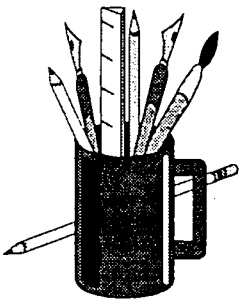
One teacher critic worried that the curriculum would bore her students with "drill-and-kill" memorization of facts, figures, and dates. Another teacher feared that the content was too advanced, not "developmentally appropriate" for her students. Terrell was not convinced that the criticism was valid: "While we teach our babies from the cradle about the world at large, when we get in schools, all of a sudden content is not 'developmentally appropriate.'" Another teacher didn't agree with the Foundation's choice of content, labeling it "Eurocentric." When the majority of the faculty voted to adopt and implement CK in all grades beginning in the fall of 1994, the three teacher-critics requested transfers to other county schools.

*Implementing Core Knowledge*

Terrell and the remaining faculty were convinced that CK was critical to the success of their students. As he put it, "The majority of our students are narrowly restricted to their small world. They haven't enriched their school learning with travel, trips to museums, etc. We are trying to share the wealth of human knowledge with our students who come from all backgrounds and walks of life. That's what CK started doing for us: putting all children on common ground. By providing a common set of curricular guidelines for each grade level, I became closer to ensuring an equal educational opportunity--equal access for all our students."

Gibson echoed Terrell's sentiment, "I have taught for over 20 years, and this is the first time that I feel my students are coming to me with similar background knowledge since they have had Core in Kindergarten and first grade. I truly believe that my students are smarter when I get them than they ever have been in the past."

Cale's mission is the same as that of Albemarle County: "to provide and promote a dynamic environment for learning through which all students acquire the knowledge, skills and values necessary to live as informed and productive members of society." In addition, Cale teachers strive to develop a specific plan for the success of all students by placing them on common ground and providing them with an equal educational opportunity. With CK as the curriculum, Terrell is certain "that the mission is possible: that it can be accomplished."



While the adoption of CK went relatively smoothly, its implementation proved quite challenging. When Cale teachers began implementing CK, they got rid of their textbooks and lesson plans, and started all over. "It was overwhelming at first," said Alice. "We had to implement not only CK, but also whatever county standards not covered by Core." The school board voted seven to one in favor of the adoption and implementation of CK at Cale, with the stipulation that the county guidelines that were different from CK guidelines also be taught. Consequently, Cale's curriculum guidelines are a blend of the Albemarle County standards and the Core Knowledge Sequence. For example, second grade Albemarle County literature requirements include *Bread and Jam for Frances, Caps for Sale,* and *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel,* none of which are CK recommendations. Albemarle County's physical science requirements for the second grade include

air pressure, heat, and sound, while the CK physical science requirements include simple tools, metals, and engineering. The only overlapping physical science concept is light. It is no wonder that Cale teachers felt overwhelmed. The majority of county guidelines that are not CK requirements, tend to involve skills and processes related to information literacy (using library systems) and technological literacy (using computer systems).

Motivated by the need to offer their students coherent and sequential content, the teachers at Cale refused to become discouraged. The teachers formed curriculum committees--language arts, science, mathematics, social studies and music--to design new lesson plans and ensure that the new materials and resources were appropriate for each grade level. This was the only restructuring that took place at Cale. "Everything other than the curriculum and the curriculum committees pretty much stayed consistent," states Terrell. According to Gibson, the majority of Cale teachers saw the task of creating new lesson plans and finding instructional materials as challenging, not daunting. "When you are trying to teach practically two curriculums, you have to be really good and really efficient, and I believe that I have become a better teacher because of it. I have learned how to find outside information and other resources to captivate and engage my students. In the past I just relied on textbooks, worksheets, and other materials provided by the publishers and the county."

To pay for teacher training and materials, the Albemarle County School Board provided the principal with $8,000. The Core Knowledge Foundation suggested that $16,000 was needed to get a school started. "We have never been given that kind of money," said Terrell, "but frankly, we have made do." During the 1994-1995 school year, Cale received $1,500 to send several teachers to a CK conference. At CK national conferences, teachers attend different sessions put on by CK teachers from various states in order to gather instructional ideas and resources. The intent is to expose a few teachers to resources and materials so that, they, in turn, can provide colleagues with resources, materials and ideas. This year Terrell received $4,000, which he used to send six teachers to the Core Knowledge conference in Denver, and to purchase additional instructional materials. Cale teachers have purchased a collection of lessons created by other CK teachers from the Foundation, and they continually download new lessons and ideas from the Foundation's home page on the Internet.

While the Core Knowledge Foundation provides teachers with resources and instructional ideas to help them teach the prescribed content, they avoid telling teachers how to teach the material. Hirsch, however, favors traditional methods, including memorization, recitation and drill-and-practice. "Core is criticized for teaching primarily with dittos, worksheets and the like; but walk into any classroom here at Cale, and you will see otherwise," Terrell claims. "You will see discussions taking place, cooperative learning going on, and kids working on hands-on projects. Just recently, I observed a kindergarten class doing a science experiment outside, working with shadow, sundial, etc." A walk around the halls and classrooms at Cale reveals that the teachers indeed favor using a variety of instructional techniques including games, discussions, projects and technology. Students at all grade levels play a variety of aca-

demic games; discuss and debate numerous historical and literary issues; and undertake projects in all disciplines, including many using technology. "Our version of CK," Gibson said, "is clearly not drill-and-kill memorization of historical dates, state capitals, and mathematical formulas."

The instruction at Cale proves that content-rich curriculum does not equal mind-numbing learning. Classroom life is hardly the drudgery Core critics claim, nor the curriculum Eurocentric. There are units on Inca, Aztec and Maya culture; African-American scientists; and Latin American independence movements. Diversity is stressed even in music, where students learn African and Latin rhythms. "If I thought that Core avoided the study of other cultures, especially the contribution of those cultures to America," states Terrell, "it would not have come into the Cale school building."

Terrell and Gibson refute critics' claims that young children cannot learn complex concepts. "My school is a very diverse school," said Terrell. "I have professional parents--doctors, lawyers, etc.-- with children who have been intellectually stimulated from birth. I also have approximately 40 percent of my parents living below the poverty line, whose children receive free lunch and many of whom are cognitively delayed. Eighteen percent of my student body is black, 79 percent is white and three percent is 'other.' All these kids are eager to learn--white, black, rich, poor, possessing rich background knowledge, possessing no foundation--they are all here and eager to learn. If you give it to them, and we do, they will take it."

Gibson strongly agrees. "My students completely surprised me when I first introduced Core. My second-graders proved to me that they are capable of learning adult information, and most surprising was that they want to know what we as adults know." Never was Terrell more convinced about the necessity of Core for his students than when a fourth grade student from a low-income home approached him in the hall and excitedly told him that she was reading the *Legends of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table*, and how very much she was enjoying it. When Terrell informed her that she would be able to take specialized literature courses in high school, the young girl, grinning from ear to ear, asked, "I will?"

"In the past this child would most likely not have considered taking an elective literature course in high school. Core allows our students to know that the study of Shakespeare is not something that they need to be afraid of and it's not something that is for the kids who live across the street, or even for 'gifted' children; it's for all children."

*Reflection*

Cale Elementary School's curriculum is a far cry from the school's pre-Core version, which was essentially a long list of skills dictated by the Virginia Department of Education--a curriculum built on the belief that skills mattered more than content. If Core is more demanding, are students rising to the challenge? According to Terrell and Gibson, they are. "I never thought of teaching meteorology or Alexander the Great in the second grade," said Gibson. "Initially I thought the kids are not going to read this." Alice went on to say about *El Pajaro Cu* (a Hispanic folk tale), "Now I know differently. Even for readers way below grade level, there is

enthusiasm." For the first time, all the teachers at each grade level are teaching the same content to their students. Gibson believes this consistency is helpful because she knows exactly what her students have studied before they come to her. But what about the students who join Cale as second, third, fourth-graders--those students who did not study CK before coming to Cale?

Neither Terrell nor Gibson had a simple response to this question. "I don't have the answer." said Terrell, "I cannot guarantee to parents that their children will be 'all caught up' when they leave us. Albemarle County is a very transient school division. People continually move across the county line and back; Cale's mobility rate is one of the highest in the county." What Terrell can guarantee parents, however, is that his teachers will do whatever it takes to nurture and foster each child's academic growth. "We do what we would do with any curriculum: take the kids where they are and do the best we can and know how." Gibson agreed with her principal, but added that even for her students who hadn't been exposed before to CK subjects, the curriculum alone can spark their interest. "I have taught for over 20 years, and this curriculum more than any other, I believe, has engaged my students."

Increased interest in the content is not the only reason that Terrell and Gibson believe Core is good for Cale kids. Standardized test scores have steadily improved since 1993. "We can show that over the last four years, which happens to be when we implemented CK, our scores for all students have consistently gone up, especially in social studies, science and math," said Terrell. "The scores surprise us because they constantly go up. We are scoring well above the national norms in the social studies, above the 75th percentile. That is very good for our diverse population. These are not all middle class kids. Half of our students taking the Iowa Test of Basic Skills each year come from low-income homes. Our scores defy what you might expect."

A recent study by the Albemarle County Schools' evaluation office supports Terrell's claim that Core is helping narrow the performance gap between students of low socio-economic status and others. A study to indicate whether the wealth or poverty of a locality was significant in its students' performance showed Cale students having much higher achievement than predicted for disadvantaged kids. Since the implementation of Core, greater numbers of Cale's free and reduced lunch students have passed the Literacy Passport Test, (a statewide exam in reading, writing and math that is taken in the sixth grade and which must be passed in order to graduate). "Looking at our kids on free and reduced-price lunch, both regular and special education kids, 72 percent passed the reading portion, 71 percent passed the writing portion, and 81 percent passed the math portion the first time they took it. That's up from 43 percent [in 1995]."

More important to Terrell than test scores, however, is anecdotal evidence. "I know that our test scores have gone

up the past few years, but I'm reluctant to say that CK was the only cause; CK is a major factor, I'm sure, but not the only factor. I know that what we are doing is good based on the conversations I have with teachers, parents and kids." Terrell's teachers tell him that they feel smarter. Since Core's adoption, Cale teachers are working together, collaborating more than ever before--even sharing materials, resources and ideas. Student attendance has also improved. "Our students are excited about learning; they want to come to school," said Alice. With improved test scores and their children enthusiastic about learning, parents are quite pleased, too. "Only a few parents have felt that Core is 'developmentally inappropriate' for their kids," said Terrell. "The overwhelming majority have been very supportive."

With considerable evidence of success, Terrell doesn't want to change much in the near future. "What we have is working for us right now, so why mess up a good thing?" In fact, Terrell only wishes for more of the same. When Virginia's Standards of Learning (SOL) were merged with CK to create Cale's blended curriculum, Terrell estimated that approximately ten percent of Core guidelines had to be omitted. "It hurts," said Terrell. "I didn't want to see any aspect of CK not being taught." Which CK recommendations were not included in Cale's curriculum guidelines? Who determined which CK recommendations to exclude and which ones to keep? And what was the rationale for omitting some recommendations while keeping others?

The answers to these questions were somewhat confusing. According to Terrell and Alice, the curriculum committees determined which CK recommendations to exclude, and omitted only those items that were similar or identical to Virginia's SOL. However, if the only CK recommendations that were excluded were those that were similar or identical to the Virginia SOL, then in essence, CK wasn't modified at all. This confusion merited a closer look at the CK guidelines, the Virginia SOL, and Cale's "blended" guidelines. The second grade curriculum was selected.

Each and every one of the CK recommendations for language arts, math and social studies were found in Cale's guidelines. For science, substitutions were made in the list of significant scientists to be taught in the second grade. Core's guidelines suggest that the lives and contributions of Galileo Galilei, Thomas Edison, Florence Nightingale and Mae Jemison be taught. The only scientist from Core listed in Cale's guidelines is Florence Nightingale; Thomas Edison, Mae Jemison and Galileo Galilei were replaced by Elijah McCoy, Daniel Hale Williams and Anton von Leeuwenhoek. The CK recommendations most modified were in the arts. Although all of Core's recommendations for music were listed in Cale's guidelines, none of Core's visual arts and drama guidelines for the second grade were found in Cale's guidelines.

Terrell hopes the school division will allow Cale to "lighten up on the county requirements." "If we have surpassed the county's expectations of our students' performance, then we should be able to decide what our students need more of," he states. "Core introduces rich content to students earlier than the county requires, so let's do it the CK way, all the way," Terrell urges.

Spotlight on the Jefferson Preschool Center:

# An Early Childhood Learning Environment

*by Christine Appert*

## I. Introduction and Background

A parking lot occupied by Big Wheels and tricycles greets the visitor arriving at an aging building in downtown Charlottesville. Inside, one encounters sunny flower boxes, walls covered with splashes of colorful children's artwork, and a floor level display with picture books, birds' nests, and other signs of spring waiting to be picked up and examined. Walking down the hall, spacious classrooms with large sunlit windows beckon visitors to enter and explore this special environment for young children.

Amidst various school division service departments and a community college neighborhood center located in the old Jefferson School building, the Charlottesville City Schools' Jefferson Preschool Center, (JPC), houses thirteen early childhood classrooms. Seven of the preschool classes serve four-year-old children who demonstrate learning and/or economic needs for educational experiences that otherwise might not be available to them. Early childhood special education programming is provided for children two through five-years of age in the remaining six classrooms and by JPC-based specialists serving eligible preschoolers with special needs who do not attend school at the center.

### *History of the Preschool Programs*

Along with other Virginia school divisions and in response to federal mandates for a free and appropriate public education for any child

with a disability[1], Charlottesville began serving preschool-age children with special needs in the late 1970's. Originally, the program, consisted of three to four classes operated by the Piedmont Regional Education Program, through an interagency agreement with the city. In 1988, Charlottesville assumed administration of the early childhood special education program and eventually added two classes.

Charlottesville's Title I Four-Year-Old Program was started in 1988 with two classrooms and expanded to three and then four in subsequent school years. The classes served children in four neighborhood schools, but, as the program grew, referrals were received from throughout the school division. Title I regulations stipulated that city-wide programming could only be offered if services were rendered at one central site for the collective set of the most educationally needy children in the school division. To accomplish this task, the four classes were moved to Jackson-Via Elementary School at the beginning of the 1991 school year.

The Jefferson Preschool Center opened at the beginning of the 1995-1996 school year with 114 children. The Title I Four-Year-Old Program classes and the six early childhood special education classes were moved from elementary schools around the city and assembled along with a new class for "at-risk" four-year-olds funded by the Virginia Preschool Initiative.

*New Life for an Old School*

With the exception of housing local elementary schools during building renovations in the early 1990's, the Jefferson building had not been used as a school in almost thirty years. Constructed early in the twentieth century, the Jefferson School was first a segregated high school and later an elementary school for the city's African American community. Frances Johnson, a school board member at the time the Jefferson Preschool Center was conceived and a 1957 graduate of the Jefferson Elementary School, expressed the commitment of long-time residents to maintaining this "community landmark" as an educational facility.[2]

Very little was changed or modernized in the Jefferson building as the preschool classes prepared to relocate in the summer of 1995. Acknowledging that a major building renovation was anticipated in the city's Capital Improvement Plan for 1999-2000, the school board deliberated the future of the building.[3] An architectural study had been conducted in 1990 to review the building's potential conversion to an administrative office space, and this option was still being considered in 1995. Ultimately, the school board settled on making the Jefferson School a home for the city's preschool classes, contingent on approval of a "special education classes relocation

plan." The plan, proposed by Marianne Kosiewicz, Director of Special Education, was developed in response to requests from parents, teachers, and the administrative staff to reduce the number of self-contained special education classes for elementary students clustered at Greenbrier Elementary School and equalize the distribution of special education classes among the other elementary buildings.[4] The relocation plan assumed the creation of a preschool center to free up space in the various schools buildings and allow for age appropriate mainstreaming of preschoolers. Dr. Kosiewicz's plan for initiating neighborhood, school-based special education placements was approved in concept by the school board in April of 1994, and then recommended for implementation by Dorothea Shannon, Superintendent of Schools. It was unanimously approved by the school board the following January. [5]

During the summer of 1995, modest renovations to the Jefferson building were initiated. These included painting and carpeting the classrooms, purchasing furniture and classroom supplies, and fencing some areas of the parking lot. Preschool staff had little input in plans for building modifications, but advocated most strongly for additional bathrooms. With the Jefferson building's long-term future still uncertain, the district administration was reluctant to consider large investments and settled on new toilets in the existing bathrooms. The preschool teachers moved into the building in September 1995, excited about the prospect of being together, but tentative about their new space. At the beginning of the school year, the bathrooms were still "in-process," no provision had been made for a library or media center, and there was no real playground-- only a fenced-in parking lot and empty concrete courtyard area. In October, Nancy Gercke, the early childhood coordinator, and Ann Dublirer, a special education coordinator, reported on the Center's opening and appealed to the school board for playground equipment. Dr. Shannon recognized the need for an outside play area, but stated that the money spent for the center had already exceeded the allocation.[6] At that point, the board's discussion turned once again to long term alternative and renovation costs for the building. A few weeks later, however, Dr. Shannon was able to announce that an anonymous donor had contributed enough money to get a playground started.

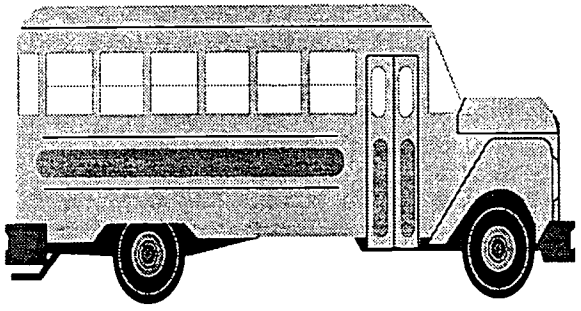
As the transplanted teachers and their students settled into the Jefferson School, Nancy Gercke and Ann Dublirer applied for a grant to fund the purchase of books and began to explore creative ways to help make the building more hospitable for young children. Teachers from all three programs formed committees and began to form a community. Sara Andrew, one of the early childhood special educators, summarizes their efforts:

> It was the situation that we were thrown into when we came over here. The building wasn't done. We had to work together or it would not work and it would not get done. We literally had to put the school together. There was no one here to do it for us. Everything was worked by committees and I think there was a good mixing of special education and Title I teachers so that we learned to work together.[7]

## II. Description of the Learning Environment

### *Organization and Staffing*

When the three early childhood programs moved into the Jefferson School, each brought with it established classrooms and staffing arrangements. The superintendent appointed Nancy Gercke and Ann Dublirer coordinators of JPC soon after the school board approved the relocation plan. As the early childhood coordinator, Nancy Gercke maintained responsibility for programming in the Title I Four-Year-Old Program and newly created Virginia Preschool Initiative class, along with other curriculum coordinator assignments, such as curriculum support for the kindergartens, first and second grades. Continued coordination of the Early Childhood Special Education classes and services fell to Ann Dublirer who continued to serve as special education coordinator for two of the city's elementary schools. Although both individuals had held their respective positions for a number of years, they had never worked together. Suddenly, they confronted the challenge of jointly orchestrating the logistics of mobilizing eleven classrooms, negotiating a building facelift that could accommodate the unique needs of the very young, and opening essentially a new school. While classroom consultation and staff development had always been part of the coordinator's domain, each became accountable for teacher evaluations in their respective program area.



Many of the features attributed to the structural organization of the Title I Four-Year-Old Program, the Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI), and the Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) programs are mandated by their primary funding sources. Federal funding through Title I and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and state-local funding through the Virginia Preschool Initiative support the operation of the programs. The associated regulations provide directives for establishing policies related to issues such as student eligibility criteria, class size, teacher qualifications, and family support services. Along with federal, state, and local education agency requirements, the JPC programs must meet Virginia Child Day Care Regulations, which pose additional parameters.

Class size for the Title I and VPI classes is set at sixteen four-year-olds and all seven classes were filled for the 1996-1997 school year. The special education classes can accommodate up to eight children, but not all rooms have that many students and some have part-time participants. Most youngsters in the ECSE classes range from three through six years of age with a separate class for two-year-olds. There are some class changes from year-to-year, but children often remain with the same teacher until they advance to kindergarten or a school-age special education placement.

All classrooms at JPC are staffed by a certified early childhood or special education teacher and an assistant. Each of the teachers boasted years of experience

working with young children working in private or public early childhood programs. With the exception of the VPI staff, all the teachers and many of the assistants were in their current assignments for a year or more prior to the move. Several of the teaching teams have been in place for a number of years. Ann Mehlin and Shelia Davis, a Title I Four-Year-Old program teacher and assistant team, have been with the program since the beginning and discussed the status of their long standing association:

> We went through initial (High Scope) training together. We worked through the glitches. We've gotten a good model established here... We think alike. We take a lot of anecdotal notes on the kids for all the things we're looking for. I can write down one or two word things and she knows exactly what I am thinking."

Notably, JPC teacher-assistant teams uniformly perceive their relationship to be co-teachers rather than a hierarchical teacher-subordinate configuration. When observing, it is almost impossible for a visitor to determine which adult in a classroom is "the teacher," because adults are always totally involved in activities with the children.

In addition to the classroom teachers, other JPC-based early childhood staff and specialists extend and enhance the center's program offerings. The role of the Inclusion Specialist is to follow preschool-age children with special needs who attend other programs in the community and serve as part of the support system for inclusion efforts at JPC. Similarly, the speech-language pathologist provides services for preschoolers identified as having delays in speech or language development and offers individual and small group interventions for JPC children. Special education students also have access to physical and occupational therapists and an adaptive physical education teacher, who come to JPC at scheduled times during the week. As required by IDEA, the Child Find Educator is responsible for taking referrals, conducting initial screenings and evaluations, and identifying youngsters who are eligible for special education services. The new position of Family Liaison is intended to provide additional contact and support for families of children served in the VPI program.

While teachers and assistants work regular teacher contract hours at JPC, students are dismissed at varying times. According to state regulations for the VPI program, children must remain in school until 3:00 p.m. The Title I and ECSE classes leave at 1:30 p.m. This arrangement affords teachers in the last two programs a substantial block of time for contact with families, synthesizing the events of the day, and planning for the next day. A visitor to JPC, late in the day, is likely to find teaching teams productively reviewing the day's anecdotal notes to determine a plan for the next day, organizing instructional materials, or summarizing their observations of the children's behavior and activities.

Training is ongoing through school-division opportunities and more specific inservice for JPC staff. During interviews, teachers described participation in High Scope curriculum training sessions and visits to other preschool centers. Some staff also discussed their own professional development efforts.

For example, Jane McCarty, the Inclusion Specialist, was interested in looking for ways to incorporate elements of the High Scope Curriculum, used by the Title I and VPI programs, into the individualized programming for ECSE students. She learned how to use a database program and constructed a computer-based template for generating Individualized Education Programs that embody the broad-based areas of the High Scope Child Observation Record.

Twice a month, the staff use the period at the end of the day to meet with Bob Pianta, a psychologist on the faculty of the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education. Teachers consistently referred to the value of these group conversations as an opportunity for "adults who are working with the same age group, to be able to sit and discuss issues."[9] Dr. Pianta also believes these sessions to be fruitful. He recalled that last-year's sessions were very child focused and seemed helpful in contributing to a collective understanding of how teachers approach children and their needs.[10]

*The Children*

Unlike children enrolled in public school kindergarten or upper grades, JPC students are selected or determined eligible to participate in one of the preschool classes. All children at the center have identified special needs, but the three programs differ in their admission criteria.

Dr. Pianta worked with Nancy Gercke and the Title I staff during the program's early years to standardize the selection process for children chosen to participate in the Four-Year-Old Program. Screening encompasses a parent interview and a developmental inventory with a representative battery of items gauging cognitive; speech/ language; fine motor and gross motor development; and personal/interpersonal behavior. Four-year-olds are recruited through local publicity and agency referrals. The applicants are screened by the Title I and VPI teachers in June. Candidates for the Title I program are chosen because they are found to be below average in the areas measured and ranked in order of educational (developmental) need. For example, children who demonstrate below average skills in all five areas are selected first. Based on the same developmental screening and parent interview format, children for the VPI classes are selected based on their "at-risk" status. In addition to developmental concerns, a child may be at-risk as a result of circumstances such as special health conditions or family situations which relate to socioeconomic level, educational level of the parents, level of family stress, or English as a second language.[11]

In discussing the selection process, teachers commented that language development is often a factor, but lack of experience is usually the major criterion. Ann Mehlin elaborates:

> There are going to be children in kindergarten that have had this kind of experience or something like it. The children here would not have if it were not for the Four-Year-Old program. So the discrepancy would be huge. They get so much experiential learning out of coming to this program.[12]

Referral for early childhood special education can be initiated at any time in the school year as specified in IDEA state and federal regulations. Children are referred and evaluated if a disability is suspected. Based on the results of a comprehensive, multi-disciplinary assessment, a child may be found eligible for special education under one of fourteen different disability categories. Once a child is determined eligible for services, an Individualized Education Program (IEP) is developed to identify specific objectives and delineate related services. A placement is determined that can offer the most appropriate and least restrictive environment in which to implement the IEP. Ann Dublirer emphasized that a continuum of educational options is available to a preschooler with a disability. Having the ECSE classes in the same building with the Title I and VPI classes has contributed to the flexibility and efficiency of placement decisions, which best support children's unique needs. This arrangement has allowed children to participate on a full or part-time basis in the larger Title I or VPI classes. Those youngsters who benefit from instruction in smaller, more specialized settings can be accommodated in an ECSE class. Depending on the child's needs, other options might include visits to JPC in the afternoon, for small group or individual speech-language therapy; attendance at a private preschool or day care center with monitoring provided by the Inclusion Specialist; or, at the other end of the continuum, individual home-based services.

Throughout the JPC, there are a number of children who, because of the multiple stresses in their lives, present serious emotional and behavioral problems in classrooms. Teachers contend with children who are physically aggressive and have difficulty expressing themselves and following routines and rules. The staff makes a special effort to create a safe and stable environment and to form positive bonds with the children. In addition, JPC has an intervention team, with membership from the special education and four-year-old programs. The hope is that support for children who are struggling in the classroom will reduce unwarranted special education referrals. Jane McCarty described several situations where the intervention team worked with a child and his teacher to find effective strategies for managing challenging behaviors. In one case, a child's behavior in class resulted in concerns from his teachers that his disruptive behavior in class might require special education. The intervention team provided support for the child in the classroom.

> He was tough.. He had so many disruptive behaviors. The intervention team asked the teacher to try two strategies to eliminate these behaviors. First, she needed to be able to remove him from the classroom because the child's negative behaviors seemed to escalate based on the reaction from his classmates. The team felt it was important that the teacher personally provide the intervention. Someone needed to be on-call to go into the classroom when he needed to be removed.Staff

were made available to substitute in her classroom. Second, the team asked the teacher to "bank time" with this child. She spent approximately fifteen minutes per day of quality one-one-one play time in an attempt to build a relationship with him. The result of this intervention has been very positive. The child has had fewer disruptive behaviors and has opportunities to demonstrate positive leadership qualities. "Time out," if necessary, can be managed within the classroom. The teacher now feels more capable of managing this child within the classroom and is no longer considering a referral for special education.[13]

*Family Involvement*

Maintaining communication and involving families in the child's preschool experience are considered critical elements of the JPC programs. A multi-faceted system is in place which includes home visits, parent meetings, parent involvement in classroom activities, monthly newsletters, and ongoing written or phone communication. A family-needs assessment is done when children enroll in the Title I and VPI programs, and the part-time Family Liaison works to address identified needs. VPI program teachers are required by the state to make two home visits a year.

Beyond satisfying IDEA regulations for procedural safeguards and inviting the parent to participate in the IEP process, there are no norms established for ECSE teachers' contact with families. Ann Dublirer noted that each contact depends on what is needed and "on the parents' openness and willingness."

Individual teachers expressed some frustration with parents who do not respond to their communication attempts. The consensus of the staff seems to concur with Ann Mehlin's position that "even though we don't hear from the parents, we don't give up on the child."[14] One teacher noted:

> I think that so many parents are living on a survival level that having to think about that [the IEP] is just beyond the amount of energy they have. That has been real frustrating for me to just step back and accept that.. I guess I've just had to learn to gauge my expectations.

Center-wide,parent workshops are scheduled once a month. Over the course of the past two years, various formats have been introduced in an attempt to increase parent participation. This year, workshops on topics such as "Bedtime Routines" or "Building Responsibility with Children" have been offered to families by classroom teachers. Attendance for workshops, however, has not matched the numbers for festive events, like Thanksgiving luncheon.

*Program Goals, Learning Environment, and Curriculum*

Labeled by distinctive logos, each classroom in the Jefferson Preschool Center has its own unique milieu reflecting the characteristics of its teachers and students. Underlying these differences, though, there is an engaging consistency which is reflected in the deliberate attention given to creating a

child-centered environment throughout the building. Practices consonant with "developmental appropriateness" were evident across settings and programs.

The philosophy that "young children learn best by doing" is pervasive. Analogous goals for the three programs exist within the curriculum frameworks intended for young children and implemented with attention to the different interests and developmental needs of each student. The three programs provide a variety of experiences that extend to all areas of the child's education including physical, cognitive, language, social, and personal growth. Individual goals for developmental progress are established and evaluated based on the child's developmental profile at the beginning of the school year. Special educators are more likely, though, to focus on discrete skill development, while Title I and VPI teachers consider the child's progress from a broader perspective.

Center-wide goals complement those established by the school division in 1995, as part of "Target 2000," a five year strategic plan. These include the provision of a range of service delivery options and family education and support. JPC staff express a strong commitment to creating a unified program organized around a common learning environment and services that meet students' unique needs.

In the Jefferson building, the ECSE classes are located on the first floor with the exception of one group which is on the second floor with the Title I and VPI classes. This configuration was determined by the superintendent when the center opened so that the special education rooms would have bathrooms. All rooms are organized into active learning centers, a large group meeting area, and an uncarpeted space with tables and chairs. There are areas for dramatic play; "hands-on" or small manipulative activities and puzzles; large and small unit blocks; sensory activities table (i.e., sand or water); art; and sometimes woodworking, complemented by centers intended for quieter pursuits such as computer use, books, and "listening." The classroom for two-year-olds is distinguished by the addition of structures for physical play, a simplified arrangement of toy and activity sections, two rocking chairs, and a changing table. The rooms are arranged to facilitate the process of discovery, support the children's desire to find out about things, and, generally, meet the needs of children engaging in active learning experiences. JPC classrooms are filled with children's creations and print; areas and materials are labeled; calendars, charts, and stories are posted in the large group areas; and written words and signs are integrated into every day life. Children in several classes, for instance, were observed requesting signs or labels to protect their work after completing puzzles or constructing structures.

Schedules vary among the classes, but all include similar components typical of a preschool. After arrival and breakfast, many of the classes have a morning circle which includes a variety of teacher-selected activities. The remainder of the morning involves a small group period with children working directly with a teacher, "work times" when children implement their own plans at activity centers, outdoor or gross motor activities, and lunch. Because the Title I and VPI classes do not

have bathrooms, several group bathroom breaks must be scheduled and coordinated with other classes. The ECSE class schedules also include adaptive physical education, speech-language therapy group sessions, and other special programming features. Children throughout the center seemed very familiar with the routines of the school day. Transitions were accomplished smoothly with little prompting from teachers: students seemed to know what was expected and what they should do next.

The Title I and VPI classes follow a specific curriculum model, which lends continuity to the total program. The High Scope curriculum derived from the Ypsilanti-Perry Preschool Project during the mid 1960's. Originally developed by David Weikart and Lawrence Schweinhart, it is described as an open-framework model with cognitive-developmental underpinnings derived from Piagetian theory.[15] Teachers and children jointly plan and initiate activities and work together. A "plan, do, review" sequence, part of every work period, is designed to encourage children to develop decision making and problem solving abilities and practice them on a continuing basis. Teachers use diverse techniques to help children decide on a plan for their work period (usually about an hour) and review their play activities at the end. Youngsters choose among classroom centers and opt to play alone or with classmates. While children are usually motivated to make a daily plan, teachers must be creative to get them to review at the end of the work period.

Teachers closely observe and interact with children during the day. Anecdotal notes, taken by both members of the classroom teaching team, are used to consider children's abilities and identify specific interests.. Teachers are particularly attentive to children's "key experiences" or developmentally important behaviors in critical areas of growth and learning.[16] Plans for small group learning experiences are based on this information rather than pre-established theme units or curriculum plans. Ann Mehlin explains the focus for her small groups in February:

> They've been really interested in animals. As part of Black History Month, we talked about Africa. Their emphasis was really on animals and they wanted to go from there. So, we've been doing lots of things with animals - a whole range. We look at key experiences to try and decide the activities that we choose and where we want to place emphasis.[17]

Children's learning and growth with the High Scope Curriculum is considered in terms of broad developmental goals The instructions for the "Child Observation Record" (COR) recommend that teachers observe behaviors during the course of regular program activities and caution against making the COR into a test.[18] Anecdotal notes help teachers keep track of children's progress in achieving new developmental stages.

Programming in traditional ECSE classrooms has taken a somewhat different tact. In the smaller and more individualized special education setting, activities tend to be more structured and teacher-directed. Instruction and assessment are focused on ameliorating deficits considered in discrete skills. The JPC special education teachers do not

uniformly follow a specific curriculum model, but all are responsible for implementing the established Individualized Education Program objectives for each student. ECSE classes display many characteristics of Title I and VPI classes: children actively engaged in play and teachers involved in facilitating or extending their experiences. Where ECSE teachers have teamed with Title I or VPI classes for joint activities, teachers reported incorporating some features of the High Scope curriculum into their program. Nancy Gercke observed:

> High Scope is not that different. There are key differences and it is often misunderstood. You can pick up aspects of it and put them in your classroom. Just the idea of "plan, do, review" is something that can easily go into a classroom. One big difference is observing children and taking anecdotal notes. Seeing what key experiences emerge and doing your planning on a daily basis. I remember years ago, I went over and talked to the preschool handicapped (ECSE) teachers about the High Scope COR and it was so radically different to them then because it is broad based and not skill based."[19]

*Inclusion*

When plans were made for moving all the preschool classes into the Jefferson building, one of the appeals of the "relocation plan" was that it would provide opportunities for children with and without disabilities to share activities. During JPC's first year, a committee including teachers and the two coordinators, developed an "Inclusion Statement." This document establishes some basic philosophical tenets and an "inclusion continuum" similar to an action plan with a "what we need to do" section. Among the guiding concepts presented in this document is the idea that "all children can benefit from being included in experiences with typical peers when appropriate support is provided."[20] Jane McCarty, the Inclusion Specialist, reported that experiences have varied from shared use of the playground to co-planned joint work periods. Inclusion has not been mandated; but, during this school year, all of the ECSE teachers have teamed with a Title I or VPI class in some way. For example, the ECSE two-year-old group joins in musical activity sessions with one of the four-year-old classes.

Sara Andrew describes this year's success in teaming for work periods twice a week with a teacher of a four-year-old class. While all her students gained something from this collaboration, it has been particularly advantageous for youngsters who are exiting the ECSE program and going on to kindergarten. They are offered an opportunity to try their wings in a larger but supportive setting. In addition, one of the children in the four-year-old class was recently found eligible for special education, and she is able to participate in two groups with teachers and children she already knows allowing for very little disruption in her school routine.

## III. Reflections

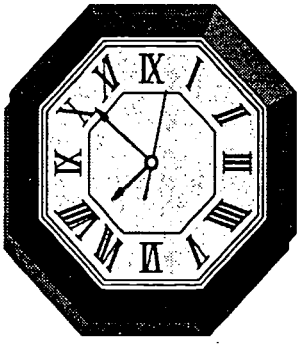
*Getting Settled*

One thing that seems quite certain about the Jefferson Preschool Center is that everyone is glad to be there and committed to maintaining a child-centered environment for young children. Teachers note the benefits for children and opportunities to share ideas, collaborate, lend assistance, and vent mutual frustrations. They contrast the current arrangement to the isolation they experienced as preschool teachers in elementary buildings.

Individuals continue to express concerns about the facility. The constraints on bathroom access comes up frequently as does discontent with the physical separation by floors of the ECSE classes from the other rooms. Ideally, all classrooms would have a bathroom, thereby making room assignments interchangeable.

*A Longer Day*

Anupcoming change that may demand considerable discussion concerns the dismissal time for the Title I and ECSE classes. Extending the day until 3:00 p.m. has been proposed as a way of meeting the child care needs of some families, particularly those affected by welfare reforms. Acknowledging that this change would be helpful for many families, the staff approved the proposal by a seventy-five percent vote. To be put into effect, it will first need to be approved by the school board as a budget item requiring an additional $42,000. Although the request was denied last year, most JPC staff feel that it is inevitable and seem to accept it with, perhaps, some reasonable reservations.



One consideration for the staff will be the loss of approximately two hours of planning time every afternoon. Lucille Williams, who has worked with her students until 3:00 p.m. this year and supports the extended day, speaks from experience:

> There are things about the 1:30 day that I miss. I don't have as much time with my team (classroom) teacher to discuss things or get things together the way that I would want. There is time for planning but not as much as we had. One thing I really appreciated last year was that I got a chance to go to the other teachers' classrooms just to see what was working for them and what wasn't." [21]

Looking at the bright side, Sara Andrew comments:

> I think it will make for a much more relaxed, flowing type of day. We're on such a tight schedule now, that if I want to make sure I teach everything I want to get done in a day --it is boom, boom, boom. It would allow for a decent nap time. I have two now that have to take a nap every day. They just can't make it. I've tried not letting them take a nap but it is not worth it because by the end of the day they are exhausted and irritable. They don't get naps when they go home, so it is time well spent for them."[22]

*More on Inclusion*

During the past two years, the JPC teachers have worked hard to develop

relationships across programs. These moves seem to be a first step toward pairing special education with Title I and VPI teachers. In looking back over the past couple of years, Jane McCarty reflects:

> One of the things that came up early in our discussion as two separate staffs is that there would be possibilities for intermingling kids. I think there was a lot of concern--fear, actually. People were afraid that somebody might do something to them to make them lose control of what they always had control of. So, I felt it was really important to go slow and not push anything. There would be obvious, logical opportunities for kids to be together. In the beginning, there was a four-year-old teacher and a special education teacher who just got together for music. Now this year, there's been more teaming. That group has expanded from music time to work time. They spend a lot more time together. One of the things that they recommended [for themselves] was that they do planning together. That was one of the big pieces that was missing."[23]

Ms. McCarty suggests that the differences in orientation between the ECSE and High Scope models may be a potential barrier for teams that wish to go beyond shared field trips and playground time. Her rationale for designing an IEP template, using the developmental stages of the High Scope "Child Observation Record," was to set the stage for thinking about instruction and assessment in terms of broad-based developmental goals. The template is intended to serve as a possible basis for establishing appropriate individual objectives that are consistent with the High Scope model. Remaining true to their resolve for a continuum of options, teachers acknowledge that a shift away from addressing discrete skills may not be applicable to all youngsters. During the next year, it will be interesting to see if teachers use and apply the COR-based template to IEPs, what modifications are made to the standard objectives, and if there is evidence of changes in classroom connections.

*Extending Family Involvement*

Communication with parents, including home visits, phone calls, notes, and meetings has always been a component of early childhood programs in Charlottesville. Since moving to JPC, parent involvement has been enhanced, however, by maximizing use of the gym and other spaces for center-wide events and parent workshops. Participation has also been increased by including parents on a JPC Advisory Board and inviting parents to come to school for special presentations, field trips, and other occasions.

The employment of a part-time family liaison provides an additional layer of support for families. While the role of the liaison is still being defined, she is assisting families with some of their identified needs, (i.e., referrals to community agencies and coordinating parent training with Head Start), and helping the VPI program teachers with parent contacts.

**Conclusion**

The Jefferson Preschool Center embodies a dynamic learning environment that evolved from ten separate preschool classrooms. In their new school, the teachers maintained their tradition of child-centered practices and sought

ways to balance the inherent differences and similarities among them. Fortified by their collective strengths and shared commitment to an exemplary level of programming, the staff has gelled as a community, and acclimated to the concomitant advantages and challenges of ongoing innovation.

1 Education for All Handicapped Children Act. PL 94-142. (August 23, 1977). Title 20, U.S.C. 1401 et. seq: US Statutes at Large, 83r, 773-796.
2 Interview conducted with Frances Johnson on 18 March 1997.
3 Minutes of the Regular Meeting of the School Board of the City of Charlottesville, 15 September 1994.
4 Minutes of the Regular Meeting of the School Board of the City of Charlottesville, 7 April 1994.
5 Minutes of the Regular Meeting of the School Board of the City of Charlottesville, 5 January 1995.
6 Minutes of the Regular Meeting of the School board of the City of Charlottesville, 5, October 1995.
7 Interview conducted with Sara Andrew on 10 March 1997.
8 Interview conducted with Ann Mehlin and Shelia Davis on 26 February 1997.
9 Ibid.
10 Interview conducted with Bob Pianta on 17 March 1997.
11 Charlottesville City Virginia Preschool Initiative Steering Committee Definition of at-risk, 1995.
12 Interview conducted with Ann Mehlin and Shelia Davis on 26 February 1997.
13 Interview conducted with Jane McCarty on 4 March 1997.
14 Interview conducted with Ann Mehlin and Shelia Davis on 26 February 1997.
15 G. Natriello, et al. Schooling Disadvantaged Children (New York: Teachers College Press, 1990), p. 57.
16 Hohmann, M.J. Extensions: Newsletter of the High Scope Curriculum (March/April 1994): p.4.
17 Interview conducted with Ann Mehlin and Shelia Davis on 26 February 1997.
18 High Scope Educational Research Foundation. (1991) Child Observation Record. Ypsilanti, MI.
19 Interview conducted with Nancy Gercke and Ann Dublirer on 13 February 1997.
20 Inclusion at Jefferson Preschool Center, 1996.
21 Interview conducted with Lucille Williams on 10 March 1997.
22 Interview conducted with Sara Andrew on 10 March 1997.
23 Interview conducted with Jane McCarty on 4 March 1997.

# DISCOVERY: An Experiential Learning Program's First Year

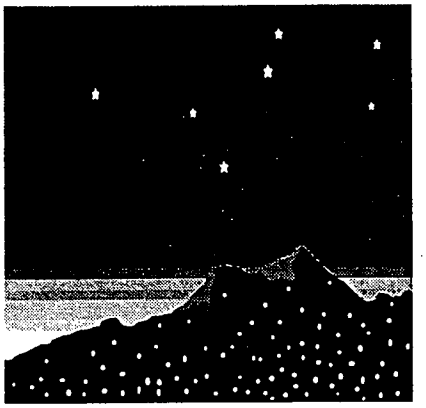
*by Tim Thomas*

Spring 1997: DISCOVERY is an experiential education program in its first year at Prospect Heights Middle School in Orange, Virginia. Formed in conjunction with the North Carolina Outward Bound School (NCOBS), DISCOVERY offers a group of eighth-graders the opportunity to learn through direct experience during outdoor challenges and service projects. The instructors in this extracurricular program, most of them teachers on staff at PHMS, pride themselves on their integration of state SOLs into the outdoor activities. The program has also received wide, popular support among businesses and community leaders within and beyond Orange County. Over 40 public and private school systems nationwide sponsor experiential education programs in association with OB. PHMS is the first school in Virginia to offer this program, largely because of a solitary teacher's career itch.

Nearing the end of his fourth year teaching eighth-grade social studies, Andy Mink was looking for a way to revitalize his craft and achieve a more powerful impact on his students. Surfing the Internet, he stumbled upon an announcement for training for educators by the OB program, "a recognized leader in wilderness education for over thirty years." (DISCOVERY, 1). "They are trying more and more intentionally to get involved in schools, public and private, and they're really trying hard to become a force in the classroom," says Mink.

He contacted a number of schools already working with OB, and in each case, no matter what the model, middle or high school, the results were the same. "Of the over twenty teachers and sponsors that I've spoken with," says Mink, "their success rate is 100% -- not one student who participated regretted doing so afterwards. In fact, teacher after teacher reported only a positive effect on their students' academic and personal outlook on school." (DISCOVERY, 1996)

During July 1996, Mink attended a three-week OB teacher practicum course in Colorado. He had convinced the county to pay for part of his trip, and a scholarship from OB covered the rest. The course allowed educators to participate in a wilderness experience and then to engage in a curriculum-writing process that addresses their school systems' specific needs.



Based on Mink's contacts with other OB-affiliated programs, he had already designed a version that would fit OB principles to Prospect Heights. "I actually did it backwards. I had the program envisioned and in place before I went on the course," says Mink. In developing the DISCOVERY concept, he sought the support of teaching colleagues at the school.

"People tend to gravitate toward people with particular interests," Mink contends, and he had a group in mind to help him with DISCOVERY. "Clearly, [I looked for] people I've worked with in the past and people I know share the same enthusiasm and interest in finding something else to turn kids on to school. It wasn't a hard sell at all."

Six other PHMS teachers had signed on before Mink left for Colorado. They included Wendy Short, an eighth-grade inclusion instructional assistant; and Gary Mittler, the media center and technology coordinator; as well as Rick Estes, the science and ecology coordinator for Orange County.

When PHMS was conceived, it was intended to be a model middle school, and over time, it has been recognized nationally as such. The school contains the sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grades. All instructional personnel are involved in teaching teams from two to 6 people in size. Estes says the atmosphere of PHMS is ideal for a program like DISCOVERY. "The personalities in the school include many people who are willing to take risks -- teachers who are willing to try innovative ideas," he says. "DISCOVERY is a natural fit. Individuals in teams are given individual freedom and are encouraged to consider possibilities."

Once Mink had done all of his homework, planning the program and attracting some interested co-sponsors, he took his plan to Bonnie Pendleton, an assistant principal, for final approval. She offered some suggestions and gave the project her blessing. "The big point around here," says Mink, "is that you want teachers to decide to do it on their own. That's the bottom line." Other sponsors found Mink's enthusiasm contagious. Wendy Short (dubbed "Wilderness Mom" by the group), a DISCOVERY sponsor and parent, says her son wanted to join the program, but she believes that even if he had not wanted to join, she would have anyway.

During the previous year, technology coordinator Gary Mittler had seen the school's "Save our Streams" program stimulate his students to create who were creating a multi-media record of the conservation project. Mittler says that experience was "like a National Geographic film crew...a focused endeavor that left the walls of the school."

He felt DISCOVERY would be a natural outgrowth of this experience.

Estes believes that for an administrator to *ask* a teacher to participate in the planning and implementation of a program like DISCOVERY would be tantamount to "pushing a rope." He feels a program as involved as DISCOVERY has to come from within someone's own interest because of the time required for research, fund-raising, and the like.

The DISCOVERY program's sponsors agree about the needs of eighth-graders that their program can address. One attitude that students frequently lack is simple enthusiasm about school. A mantra that kids tend to mutter is "I hate school." "Some kids were buying into this view more than they should have," says Mink. So, he set out to create "an enthusiastic program in which kids would have a vested interest."

PHMS does not track students academically. Classes are heterogeneous, and students can earn no grade below a "C." The school's mastery learning philosophy has teachers re-teach content to students who did not "get it" the first time around. Mink says he feels like this system works, "but in some ways this school shelters kids from failure. We wanted to set up a program that would offer kids (in a variety of academic ranges) a chance to meet challenges -- fail, learn from that failure, then move on to be successful." Estes calls it "falling on your can." Mittler agrees that kids lack real challenges today. "They can be challenged in an academic environment, but it's not a survival challenge. Academic settings can give artificial challenges, but not ones that require you to reach down deep....Other people's well-being will depend on the kid meeting the challenge." Mink felt it essential to provide students with a challenge: "We live in a society where we can avoid things that scare us.. It's really easy if you don't like something you're not good at to sort of steer away from it and still lead a pretty comfortable life.

Finally, Mink wanted to give kids a chance to work with adults as fellow learners. Too often, he feels, a student's primary interaction with an adult involves her parents telling her what to do. He wanted to offer students an opportunity for positive interaction with adults. "Every time we run an outing, we invite adults to come with us, not as chaperones, but as students." So, DISCOVERY has brought along teachers, parents, police officers, and community leaders. And each of these adults struggles along with the students to meet the physical challenges of the outing.

One of the primary factors influencing the program's planning and design process was Mink's desire to make DISCOVERY a rite of passage for eighth-grade students. Limiting the enrollment makes DISCOVERY seem valuable, more desirable. Seventh-graders see photos of DISCOVERY events on the school's web site and express a desire to be a part of the program; Mittler says those are perfect opportunities to tell them to make sure they keep grades up so they can apply for the team next year. "Wilderness Mom," who has been working for the school system over eight years, recognizes the "mild peak" that eighth-graders are reaching as they get ready to go to high school. DISCOVERY is sort of their swan song, "a way to leave their mark.".

Prospect Heights' philosophy provides a perfect basis for programs like DISCOVERY. The school's mission states that:

- students learn at different rates and have different learning styles;
- students learn best when they are actively engaged in the learning process;
- students learn best if they understand the value and purpose of the learning; and
- the responsibility for all children in the school should be shared by parents, teachers, students, and the community. [See Appendix]

Kurt Hahn, founder of OB, summarized his group's purpose thusly: "I regard it as the foremost task of education to insure the survival of these qualities: an enterprising curiosity, an undefeatable spirit, tenacity in pursuit, readiness for sensible self-denial, and above all, compassion." (Outward Bound, 1996) The "Four Pillars of the Outward Bound concept" include self-reliance, compassion, physical fitness, and craftsmanship, which leads naturally into the OB mission statement: "to conduct safe, adventure-based courses structured to inspire self-esteem, self-reliance, concern for others, and care for the environment." The activities that comprise OB's core curriculum are skills and safety training, expeditions, solos, and service projects.

From these mission statements, Mink and his colleagues have sculpted a program that serves 22 eighth-graders and meets after school and on Saturdays. Students participate in service projects and outdoor challenges in order to prepare them for an eight-day trip to NCOBS, near Asheville, NC, during May. The students have to raise all their own funds, which Mink cites as an additional learning experience. This culminating activity costs $800 per student.

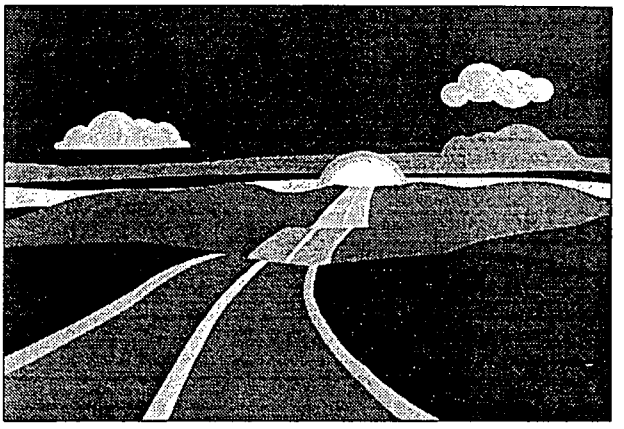
The DISCOVERY vision is aligned with the learning needs of young adults and the characteristics of effective middle schools. The program offers learning opportunities in the physical, moral, educational, and social realm. Students are called on to be actively involved with teachers in a variety of learning situations. And as students work toward their culminating activity, they are engaged in interdisciplinary projects that build upon another (Merenbloom, 1986).

"A focused academic effort, an almost spiritual aspect" is what Mittler thinks makes the group's outings more than an outdoor club, more than fun and games. He points to a "serious, high-quality edge" to all the outings. Despite its extracurricular status, DISCOVERY offers students "the chance to use the natural environment as a classroom to study the core curriculum, including 35 of the state's new SOLs." (DISCOVERY, 1996) For Mink, the rationale for this academic commitment is simple: "We are asking the parents, business, and school community to invest a lot of time, energy, and faith in this project. For a year of sacrifice, we want parents to know that their kid is getting a creative, inventive, and *academic* learning program."

"Philosophically," he continues, "we want this to be an extension of the class-

room, giving our kids a chance to make our material more relevant and accessible. Sure, it would be a very worthwhile program if we intended to only teach hard outdoor skills, but we would like to take that to the next level and tie those hands-on activities into the less concrete world of book-knowledge."

Dave Eichler, a teacher at Donegal High School in Mount Joy, Pennsylvania, has led an OB-based course for high school seniors. "Lots of school districts have contacted me about our program and what we've done," he writes, "but few seem to have the administrative or community commitment to get past first base." For DISCOVERY, the support exists, thanks to Mink's carefully crafted local network.



Along with the autonomy to plan DISCOVERY, PHMS handed Mink the responsibility for raising all funds. The school has provided other forms of support, including buses for group outings, leave for the sponsors traveling with the team to NCOBS in May, space and supplies for meetings, and so forth. Mink appeared before the school board in September 1996 to provide an itinerary of what DISCOVERY would do. Then, during late November he asked parents to write to the school board and describe the experience their students were having. His final trip for the academic year came during April when he showed the school board artifacts from DISCOVERY's first year: newspaper articles and clips from radio and television coverage. The group requested a budget allocation from the school board for next year.

Mink has found that DISCOVERY's affiliation with OB opened many doors in the community. "People do recognize Outward Bound as a very sophisticated and successful education program," he says. Mink has sought aid from area OB alumni and received many helpful responses. "What I've found is I haven't needed anything and asked for it and not gotten it. I think there are a lot of people in this area who enjoy the outdoors who were waiting for something like this, and they rallied behind it," he says. Several OB alumni have called to help the group with outings, grant writing, and organizational advice. In addition, Mink has petitioned area outdoor outfitters for any kind of support. Blue Ridge Mountain Sports (BRMS) of Charlottesville has responded generously, giving hiking boots and outdoor sandals to every DISCOVERY student. More recently, BRMS sponsored an outdoor equipment exchange and donated all the proceeds to the program. Mink has found this sort of business involvement with DISCOVERY essential to the program's expanding scope. "If this was simply a school program," he says, "we would be more limited in what we could do."

DISCOVERY also has been benefited from the technology users at the school. Mittler's library interns have chosen DISCOVERY as the focus of their efforts to learn digital production. Therefore, a

photographer wielding a digital camera accompanies each of the group's outings, and the resulting images are archived in the library and posted on the school's web site. Two of the group's students maintain a DISCOVERY web site that illustrates the evolution of the program.

The school year began with a pool of approximately 35 interested students. Their parents were willing to make a financial commitment to support the group's trip to NCOBS. Because one goal of the program was to provide a 3:1 student-to-teacher ratio, the sponsors had to whittle the number of students down to no more than 22. The decision was not an easy one. The sponsors wanted a diverse group, both in terms of academics and behavior. Students had to be willing to work to maintain the grades which would allow them to leave Orange for the mountains near Asheville during May. Perhaps surprisingly, the final group of participants did not have a great deal of outdoor experience.

The requirements for the program are rigorous. In addition to bi-weekly study halls after school and ongoing fund-raisers, the students engage in a variety of outdoor adventures, including mountain biking, rock climbing, and hiking. The program also includes physical fitness activities (including aerobics and yoga) to prepare students for the NCOBS experience.

The 22 have coalesced around the goal of visiting the mountains of North Carolina; Mittler says they display the camaraderie of a successful sports team. "I really see a lot of enthusiasm," concurs Mink. "They are definitely a part of something bigger now than just a school program or even an athletic team. There's something much more sacrificial about it, and that's going to be a thousand times more [true] when they come off the OB course in May."

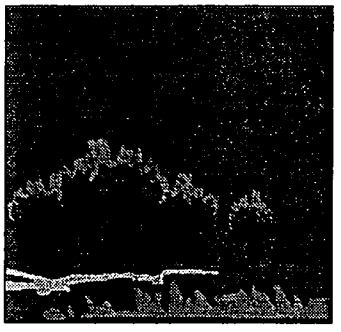
For Mink, the signs of program success are clear. "I have seen our kids become invested in a program that they had never heard about before, much more than is typical for eighth-graders. These kids seem to have a genuine sense of worth and accomplishment in the things that we do. Funny thing is," he continues, "they still have no idea what is waiting for them in Asheville. I am anxious to see the effects on them, and on us as adult students, when we get on course. We have held their hands so far, provided safe, fun outings. I'm curious to see how several individual kids will react when put to the real test. Many will fail initially at recognizing and battling their fears, so the true feedback will come after we return."

The program's impact to this point is a tribute to the support of the community and the atmosphere that exists at Prospect Heights.. Local musicians have given a performance to benefit the students' tuition at NCOBS. Officers from the Orange Police Department accompany the students on their outings as fellow adventurers. Local bike experts donate their time as advisors and trip leaders.

At Prospect Heights, Mink and his colleagues have experienced democracy in action. "There are very few decisions that are handed down here," says Mink. "People are very very willing to hear good ideas." Estes re-emphasizes the importance the school's administrators place on risk-taking: "Teachers are able to say to one another, 'This is just our

first year. Next year we will do this differently,' which is a huge strength at this school." In fact, teachers not only have the freedom to ponder how they can continue to tweak a program, but the team teaching at Prospect encourages teachers to cross-pollinate their programs and intensify student interest. Consider how Short, Mittler, and Estes have each been able to link their instructional emphases through the vehicle of DISCOVERY. Pendleton says she doesn't care how teachers convince kids to learn -- if it works, do it.

The DISCOVERY sponsors would like to see the program expand beyond its current "extracurricular" status. Orange County will soon begin construction on its second middle school. Mink envisions the DISCOVERY program serving as the foundation for a program run at both schools. He espouses the model of the Hickory (NC) school system whose College Park Middle School has completely integrated OB into its curriculum. "Every single kid is a participant, every classroom uses the theme of service learning in their instruction, and they even modified their calendar to provide time for teachers and students to go on course with OB," he explains.



DISCOVERY's goals are ambitious. "Clearly, we have the opportunity to create an outdoor experiential education program...that will become a model for other schools in Virginia and the Southeast." Several other schools in Virginia have already contacted Mink for in-service programs about DISCOVERY. Mink advocates setting up a program at Orange County High School to provide a follow-up experience for Prospect's DISCOVERY graduates. Other plans include a network of schools throughout Virginia and the Southeast to provide accommodations and support for other DISCOVERY programs.

One possibility is for DISCOVERY to become an elective taught on a daily basis within the "works course" framework (an enrichment opportunity in which students engage after their morning core classes). A new set of students would be in the course each semester, with each group traveling separately to NCOBS. Such an arrangement would allow DISCOVERY to serve twice as many students.

Another possibility is for DISCOVERY to become its own team within the eighth-grade. DISCOVERY teachers would serve a group of about 100 students on the outdoor education thematic team. Mink describes this arrangement as similar to the magnet school concept in which students would have options from which to choose among variously themed teams.

Ultimately, DISCOVERY would like to gather enough teachers representing the different disciplines to actually shift its focus away from planning outings to spending more time on the curriculum, fulfilling its goal to incorporate Virginia's SOLs. As the promotional brochure for the program states:

> Imagine studying Whitman and Twain and creating verse to the brilliant orange of a campfire and the twinkles of a million points of light in the sky above...Imagine having the

> world as your biology lab with all of its waterfalls and adventures and creatures as your tools.

The opportunities for interdisciplinary instruction are great within the team-teaching framework. Estes imagines physics lessons being taught in the context of learning about ropes and rock climbing, students becoming the living weights balanced along a climbing wall. He feels DISCOVERY teachers are on the verge of doing some powerful team teaching, but the occasion has not yet arisen in which teachers are sitting down together and planning to team-teach.

Financial and safety concerns will likely keep DISCOVERY very close to its current size next year. It is the group's small size that is the source of a single criticism that Mink has heard: "Why can't this program be offered to every student?"

## Appendix

Mission statement for Prospect Heights Middle School, Orange, VA.

*We Believe:*

*all students desire success and are capable of learning; students learn best in a safe, positive, inviting school environment; students learn at different rates and have different learning styles; students learn best when they are actively engaged in the learning process; students are more successful when they take responsibility for their own actions; students have various talents, skills, and experiences which affect their learning; students learn best if they understand the value and purpose of the learning; students learn best when they are confident and have a sense of self-worth; students learn best when they are given appropriate opportunities for success; students learn to make appropriate decisions given a supportive and challenging environment; teachers need to use a variety of instructional strategies to accommodate different learning styles and rates; teachers, parents, and students should hold high expectations for student behavior and performance; the responsibility for all children in the school should be shared by parents, teachers, students, and the community.*

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Current information about DISCOVERY is available at:
http://www.gemlink.com/~phms1/discovery/discovery.html.

# Spotlight on

# NEW LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS



**Issue 2**
**Fall, 1998**

*A Journal by the Thomas Jefferson Center for Educational Design*
*University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia*

# SPOTLIGHT ON NEW LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

*A Journal of the Thomas Jefferson Center for Educational Design at the University of Virginia*

ISSUE 2

Fall, 1998

## STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

SPOTLIGHT OF NEW LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS is intended to provide educators, policy makers, designers of learning environments, and interested citizens in general with descriptions of innovative schools, classrooms, and alternative learning arrangements. The Thomas Jefferson Center for Educational Design is committed to monitoring these new developments and determining their strengths and weaknesses. The inclusion of a particular innovation in this publication does not constitute endorsement by the Thomas Jefferson Center for Educational Design or the University of Virginia.

## EDITORIAL STAFF



## INQUIRIES

Inquiries regarding receipt of this publication or submission of manuscripts for consideration should be directed to the Editor, in care of the Thomas Jefferson Center for Educational Design, Curry School of Education, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia, 22903. The phone number of the Center is (804)-982-2866 and the fax number is (804) 924-0747.

## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

SPOTLIGHT ON NEW LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS is a publication of the University of Virginia's Thomas Jefferson Center for Educational Design. The journal is an important component of the Center's mission. This issue features three articles that cover a range of topics at the forefront of educational discussions. The articles have been written and researched by graduate students at the Curry School of Education. They offer glimpses of Minnie Howard School in Alexandria, Virginia, a learning environment exclusively for ninth graders; *The Center for Communications*, a high-tech learning environment in Henrico County; and a case study of Gildersleeve Middle School in Newport News that follows the school's creation from initial conception to the actual bricks and mortar of final construction. I join my colleagues at the Center in hoping that readers will find the material in SPOTLIGHT informative.

Daniel L. Duke, Editor

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

# Minnie Howard: For Ninth Graders Only

by Beverly Epps

*The hallways treat every visitor to a bright, cheerful and spotless environment. The floors gleam with pride because they survived the early morning trampling of 700 fourteen to sixteen year olds – ninth graders.*

Minnie Howard is a special place for ninth graders who are full of energy and the ability and desire to learn; and there is an incredible staff of teachers, administrators and counselors with a focus on a high standard of "absolutely the best" for every child. There were various reasons for the creation of this ninth grade school, but the most important reason was student academic and social success. Anyone who has had experience with the trials and tribulations of fourteen, fifteen or sixteen year olds knows how that student age group has certain needs as it transitions from middle school to high school.

The number of students who stop participating academically and/or dropout during the ninth grade year is alarming. A cursory look at state retention rates from K-12 grades paints a dismal picture of what happens to large numbers of children in the ninth grade. According to the Superintendent's Annual Repot for Virginia, 1995-1996, 6%of students were retained in eighth grade; however, that rate doubled in ninth grade with 12% of students failing. The rate deceased to 7% of students failing in tenth grade. This increase in the number of students retained in the ninth grade is staggering and is an indication of the severity of the problem. Through interviews with teachers, administrators and counselors, it is evident that the staff of Minnie Howard is out to reverse this trend for the ninth graders in the City of Alexandria. Their tactics are direct and deliberate and are carried out with care.

In 1992, issues of overcrowding precipitated a close look at the City of Alexandria schools. T. C. William High School was near capacity and the elementary schools were bursting at the seams. The concept of a ninth grade school was one of three possible solutions to the problem. It was the most economical answer and it met several needs. It involved the renovation of an existing building, which was being used for administrative offices, into a school for ninth graders. The creation of a ninth grade school also enabled the city to move forward with the middle school concept. The two junior high schools were able to change their grade configuration from seven through nine to six through eight. The high schools did not have to find a way to absorb seven hundred more students into their already crowded facility. These issues alone made the idea of a ninth grade school attractive to many members of the community.

A task force composed of parents, teachers and administrators researched the concept of a ninth grade. They visited the few ninth grade schools that were in existence in other states and presented their findings to the board and to the community. Their reports focused on the high rates of truancy, drop out and retention of ninth graders within the traditional configuration of school. The task force presented a vision of a revolutionary ninth grade school, where the students would have their own support staff of guidance counselors, a psychologist and a social worker. Their

vision predicted wonderful things for ninth graders if they were in this type of environment. As good as the concept looked on paper, it still took considerable effort to convince those opposed to the idea that a ninth grade school was a viable solution.

Members of the Minnie Howard staff recalled some of the concerns of the community. One administrator said,

> There were some misconceptions about how a ninth grade school would work. First, they had never heard of the concept of having all the ninth graders in one building...used to seeing them in high school where they were at the bottom of the heap and in the middle school where they were at the top of the heap. Students were apprehensive because they were going to be coming together with children from the other side of town...a year earlier.

A teacher said, "Students did not want to be here. They wanted to be where everyone else was...at the high school or the junior high school." Parents were concerned about the academics. There was a fear that academics would suffer as a result of the isolation. There were even teachers who had doubts. After many presentations, conversations and debates, the decision was made to go forward with the creation of a ninth grade school.

The real challenge came when they had to make the plans that looked good on paper a reality. The most essential component of the process was to bring in a leader with the "right stuff" to make the ninth grade school a success. The teachers remember speculating about who would be the principal of Minnie Howard. They were only told that the principal would be someone they did not know. Dr. Margaret Walsh came to the position with a background in education, but her most recent positions had been in private industry. One teacher said, "She brought with her a kind of management style that comes from industry...business into the educational framework? We were not used to that and we were very suspect of it. So it was kinda like...what do you mean I can do this? Teachers don't do this - - you do it. It was that kind of thing."

Dr. Walsh placed a lot of control of the program in the teachers' hands. She told them, "Kids first period, whatever it takes and if they would just teach the kids and get to know their families and we won't ask you to do anything else -- no hall duty, no bus duty, no lunchroom duty, no duties. I am not asking you to do all of that...Focus on the kids...make it your program." The teachers and support staff did just that.

The official decision was made to create teams much like the middle school model. The rationale was that ninth graders needed connections to each other and to their teachers just like the middle school child. They also made the decision to do away with tracking. For example, every student takes World Civilization, a course traditionally offered only to the gifted and talented students. They still offer an honors level of the course for those students who are identified as Gifted and Talented, but any child can opt to take the honors course, not just the gifted and talented students. If the honors level course is too difficult for any student, then he or she can drop back to the regular level without penalty.

These decisions required adjustments on the part of the staff. The teachers had been used to teaching in isolation and teaching to a certain level of students. "Teachers had to learn to teach on teams...They were used to isolation

and departmentalization," said one administrator.

Teacher Advisories (TA's) were also developed for each team. The staff refers to the TA's as the "Heartbeat of Minnie Howard." The TA's are not homerooms or a place for prepackaged lessons on organizational skills or study skills. It is a time for students to interact with each other. The TA's are small and the adult in the room is assigned as case manager for each child in the TA. The case manager's job is to monitor grades and help the children develop coping skills. Students learn how to set goals and how to take responsibility for their behavior. According to the ESL teacher, the concept of a ninth grade school, in particular the TA component, is very beneficial to the ESL child. "These ESL students are not mainstreamed, so TA is the one of the few chances they have to communicate with other students and practice their English. They feel like they are part of the team."

Along with coping skills, TA is a time to reinforce the staff's target of self-advocacy for every child. During class time, TA and even in the halls, the students are learning how to properly speak up for themselves. "They learn how to approach their parents and teachers to explain what they want. They learn to talk to parents about who they are...."

Scheduling children for classes has been, and continues to be, a proactive venture at Minnie Howard. During the summer counselors work diligently to place students in the right classes and in the right circumstances. A majority of the students hit the ground running when they enter the school. Students with extreme attendance issues are assigned to the same team so that they can be monitored closely. If a student does not show up at school, the team leader calls home and asks, "What is going on? How can we help you?" If a student needs a ride, someone goes and picks him or her up. The staff of Minnie Howard believes that in order for students to learn they have to be in school, even if it means picking them up and bringing them to school.

This belief system has opened the doors of communication at the school. One teacher commented that "the kids understand that we care and if you are here you will learn and the bottom line is come." The staff of Minnie Howard has so effectively communicated to students the need to be in school that some students will call and say, "I missed the bus, is there someone there who can pick me up?"

The school has a Crisis Room. In keeping with the staff's efforts to keep students in class, it is seldom used. Behavior issues are dealt with promptly to keep the number of problems down. Every effort is made to prevent lag time between students' inappropriate behaviors; conversations with counselors; referrals to the office; and teachers' knowledge of the results of referrals. An even greater effort is made to anticipate and handle behavioral situations before there is a need for a referral.

Some students and parents were concerned that ninth graders at Minnie Howard would miss out on leadership opportunities and sports. It was business as usual once the school put student activities in place. Minnie Howard now has a student government and all the various committees found in a high school. Students participate in sports and clubs at the high school. Some

organizations from the high school meet or practice at Minnie Howard.

Minnie Howard has been open for six years. Have they reversed the trend in ninth grade drop out rates? Are they having success with their ninth graders? The answer from the community, staff, central office administration and the students is a resounding "YES!" The evidence of success is everywhere. There are fewer students held back in ninth grade and fewer behavior problems. Newspaper articles report a change in heart from those who originally opposed the idea. The administration points to the fact that parents who pulled their children out of the school system for ninth grade have returned their children to the school system. Parents with elementary aged children are now looking forward to their child's experience at Minnie Howard. One teacher believes,

> This school gives them an extra year to mature before they have to go out and face some of the pressures of high school and the expectation that you will make up your mind in the next two years to figure out what you are going to do with the rest of your life. This has been a good positive stopover...

The teachers at the high school have noticed a difference in the tenth graders that come from Minnie Howard. Minnie Howard teachers report that the high school teachers say,

> There is a shorter period of acclimation. The students are better prepared, have a clear idea of what through as much culture shock at the increased length of time to prepare schoolwork. They are more settled in the classroom. They are not as behaviorally challenging as they were three years ago.

When the teachers were asked to attribute the success of the ninth graders, they mentioned four things: commitment, compassion, consequences and communication. The teachers, counselors and administrators who were interviewed talked about the sense of unity and the understanding of expectations. Everybody in the building is genuinely concerned with the academic and social health of the ninth graders. The students know the expectations of Minnie Howard and they know that these expectations are for their benefit.

Members of the staff view communication as key to the success of Minnie Howard. Parents are called frequently. A foreign language teacher said, "She had never had so much parent contact before and it is a good thing!" Students know that their teachers and parents are communicating so there is no way they can slip into a crack somewhere. When students are having trouble and parents have to be called in, the whole team is there to figure out what to do to help the child. These conferences are not for articulating what is wrong, but instead they are for brainstorming ways to help the child be successful.

Style of leadership is another key to the success of Minnie Howard. It takes a belief in people and a willingness to listen for a culture of commitment and compassion to develop. Dr. Walsh believes to be a school leader you must:

*Love what you do
*Keep kids first
*Keep parents close to first
*Keep the staff inspired
*Develop a philosophy of learning and teaching
*Commit to a vision
*Communicate the vision
*Listen, actively and flexibly

*Empower staff
*Love what you do
*Monitor behaviors and outcomes
*Encourage outside observations and evaluation
*Seek the opinion of dreamers
*Listen, actively and flexibly
*Love what you do
*Begin again

With these tenants as the foundation of her actions and reactions she has created an environment for collaboration. Her open door policy has encouraged the staff to be dreamers and believers in what is possible for kids.

Minnie Howard is not perfect. There is no such thing as perfection when you are dealing with human nature. However, the staff has gone the extra mile to try and ensure success for each and every child while maintaining high standards. Teachers and administrators hold themselves accountable for student success, while students learn that their individual success is really their responsibility.

## References

A research team from the University of Virginia's Thomas Jefferson Center for Educational Design conducted a field study of 14 transition programs for ninth graders. Data were collected during the fall of 1997, and Minnie Howard was one of the schools included in the study. Data collection included organizational information, policies, practices, overall effectiveness, and problems of each program. The Thomas Jefferson Center published a policy paper entitled, *Ninth Grade Transition Programs in Virginia.*

Interviews were the primary source of information for this article. Statistical data were obtained from the Superintendent's Annual Report for Virginia, published by the Virginia Department of Education, 1995-1996. The respondents included two administrators, five teachers, and two guidance counselors. Minnie Howard is highlighted here because it is the only ninth grade school in Virginia, and it appears to be having success with ninth graders.

# THE CENTER FOR COMMUNICATIONS

*Spotlight on a High-Tech Learning Environment*

by Jerry Bourdeaux

### Student Voices

*Our team is in charge of getting the video footage ready for broadcast on Channel 36. Everything has to be just right. The technicians taught us how to use the cameras and studio equipment. Teachers showed us how to write the script and to look good on camera. I would like to be a broadcast technician. I like working behind the camera.*

*–Craig, 10th grader*

*We are learning to write like journalists and to use computers for research. We have to be good at writing, no mistakes. What we write goes out to the public. It would be embarrassing if we misspelled words or wrote boring stories. I would like to be a sports writer someday.*

*–Rusty, 9th grader*

*I loved the Whale Project. We used the Internet to get information. We downloaded visuals and maps for our class presentation. We got three grades for the project–a grade in English on our writing; a grade in earth science for our data and visuals about whales; and a grade in communications for our Power Point presentation and public speaking. It sounds hard, but it was really fun because we got to work with a partner. I like to work on teams and use computers to create presentations. Public relations would be a good career for me.*

*–Chantee, 9th grader*

### Images of the Center for Communications

The Center for Communications (CFC) is housed in a new wing of a building at Varina High School in Henrico County. The facility consists of two large computer rooms filled with the latest Macintosh and PCs, printers, scanners and other accessories; a fully equipped TV studio and control room; two editing suites; and a presentation room for student presentations and guest speakers. A glass-enclosed office and several small meeting rooms provide space for administrative duties and teacher conferences. As visitors enter the spacious reception area, their attention is drawn to two TV monitors set into the wall. One monitor silently scrolls the text of Varina High School's daily announcements and the other monitor shows a local news program created by CFC students.

The CFC was designed as a college preparatory program that would integrate studies in English, communications, academic subjects, and advanced computer and broadcast production technology. Students engage in hands-on experience with the electronic print and broadcast media. They work side-by-side with professionals in communications, at the school and in the field. "Students who come here have a strong interest in communications. There is not a program like this one anywhere." explained Bev Lanier, Chair of the CFC and a teacher in the English department at Varina High School.

Activities in the CFC are not what you would expect to find in a typical high school. In the main computer lab, twenty-seven teenagers peered intently at computer screens, as they finished a variety of assignments. Some students worked in groups to prepare the layout for the students' newsletter. They were using PageMaker software to arrange student-written copy and photographs on a series of pages. Several students were putting the final touches on a multi-media

presentation using PowerPoint software which allows students to create a slide show with graphics and text.

At one computer station, Craig, a tall freckled 10th grader, showed me the "slides" he had created for his PowerPoint presentation on medieval warfare. Bright yellow words appeared on a dark blue background. Pictures of ornate medieval weapons were arranged near the text. "I did all the research on the Internet and downloaded the pictures of weapons. I even animated one of the weapons," he said, proudly as he commanded the screen image to spin.

In an adjoining computer lab, 9th grade students sat in groups discussing articles for the student newsletter, *Notes from the Center*. Ms. Lanier pointed out how the newsletter is generated from wide-screen Macintosh computers, a color printer, and a scanner used to produce camera-ready copy. She comments, "It has been a challenge to learn how to use all of this equipment. With the addition of a computer graphics instructor and a television producer/director, we have a staff that offers students both technical and academic expertise."

Another section of the building contains a cluster of broadcasting studios used for news production and distance learning telecasts. One TV studio was alive with activity. Teams of students and professional technicians worked on the final rehearsal of a student-run local news program called "Henrico County Now," a program aired on Channel 36. Four students manned large cameras mounted on tripods. Clusters of electrical cables trailed behind the cameras as the students moved the equipment to get the best angle on the set. Troy and Marsha, the anchors, sat nervously waiting for their cue to start reading their lines off the teleprompter. Teachers and professional technicians gave student-technicians last minute instructions.

In the dim light of the control room, another team of students worked at a consoles which controlled the video tape-decks, the video switcher, audioboard, character generator, and the teleprompter. Above the control panels, large windows allowed the student-technicians full view of the TV studio where the broadcast was about to begin. Tension mounted as students waited for the signal to begin. The producer/director, Scott Mewborn, a newly hired communications teacher and former professional broadcaster, orchestrated a complex series of interactions between the students working in the TV studio and students working in the control room.

> *"Push lights up to full...track camera three...Kate, start zoom...cue Marsha...camera one, ready...roll tape... no, Jake, wait until I say go...two minutes left...come back, Troy, on camera one...roll it...stand by to track it...good job...lose the mike...cue Marsha on camera one...jog your search wheel...roll tape...fifteen seconds...Kate zoom out...roll it and track...fade out...wait for me, hold it...nice and slow...five, four, three...good job everybody." The students cheered and relaxed, their tension eased. Scott smiled and shook the hand of a student sitting near him. "Good work, everybody. Let's roll it back and see how we look."*

## Origins[1]

The Center for Communications is the result of the efforts of two Henrico County superintendents, Dr. William Bosher and Dr. Mark Edwards, plus dozens of Henrico County administrators, teachers, and community leaders. In 1987, Dr. Bosher initiated a process of school reform which gave birth to the idea

of highly specialized programs or "specialty centers." Dr. Edwards, who joined Henrico County as superintendent in 1994, continued the drive to open specialty centers. He was a key person in selling the specialty center concept to the public. Both superintendents believed that specialty centers would provide a unique opportunity for school choice for Henrico County residents.

Because Henrico County recently faced unprecedented growth and development, the interest in a major school reform grew out of concern for the future. As families moved into the county to take advantage of business opportunities, the student population was growing at the rate of 1,000 students per year. Civic leaders and citizens wanted to attract international industries and corporate headquarters to the Richmond area. They laid the foundation for state-of-the-art schools and special programs that met the diverse needs of the community; school and civic leaders believed a school reform effort could support the region's prosperity.

Superintendent Bosher established a 36-member blue-ribbon commission "to develop recommendations to assist the school division in setting priorities, planning future programs, and evaluating the educational needs of young people who would graduate and work in the next century."[2] The commission, composed of community and business leaders, higher education representatives, parents, students, and school staff, became part of a long-range plan project called *Henrico Education: 2000*. The commission's recommendations would guide the school division for the decades ahead. "We were not interested in short-term solutions or prepackaged deals. The big questions was this: What would students need to know in the year 2000 and beyond?" said Dr. Dan Norman, former Assistant Superintendent of Administration, who was a key player in the strategic planning process.

In their report, the commission drew attention to the need for new learning environments for students with special needs, talents, and interests. One of the commission's recommendations called for highly specialized programs which would combine challenging, high level academic courses with hands-on experiences; these courses would be unlike the traditional honors and AP courses offered in the comprehensive high school.

Each specialty center would be built around a different theme, such as the arts, science and math, foreign language, transportation sciences, or the humanities. Students who apply to attend specialty centers would be chosen based on their level of interest and their motivation to undertake in-depth study in a field of interest. To include all interested groups and to offer a variety of choices, a specialty center would be housed in each of Henrico's high schools.

The specialty centers are ingenius designs in secondary education. They satisfy four important objectives. First, students are given a broader range of choices than is typically found in the comprehensive high school. Second, specialty schools are designed for highly motivated students, not necessarily gifted students. Third, specialty centers are to be on the cutting edge of innovation in secondary education. They are exemplary programs which set an example for others. Fourth, specialty centers are embedded in the traditional high school as a "department" of the

school; they are not a separate entity. Students take advantage of the resources in both the specialty center and the regular high schools, spending part of the day in each learning environment.

## DIMENSIONS OF THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

### Purpose

The mission of the Center for Communications is to provide talented, motivated students with a rigorous college preparatory program in the field of communications. Emphasis is placed on mastery of oral, written, and visual presentation skills. Students work in a high-tech environment similar to those found in the real world of publishing and broadcasting. Both at school and in the field, students learn from practicing professionals in the communications field. Students acquire the knowledge and devlop the practical skills applicable to careers in commications: television, print journalism, photography, multimedia, graphic design, advertising, and public relations.

### Structure and Staffing

The Center for Communications, like all specialty centers, is closely tied to the school where it is housed. Organized as a "department of study" within Varina High School, the Center for Communications is treated like any other academic department, like mathematics or art. The planners of specialty centers wanted to avoid having separate schools which might isolate teachers and students from the regular high school.

Students spend three periods a day taking courses in the Center for Communications (CFC). The rest of the day is spent in courses at Varina High School. Students who attend the CFC become part of the academic, athletic, and social life of Varina High School. The CFC was designed for 50 students, or two classes of 25, at each grade level 9 through 12. At full operation, the CFC potentially could enroll about 200 students. More importantly, the enrollment is market driven. The CFC, like all specialty centers, can grow and shrink as needed. Teachers in the CFC are also teachers at Varina High School. A television producer/director and a part-time graphics instructor have been added as additional instructional staff to the CFC. "One professional member of the staff is paid out of two different budgets. It is an ingenious way to meet the needs of two different departments--instruction and telecommunications," said Dr. Tom Bailey, Director of Secondary Instruction who coordinates staffing in the specialty centers.

### Pedagogy

The CFC requires innovative teachers as well as an innovative pedagogy. "Teaching has to incorporate technology, but not be compromised by it," said Dr. Norman. "There is a real danger in having technology. Teachers can get hooked on playing with the toys, the computers and the technology, and forget that students must meet high academic standards and develop excellent writing and speaking skills. It is not easy for teachers to learn how to integrate core subjects with technology. It takes time and monitoring teaching practices."

CFC teachers have learned a variety of new skills and approaches to learning. They team teach with experts, professionals, and individuals who may or may not be trained teachers. They must also be able to develop meaningful hands-on activities as part of their pedagogy and to combine subject matter with technical skills. The teachers have found that one

of the most challenging aspects of working with technology is accurately judging how long it takes students to complete projects.

**Governance and Supervision**

Bev Lanier directs the day-to-day activities at the CFC and manages the program throughout the year. Her duties include recruiting and selecting students, meeting with parents and community members, and integrating activities within the program. She meets regularly with central office administrators and other specialty center chairmen to coordinate schedules, transportation, parent orientations, and academic and discipline policies. In addition Ms. Lanier coordinates her work with two supervisors.

Mr. Gerald Kanner, the principal of Varina High School and her immediate supervisor, is a key player in the operation of the CFC. To coordinate the program at the CFC with that of Varina High School, Mr. Kanner has made special provisions for the CFC's faculty to have common planning time. "To build a teaching team and coordinate the curriculum, teachers have to talk to each other, to plan, to share ideas. The teachers are a team, not a solo act. They have special needs which other teachers at the high school do not have," Mr. Kanner said.

Second, Dr. Tom Bailey supervises and coordinates the operations of all the specialty centers. Part of his job is to help maintain standards for each center and select faculty. "We try to hire high caliber teachers and professionals in the specialty centers. We look for the best instructors we can find inside or outside the school system," Dr. Bailey stated.

A steering committee guides the CFC's program, acting as a support group and sounding board for the chairman and faculty. The committee includes the principal of the high school, the chairman of the CFC, several teachers at Varina High School, a parent representative, curriculum specialists from central office, and professionals from the community. The steering committee oversees decision making and provides a means of communication between the central office, the school, parents and faculty.

**Evaluation and Expectations**

In Henrico County, each of the high schools has a program audit every four years and the curriculum is audited every five years K-12. Specialty centers will be evaluated as part of the same evaluation process.

The central office staff expects to see a high level of student performance in the specialty centers. Dr. Bailey makes clear the expectations of central office, "High standards are set for the selection of students in the centers, and we will not compromise our admission standards. We want students to aim high and reach for greater achievement than they have reached for before. We encourage the chairmen of the specialty centers to maintain high standards. Some students may not pursue careers in the specialty area, but we expect them to be outstanding in their work."

**Budget and Funding**

Originally, funding for the specialty centers came out of capital improvement funds. Start up costs averaged about $2 million dollars for each specialty center. The Board of Supervisors in Henrico County funded specialty centers because they wanted to draw major companies to the Richmond area. "Having outstanding schools was part of their economic development plan

to promote the area," said Vicki Wilson, current Assistant Superintendent for Instruction who chaired one of the original planning teams.

The CFC is treated like any other department within a high school and is funded according to its needs. Ms. Lanier submits an annual request which is reviewed by Dr. Bailey and central office administrators. The School Board and Henrico County Board of Supervisors provides each specialty center with additional money as needed to run their programs. Since student enrollment is expanding at the CFC, additional faculty and accessories for the computer labs have been requested.

**Transportation**

Transportation is provided to all students who attend specialty centers. The ride from some pick-up points to a specialty center can be as long as forth-five to sixty minutes. Transportation can be difficult for students who play sports after school because parents have to provide transportation after practice.

To avoid the transportation issue, some students drive or car pool with friends. Others attend specialty centers in their home school. Currently 64 students attend the CFC and 52% of these students are in the Varina High School district. About 50% of the students who attend specialty centers pick the centers located in their home school.

**Grading**

The regular high school provides honors and AP courses for advanced students. Grades for these courses are weighted or given more value when computing a student's grade point average (GPA). Certain courses at the specialty centers are also weighted. A specialty center's classes do not guarantee weighted credits. Therefore, attending a specialty school is not necessarily a strategy to achieve a large number of weighted grades and a higher GPA. The number of courses with weighted grades in the specialty center is similar to those found in comprehensive high school curriculums. For example, honors English in the regular high school carries the same weighted grade as honors English in the CFC.

**Students**

Specialty centers are designed for students with a high degree of interest in an area, strong work ethic, and motivation. The centers are not considered as a program for just gifted and talented students. Potential applicants are encouraged to investigate the options in programs and to make careful choices when selecting a specialty centers.

Selecting a specialty center requires students to make two choices. First, the student must decide which specialty center meets his or her needs. Second, the student must decide whether to leave the home school and become a member of the high school where the specialty school is housed. Students are not allowed to be part of two different high schools. For students who have strong loyalties to their neighborhood schools and sports teams, it can be a difficult decision to switch high schools.

Some students do not mind the inconvenience of attending a high school located far from their neighborhoods. "Attending the Center for Communications is like going to a great private school," said one parent during the February open house. "The kids and teachers work closely together, and my child gets a great chance to work closely with professionals. Todd now has friends in both schools. It has not been hard for

our family to give up a little convenience for a lot of excellence."

Students attending a specialty center compete in all aspects of academics and athletics in the school they choose. Very few students drop out once they enter a program. The key to student retention in the centers is careful selection and decision making from the beginning.

**Selection Process**

The student selection process begins with a series of orientation meetings. The specialty center chairmen visit each middle school and present their programs to 8th graders. Each specialty center also has an open house in February or March for families of prospective students. Students begin the application process in the spring of the 8th grade year.

A CFC selection committee reads the student applications at each specialty center. The committee is composed of the specialty center's chairman, teachers, and area specialists from central office. They seek students who are committed to the program, self-motivated, possess a strong work ethic and who have the potential to succeed at the specialty center.

Students must submit the following items in their application: (1) grade transcript, (2) standardized test scores; (3) a copy of last report card; (4) recommendations from current English teacher, social studies teacher, and another adult chosen by the student; (5) a student essay explaining their reasons for applying to the CFC; and (6) an original student project. This project is considered one of the most important parts of the applicantion portfolio because it demonstrates the student's communication skills. Due to the complexity of the application process and the difficulty in creating an individual project, students are encouraged to get help from parents or guidance counselors in organizing their application. The selection committee ultimately looks for how well applicants communicate their ideas.

The student project can take one of two forms. Under Option I, students can write about a time in which they communicated in a special way with another person. Communication includes conversations, letters, cards, recordings, interviews, newspaper articles, and electronic mail. The description could be in the form of a letter, essay, play, poem, or short story.

Under Option II, students can submit a project in an unwritten format which illustrates something about who they are as a person. Projects can be done in one of the following media: a video tape, audio tape, brochure, flier, multimedia presentation, or photographic essay. Presentations should be no longer than three minutes and must use equipment normally associated with high school media centers. One successful applicant created a video about her life. Another student wrote a broadcast about his desire to be a sports writer. A 10th grader created a giant autobiographical collage of photographs she had taken herself and borrowed from family albums.

If a student fails to get into a specialty center of choice, the parents can request an appeal before a committee comprised of the principal, center chairman, educational specialist, and guidance counselors. The committee explains to the parents why their son or daughter was not selected. This committee examines the selection process and determines if the appeal is supported or denied. If parents are still not satisfied

with the decision, they can take their case to the principal and an administrator from central office whose decision on the matter is final. While there have been few appeals to date, more appeals are anticipated as the number of students applying increases.

**Schedule**

Since students are in the CFC for three periods a day, it is possible to team teach and to integrate coursework in core academic subjects, communications, and technology. Teachers combine skills and knowledge in communications with core subjects by collaborating in lectures, labs and making assignments. Classroom lectures can be followed by hands-on experiences or demonstrations of the lesson which are difficult to find in a traditional fifty-minute class. An extended block schedule makes it possible for students to work on projects that require teamwork or extensive use of technology.

**Curriculum**

Although the CFC has been open for three years, a four-year course of study has been developed. Students follow a curriculum that combines communications skills and information technologies with core academic subjects.

The uniqueness of the CFC rests on its four communications modules for grades 9 through 12. The modules were designed by a committee of teachers and professionals in the field of communications over a period of two years and provided students with a thorough introduction to the communications field.

The 9th grade curriculum consists of three core subjects (English 9, Earth Science, and Global Studies) and a one-period communications module , Communications and Technology Connections. This module includes a foundation in the basic principles of communications as well as the ethical and legal issues in the communications field. Students also develop skills in copy writing, reporting, and editing. They learn technical skills in desktop publishing, multimedia, photography, graphic design, and audio/video production. Students work on public speaking skills such as articulation,poise, and speech writing.

Sophomores study English 10 plus a two-period communications module called Communications Writing and Production I. The module consists of the study of the historical, ethical, legal and economic aspects of television, radio, print media, and public relations. Students continue to develop skills in print journalism, such as copy writing and reporting. In addition they practice skills in script writing and delivery of persuasive speeches and oral interpretations. Students work to produce programs for *Roll Tape* (formerly called *Henrico County Now*) on Channel 36.

Juniors take English 11 and two periods in Communications Writing and Production II. Students continue building communications skills--copy writing, reporting, script writing, and editing. They study effective speeches and presentations from American history and literature and write and deliver original oratories. They participate in debates and panel discussions and deliver on-air presentations. They continue to hone technical skills in desktop publishing, computer information systems, photography, graphic design, multimedia, and audio/video production.

Seniors take English 12 and a two-period module, Advanced Communications: Writing, Production

and Directed Research. Students develop advanced skills in audio/video production, photography, graphic design, and journalism as well as public speaking and presentation skills. Students may also select an area of interest for directed research. Directed research reflects a synthesis of skills in an area of specialization. Students work in an area of communications to design and present a project to a panel of experts. While career exploration goes on at all levels in the center, for seniors it can mean mentoring with a professional in the field.

## ISSUES AND CONCERNS

### Growth

Specialty centers have met and exceeded the enrollment expectations of the program designers. Matriculation has doubled since the nine centers opened in 1995, increasing from 540 to 1,017 students. The physical capacity of the specialty centers accommodates in the range of 52-55 students a year. The Center for Communications currently enrolls 47 freshmen and sophomores. It is scheduled to add an additional junior and senior class in the next two years, reaching an enrollment of 100 students by the year 2000. However, since enrollment in all the specialty centers is market driven, fluctuations in enrollment figures are expected to be part of the challenges facing administrators.

The Center for Communications provides students with a unique experience which is not found in any other school in Henrico County, or in most schools in the nation. The program also gives students valuable experiences in the communications field, which qualify students for advanced communication classes in college and certain career-related summer jobs. Applications for admission are likely to grow as awareness of what the Center for Communications has to offer and the advantages it gives its participants.

### Ninth Graders

With few exceptions, students must enter the specialty centers, including the CFC, in the ninth grade. The curriculum at the specialty centers is designed as four-year programs, and it is difficult, but not impossible, for a tenth grader to enter a program. Students from outside the district may be considered for admission if their previous educational program matches the specialty center's format.

It is important for parents to be familiar with program options and application procedures at specialty centers in order to help their children make good choices and meet important deadlines. Parents and students attend orientation meetings in the spring of the student's 8th grade year. The specialty center directors and guidance counselors publicize throughout the district what the programs have to offer students.

### Standards

Maintaining high academic standards is a critical issue for central office planners and staff of the Center for Communications. Some 9th graders initially struggle to meet the challenges because the academic environment at the specialty centers is vastly different from middle school. "We will not water down the curriculum or lower standards. It may take time for students to realize that they can reach new levels of accomplishment," said Dr. Norman. "Students at the Center for Communications must have strong verbal and communication skills, correct grammar and speaking skills. There is just no way around it. They have to work

hard to gain the skills and knowledge they will be using."

Staff and teachers at the CFC are concerned that students' interest in cameras and working with equipment might overshadow their focus on academic excellence. "There is a temptation to allow the glitz of technology to distract from having high standards," said Dr. Norman. "Being aware of this possibility helps us monitor the program."

There is pressure on teachers to produce high quality student performance. Because of the public nature of work performed at the Center for Communications, there is low tolerance for mistakes. "Sometimes we feel the pressure to produce flawless students. A bad performance on the air or in print would make us look bad. It takes time to produce top performance. We have to be patient and at the same time try to help students reach high standards," said Joey Boehling, a communication teacher.

The faculty of the Center for Communications also expects students to test well in relevant subject areas. Students are not necessarily expected to pursue careers in communications, but they are expected to make top scores in their field. "It is important for our students to be able to write well, speak well, and present themselves well when they leave here," said Bev Lanier.

**Self-Deception**

"Our biggest impediment to progress is self-deception," said Dr. Norman. "We don't want our principals or teachers deceiving themselves about what they are doing. We want them to know if they are successful and what they have to do to improve." Administrators in central office worry about a "drift" away from the central vision of a specialty center. "Over time the vision could get soft," said Dr. Norman. "Specialty centers could become all things to all people. They are what they say--'specialty.' Students are expected to meet the demands of each center." Designers of the specialty programs monitor closely how the centers pursue their curriculum goals and objectives.

**Preparing Principals**

The hardest part of developing the specialty centers was developing with the principals a common vision which would fit their schools. At first the principals were concerned about the effect of having an innovative program on their campus which was not a part of the traditional comprehensive high school facility. Some principals feared that a specialty center might compete for the better students and teachers. "It took two years for principals to develop a shared vision of having a speciality center on their campus and what it would mean for the whole school. We had to convince principals that specialty centers were not just for a few students," explained Dr. Norman.

Mr. Kanner, the principal of Varina High School admitted that at times regular teachers resented the attention the center received, "We had to keep the Center for Communications from being isolated and to make teachers aware of ways they could use the facility. Our school gains a lot from having a specialty center like the Center for Communications on the campus."

**Educating the Public**

Dr. Mark Edwards was a key person in selling the specialty center concept to the public. After joining Henrico County Public Schools, Dr. Edwards was instrumental in opening of six of nine of the specialty centers. Dr. Tom Bailey, Director of Secondary

Education, also was involved in making the public aware of the new opportunities at specialty centers. "We tried to make sure the public was well informed about what we had to offer and that misinformation among centers did not happen," Dr. Bailey said. "Keeping the public informed about the specialty centers--how and when to apply, criteria for admission, and what is expected--has been a constant challenge."

## CONCLUSION

The specialty centers represent a new concept in school choice in secondary education. The Center for Communications, in particular, sets an example for combining a high-tech learning environment with core academic content. In addition, the Center for Communications' teachers reflect the changing roles of teachers. They are not isolated in classrooms, nor do they rely only on lectures and textbooks to deliver instruction. Teachers make every effort to integrate units and student assignments. Teachers serve as coaches in the computer lab and TV studios.

Professional development abounds. Working day-to-day with professionals, teachers are forced to develop new skills and to concentrate on integrating academic content, communication skills, and high-end technology. Structural characteristics in the Center for Communications (e.g. scheduling, integrated curriculum) force teachers to develop and use a broader knowledge base.

As leader of the Center for Communications, Bev Lanier keeps a close watch on the dynamics of the program as it unfolds. The main problem, as she sees it, is making technology support the teaching objectives and the educational goals of the project. It has also been a challenge to find texts and curriculum appropriate for 9th and 10th graders. "We had to find teachers who knew a lot about technology and its uses both in schools and in the real world," she said. "We were looking for a new kind of teacher."

When teachers talk about their teaching, work together to find solutions, seek help from professionals and other nontraditional teachers, meaningful change is possible. When this kind of interaction does not take place, teaching tends to stagnate. According to Michael Fullan, "Educational change depends on what teachers do and think--it's as simple and as complex as that." [3]

The specialty centers, although in their infancy, have already brought recognition to the Henrico County for having excellent schools. The *Richmond Times Dispatch* has written glowing articles about specialty centers and the Center for Communications.[4] International companies are seeking locations in the United States with good school systems; they visit specialty centers on a regular basis. It is not uncommon for visitors to tour the Center for Communications. Its facilities exemplify state-of-the-art technology and hands-on student involvement.

In reflecting on the success of specialty centers and their promise for the future, we might also consider the past. Nearly 400 years ago, a series of events took place in Henrico County that linked its progress to that of America. The land directly under the Center for Communications and Varina High School once belonged to John Rolfe, husband of the Indian princess Pocahontas and developer of the strain of tobacco leaf that

enabled Henrico County and the Virginia colony to grow, ensuring the survival of both. It is not too large a leap to envision the Center for Communications as an important link to regional and national economic development--continuation of a pattern set in motion long ago.

## Notes

1. Interviews with the following central office administrators provided the background information for the origins and operation of the Center for Communications. Ms. Vicki Wilson, current Assistant Superintendent of Instruction in Henrico County gave me an overview of how specialty centers evolved and where they are going in the future. Dr. Dan Norman, retired Assistant Superintendent of Administration, explained the work of teams who put together the recommendations for specialty centers and the general philosophy behind the unique programs. He continues to work part-time for the school system, directing its four TV stations. Dr. Sandy Snider, current Director of Research and Planning, helped develop plans to implement the recommendations of the *Education: 2000 Management Plan.* He provided valuable information about the demographics of Henrico country and its need for diverse programs. Dr. Tom Bailey, Director of Secondary Education, described to me how the specialty centers are supervised and linked together. He is currently in charge of assisting the implementation of new programs throughout the division, including the Center for Communications.

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# The Opening of Gildersleeve Middle School: A Case Study

by Donald L. Ashburn, Jr

Gildersleeve Middle School, in Newport News, Virginia, opened its doors to 1,140 students on the day after Labor Day in 1989 with a total price tag of $8.7 million. The school was named for Ethel M. Gildersleeve – the former teacher and dean of women at Newport News High School. Miss Gildersleeve so inspired her former students that, when suggestions for the name of the new middle school were sought, a petition containing 900 signatures was presented to the district's school board.

The history of the opening of Gildersleeve Middle School is as interesting as the life of the woman for whom the school is named (see portrait below). Gildersleeve, the educator, was born on December 2, 1898, and was graduated from Newport News High School on 1916. She received a Bachelor of Science degree in mathematics from State Teachers College at Farmville (later, Longwood College) in 1920 and a Master of Science degree from Columbia University in 1932. Gildersleeve began her teaching career in 1920 after being hired as a math instructor at Newport News High School. She went on to become dean of girls and an assistant principal at that school, serving with distinction for over 40 years. During this time, Gildersleeve was an active member of the Alpha Chapter of the Delta Kappa Gamma Society, an international organization honoring outstanding women in education.

The design for Gildersleeve Middle School contained many unusual features which enabled the facility to became an award-winning building. The construction process saved millions of dollars and the staff was hand picked by the principal. This case study will examine the process of opening Gildersleeve Middle School from in conception in 1985, through its design and construction, to its opening in the fall of 1989.

## Need

A needs assessment conducted by Newport News Public Schools in 1980 concluded that the city needed two new middle schools for space in the 1990's. The city had been growing for the past two decades and many of the system's schools were already overcrowded. The military buildup of the Reagan administration exacerbated the situation because Newport News Shipbuilding, the area's largest employer, began hiring thousands of new workers to construct Reagan's "500 ship navy." A review of the system's master plan in 1985 indicated that the new middle schools

needed to be opened sooner than expected. It was also determined that there was a need for several new elementary schools.

As a result, it was decided that two of the system's seven middle schools would be converted into elementary schools and that the new middle schools should have the capacity to absorb predicted increases in student population.

**Funding**

Even though there was wide-spread public support for the construction of new educational facilities in Newport News, the city still needed to find a way to pay for them. After numerous public hearings and a cost analysis study, it was determined that the construction projects could be funded through a combination of school construction funds from the state and city-issued general obligation bonds. Because of the growth in the city's tax base, it was also determined that no tax increase would be needed to fund construction. As a cost-saving measure, the city also decided to look into building the two middle schools at the same time -- using the same architectural plans and construction contractor. Proceeding in this manner saved an estimated one to two million dollars.

**Design**

In the spring of 1986, the Newport News School Board accepted a bid of $400,000 from the Roanoke architectural firm of Smithey and Boynton, for the design of both new middle schools. These schools would become the first in the city to be designed specifically for the program requirements of a middle school. Design input would come from both teachers and administrators.

The architectural drawings for the two middle schools were submitted and approved by March of 1987. They were identical except for their color schemes. The 258,800 square foot facilities have two, two-story, learning towers using a "school within a school" concept. There is one grade level per floor and a related arts wing on the first floor of one tower. Classrooms are located on the outer edges of grade-level pods (floors) and the support services, guidance offices, assistant principal's office, teacher's lounge, and meeting areas, are located at the center of each pod. The media center and administrative offices are located between the two towers and are connected to a one-story wing which houses the dining hall and gymnasiums (the plans are at the end of this article).

This award-winning design is enhanced by the architect's selection of building materials. Light is able to enter the building through picture windows, skylights, and see-through glass blocks, giving the building a light and airy feeling. In addition, carpeted floors add a warmer feel to the design (image below).

## Site Selection

In Jne of 1987, the Newport News School Board entertained Donald S. Bruno's, the division superintendent, recommendation to build the first of the two middle schools (Gildersleeve) on city-owned land, off of Roy's Lane in "uptown" Newport News. This parcel sits in the middle of the school's attendance zone and serves students from a professional community as well as students from subsidized housing.

Bruno proposed that the second middle school (Hines) be constructed on a parcel of land owned by the CSX Corporation in mid-town Newport News. There was some opposition to this proposal because of a shift in the population of the school's attendance zone to the north. In 1971, when cross-town busing began, students living north of Denbigh Boulevard were not bused. With the construction of Hines, these students would be bused to mid-town for the first time.

Superintendent Bruno also reported that the cost of preparing the two sites for construction would be around $2.2 million. This figure included the resolution of drainage problems at both sites, sewage pumping stations, and access roads. The board unanimously approved Bruno's site recommendations.

## Construction

Bids for the construction of the two new middle schools were accepted on February 25, 1988. The low bid came from the W. M. Jordan Company of Newport News in the amount of $15,725,000. This figure included the cost of site preparation, construction, and supplying the schools with basic furnishings. Mr. Bruno, at the February 26th school board meeting, recommended that the bid be accepted and requested that the Newport News City Council to fund the projects. He further indicated that $2 million in state funds were available for construction. The remainder would need to come from general obligation bonds.

Construction of Gildersleeve Middle School began in April of 1988. The construction of Hines Middle school commenced six months later. This allowed each sub-contractor to move directly to the Hines site after their work at Gildersleeve was completed. This, coupled with the fact that all of the materials for both jobs were ordered at the same time, created substantial savings in both cost and construction time. Time was needed because the construction of both facilities was hampered by 40 days of rain in the spring of 1989. Even with the inclement weather, Gildersleeve opened on time in the fall if 1989 and Hines opened early, during Easter of 1990.

## Staffing

The staffing of Gildersleeve Middle School began with the appointment of a principal to head the new facility. Donald S. Bruno, Superintendent of Newport News Public Schools, selected Mrs. Jean Beckerdite for this position in the spring of 1988. Beckerdite, principal of award-winning Newsome Park Middle School, was reassigned to Carver Middle School for the fall of 1988. She had to close that facility the following spring. During her brief tenure at Carver, she had the additional responsibility of making preparations for the opening of Gildersleeve in the fall of 1989. In the spring prior to opening, Beckerdite and superintendent Bruno selected Phil Hamilton and Terry Cline as assistant principals to complete Gildersleeve's new

administrative team.

Beckerdite personally interviewed all applicants for teaching positions at Gildersleeve. Although priority was given to those teachers who then held positions at Carver and Dunbar, the two middle school facilities being replaced by the new construction, the primary factors in selection included:

* Interest in working at Gildersleeve.
* Content expertise.
* Love of students.
* The talents of applicants to meet the needs of students.
* Interest in working in teams.
* The confidence to work in a "model" facility which would be in the public spotlight.

Based on these criteria, Beckerdite hired a total of 80 teachers and support personnel to staff Gildersleeve during the spring and summer of 1989. By design, they reflected the demographics of the community – being balanced in sex, race, and educational background. In addition, "There was a balance in the staff with both maturity for leadership and youth for fresh ideas represented," Beckerdite says. This diverse staff reported to Gildersleeve the week before Labor Day in 1989. It was the same week that the Newport News building inspector granted an occupancy permit for the recently completed building.

**Curriculum**

The curriculum for Gildersleeve was developed collaboratively by teachers and supervisors within the division. The basic program was comprehensive and had been in use in Newport News for ten years. This program utilized a direct instruction model, Madeline Hunter's Program for Effective Teaching (PET), as well as cooperative and discovery learning practices.

The basic curriculum was supplemented by three programs for special needs populations. The special education program was designed to serve the needs of learning disabled and emotionally disturbed students. It employed a mixture of self-contained classes, resource classes, and mainstreaming. In addition, Gildersleeve served as a talented and gifted program (TAG) center for the division. The curriculum for this population consisted of accelerated courses, pull-out programs, and enrichment. Finally, the new school served as the English as a Second Language (ESL) site for all middle schools in Newport News.

**Student Scheduling**

Gildersleeve's principal and assistant principals meticulously scheduled students to classes. Their placement was based on information provided by the feeder elementary schools. This information included academic achievement data, assessments of individual learning styles, and placement suggestions submitted by the elementary staff. Students were grouped heterogeneously into homerooms and academic teams which reflected the diversity of the population. They were then homogeneously grouped for reading classes and regrouped for math classes. Across the board, academic class size averaged 27:1.

Six classes for special needs students were assigned and included those for the aforementioned special education, TAG, and ESL populations. These classes were scheduled in the center of each academic tower which allowed the students to move more freely from special classes to regular classes and

eliminated the feeling of isolation often associated with special programs.

**Parental Support**

Gildersleeve's PTA was formed prior to opening with representatives from each of the school's attendance zones. This group served in an advisory capacity and assisted with the school's opening. The major area that the PTA supported was the transfer of the library from Carver Middle School to Gildersleeve. In addition, they bought jackets for the school band, at a cost of $7,000, during the first year of operation. Evidence of the PTA's overall support of Gildersleeve can be seen in the fact that they had the largest PTA and volunteer membership of any middle school in the system. At the time they had over 1,000 parents in the PTA and 100 volunteers.

**School Culture**

Teacher's and parents developed the mission statement for Gildersleeve during the summer of 1989. This statement helped to define the academic and social culture of the school. It states

> The faculty, staff, and students of Gildersleeve Middle School are committed to providing a safe and caring environment in which all students can learn. We are dedicated to the emotional and physical growth of each child during this transitional period of development. We motivate and encourage students to ,think critically, apply knowledge, explore individual talents, and take responsibility for their own learning. We strive to develop productive citizens who make responsible decisions and respect the rights of others. We challenge the whole school community to work together to accomplish our mission.

It is important to note that the person responsible for implementing this lofty mission was the school's principal, Jean Beckerdite. Her tireless energy and infectious enthusiasm helped to set the tone for the school's culture for years to come. This native Mississippian expected nothing less than excellence from her staff and students and had the knowledge and charisma to lead them toward that end. Her leadership was so strong that one might speculate that if any other person had been selected as principal they might have failed to establish this "culture of excellence."

Further supporting the establishment of a unique culture for Gildersleeve, students were asked to suggest and vote on a school mascot and school colors during the first year of operation. Twenty-seven different mascots were suggested and the Sea Hawk was selected. The winner for school colors was blue and gray. Students also selected team mascots and colors and designed flags which hang in the foyer of the school.

**Dedication**

Gildersleeve Middle School was dedicated on Sunday, December 3, 1989 – one day after the 90th birthday of the school's namesake. An estimated 2,000 parents, students, and admirers were in attendance to pay their respects to Miss Gildersleeve and to tour the building. During the ceremony, which included speeches by school officials and musical selections performed by the school's band and chorus, a portrait of Gildersleeve was unveiled to the audience and a collection of reference books was donated to the school library by members of the Newport News High School Alumni Association. Upon seeing the books, Miss Gildersleeve turned to the audience and said, "I never could get enough books to read, but you can. So, read them!"

## Retrospective

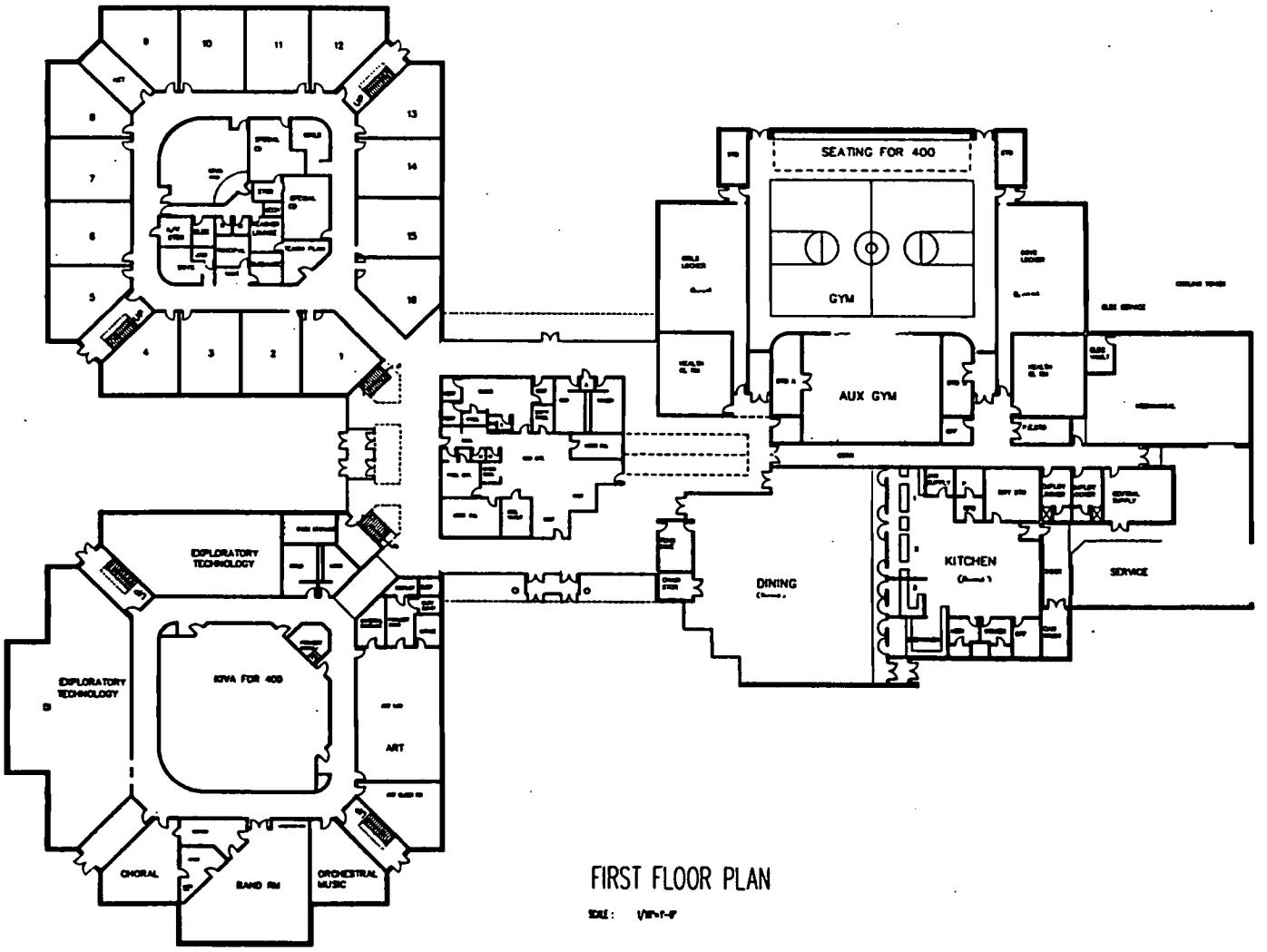
Ethel M. Gildersleeve died on November 24, 1991. The program for Gildersleeve's memorial service illustrates the impact that she had on the successful opening of Gildersleeve Middle School by stating, "Miss Gildersleeve devoted her time, charm, and wisdom to make Gildersleeve Middle School a special place for young people. She attended open houses, awards ceremonies, performances, and special events. She followed the students' progress with interest and wrote thousands of congratulatory notes to them. She installed the PTA officers each year and challenged the parents to stay involved and to support the students and staff. The Virginia PTA recognized Miss Gildersleeve with its first "Friend of the PTA" award just one month before her death. Our school family considers it an honor and a privilege to have known and loved Miss Gildersleeve in her role as our finest cheerleader and spokeswoman."

The legacy of Ethel Gildersleeve lives on in the middle school which bears her name. Since its opening, Gildersleeve Middle School has continued to evolve to meet the challenges of educating today's youth. In its quest for excellence, Gildersleeve has received both local and national notoriety. Its students consistently score above students from other schools in the tidewater area on standardized tests; the accolades received by Gildersleeve's students at regional science fairs are too numerous to mention; and Gildersleeve became the only school in Virginia to be named a national Blue Ribbon School in 1996. Miss Gildersleeve would be proud.

When asked if there is anything about Gildersleeve he would change, current principal Bob Surry says, "Not much, this building is about as good as they get. I would maybe make the foyer less acoustical; maybe add a few more lockers." He goes on to say that, while the building is great, the educational programs are always being evaluated for their effectiveness. Only through this process can a school continue to grow. "Besides", he says, "Ethel would have wanted it that way."

## References

Most of the information cited in this report was gleaned from information collected during interviews of the involved individuals on August 11th and 12th, 1998, in Newport News, Virginia. Additional information came from the minutes of the Newport News School Board, Gildersleeve's PTA scrapbooks, and the school's yearbooks. In the interest of journalistic balance, I did confirm some of the information in back-issues of Newport News' paper, – *The Daily Press*.




FIRST FLOOR PLAN

SCALE: 1/8"=1'-0"

AREA 81,600 SF

# Gildersleeve Middle School First Floor Plan

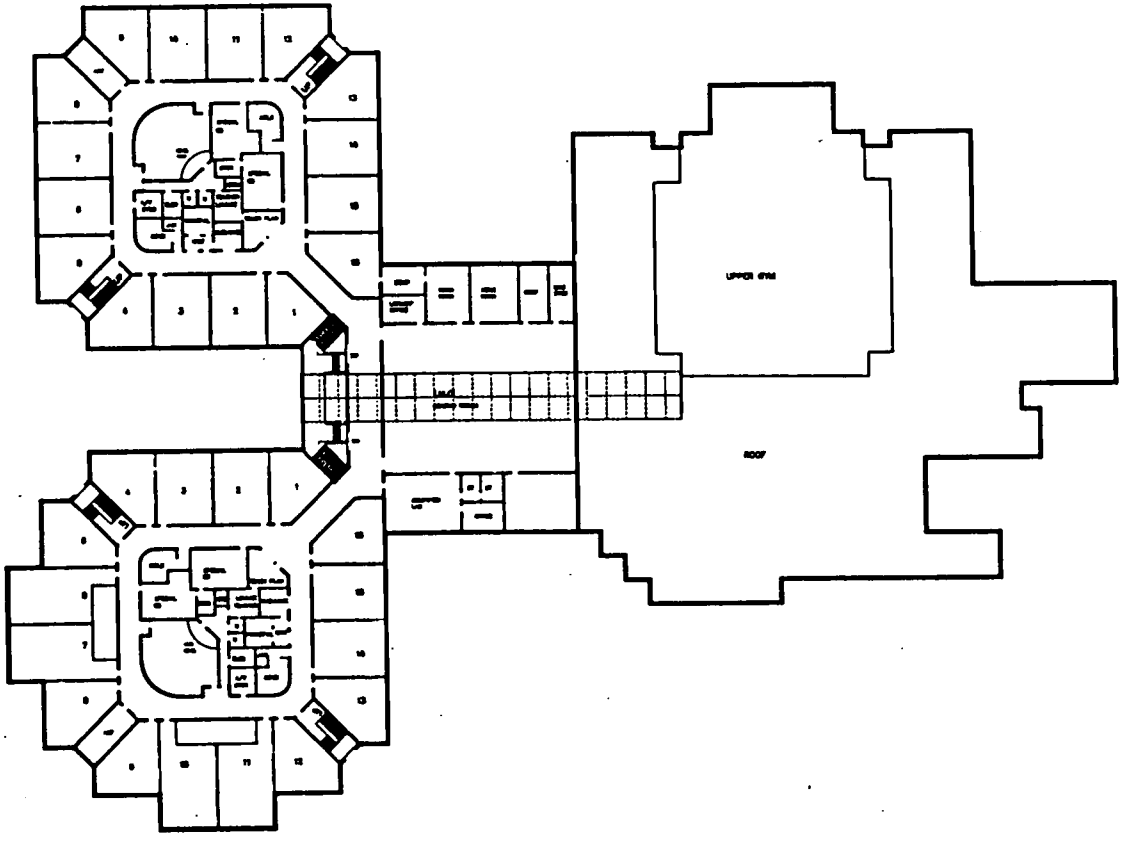
Smithey & Boynton

NEWPORT NEWS PUBLIC SCHOOLS
MIDDLE SCHOOL I

FIRST FLOOR PLAN

DD 1

# Gildersleeve Middle School Second Floor Plan




SECOND FLOOR PLAN

SCALE: 1:30

SECOND FLOOR AREA 49,500 SF GGROSS

Smithey & Boynton

JULY 14, 1997

NEWPORT NEWS PUBLIC SCHOOLS
MIDDLE SCHOOL I

SECOND FLOOR PLAN

SK 2

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