

## Snapshot #32

### Rejuvenating a Multiethnic School

Shidler Elementary School  
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

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## Research Findings

The staff of Shidler Elementary School in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma make extensive use of many practices researchers have identified as conducive to improvements in educating students, especially within urban schools serving multiethnic student populations.

The following practices, identified in *Effective Schooling Practices: A Research Synthesis/1990 Update* (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, April 1990), have guided much of the restructuring effort at Shidler:

#### **1.2.1** *Instructional Groups Formed in the Classroom Fit Students' Academic and Affective Needs*

- a. When introducing new concepts and skills, whole-group instruction, actively led by the teacher, is preferable.
- f. Teachers make use of heterogeneous cooperative learning groups, structuring these so that there are both group rewards and individual accountability.

#### **1.2.4** *Standards for Classroom Behavior are Explicit and are Consistently and Equitably Applied*

- a. Teachers let students know that there are high standards for behavior in the classroom.
- d. Consistent, equitable discipline is applied for all students. Procedures are carried out quickly and are clearly linked to students' inappropriate behavior.
- e. Teachers reinforce positive, prosocial behaviors, especially with students who have a history of behavior problems.

### **1.3.1** *Students are Carefully Oriented to Lessons*

### **1.3.3** *Effective Questioning Techniques are Used to Build Basic and Higher-Level Skills*

c. To check students' understanding and stimulate their thinking, teachers ask a combination of lower cognitive (fact and recall) and higher cognitive (open-ended and interpretive) questions during classroom recitations.

### **1.3.4** *Students Routinely Receive Feedback and Reinforcement Regarding Their Learning Progress*

d. Praise and other verbal reinforcements are provided for correct answers and for progress in relation to past performance; however, teachers use praise sparingly and avoid the use of unmerited or random praise.

### **1.4.3** *Personal Interactions Between Teachers and Students Are Positive*

### **2.1.1** *Everyone Emphasizes the Importance of Learning*

d. The principal and other administrators continually express expectations for improvement of the instructional program.

### **2.3.1** *Strong Leadership Guides the Instructional Program*

In her paper, *Educating Urban Minority Youth: Research on Effective Practices* (Topical Synthesis #4, NWREL 1991), Kathleen Cotton identifies additional practices with "particular relevance to members of minority racial and ethnic groups." Those influencing Shidler's program include "multicultural programming integrated into the core curriculum to promote cross-cultural understanding and respect," and "coordination of community resources to meet personal or family needs of students."

## **Situation**

Shidler Elementary School (pronounced Shyd-ler) is a small urban school in the Oklahoma City Public School District, serving 250 students in kindergarten through fifth grade, plus 20 students who attend a morning prekindergarten program. Shidler is located in the economically depressed residential and industrial northeastern section of the city. In fact, Shidler's neighborhood is the economically poorest of the school district's 63 elementary and 17 secondary schools. Much of the school's population resides in a nearby public housing complex, and nearly all of Shidler's students receive meals under the free breakfast and lunch program.

The school's neighborhood has always been multiethnic, but the composition has changed over the years. A decade ago, African-American youth comprised about 70 percent of the student body, Hispanics 15 percent, whites 10 percent, and Native Americans 5 percent. By contrast, the current population is 50 percent Hispanic, 22 percent white, 21 percent African-American, and 7 percent Native American. Forty percent of the student body is limited English proficient (LEP). In addition, only 10 percent of the students whose sole language is Spanish are literate in that language.

One of Shidler's assets is that, because it is smaller than the average Oklahoma City elementary school, the teacher-student ratio is higher than the city's mandated ratio of one teacher and one teacher's assistant for every 20 students.

## Context

At the time of his appointment as Shidler's principal in 1985, Dr. Eugene King says that the school had a bad reputation among the school district's administrators and teachers. Faculty considered it a punishment to be assigned to Shidler, and staff morale was extremely low. "No one wanted to be principal here," King says, recalling that the school was dark and dirty and lacked a clear academic focus. Too often in those days, students received inequitable treatment based on the racial and cultural prejudices of teachers and administrators. Student and staff absenteeism was rampant. Many parents felt alienated by the negative attitude manifested by the school staff, and they seldom participated in school activities.

"There were *no* computers here," King goes on, "and although half of Shidler's students spoke Spanish as their first and often only language, there were few Spanish-language resources." King recalls that former district superintendent, Dr. Arthur Steller, was prepared to close the school down because of its students' poor academic performance and low attendance rates. For years Shidler's test results were in the lowest quartile among the district's schools.

Many administrators would have abandoned hope of bringing about improvements in such an environment. But King, with his background in educational administration and in working with emotionally and developmentally disabled students, had seen what could happen with students when teachers believed in them. He decided to take the situation at Shidler as a challenge.

Among King's early efforts at Shidler was the work undertaken to upgrade the school's building and grounds, reasoning that students are not likely to respect or take pride in a dirty, run-down environment. He brightened the building's interior with more lights and a new paint job, and he began seeing to it that the grounds were maintained.

At the same time, King worked to earn the trust of the parents of Shidler's students. He recalls spending several months going to local homes and businesses, introducing himself, and outlining his plans to improve student learning and behavior at Shidler. In his second year, he began holding three or four book sales annually as a way of getting parents to come to the school and also to get more reading material into students' homes. His goal was to develop a partnership with the community. "We needed to educate the kids, and that called for school staff and parents working together as partners."

Steady, gradual improvements in the instructional program and in student learning and behavior followed. Then, in 1989, unexpected events ushered in a period of rapid growth in Shidler's improvement efforts. In that year, businessman Charles Hollar of Ponca City, Oklahoma established a foundation for teachers who were interested in utilizing the techniques taught by Marva Collins at her West Side Elementary School in Chicago. Knowing of and admiring Collins's methods, King engaged his staff in applying for one of the foundation grants.

The Marva Collins style of teaching is grounded in the development of reading skills through phonics, memorization and recitations, and acknowledgment and praise for work well done. Her successful work with poor, urban children is based on the assumption that all children can learn, and that a teacher has failed a student if the student is failing to learn. Says King, "I was serious

about changing teacher attitudes. My teachers were putting limitations on kids. When a teaching method wasn't working, the teachers were making excuses. My desire was to take the excuses away. As Marva Collins says, 'if the student didn't learn it, then I didn't teach it.'"

After applications were submitted, 25 schools in Oklahoma were chosen, with Shidler being one of eight Oklahoma City schools selected. Administrators and teachers from the Oklahoma schools went to Collins' West Side Academy in Chicago for two days. In addition, each school was able to send two teachers to West Side Academy for an intensive five-day stay, with their expenses covered by a combination of grant and state resources.

Collins's approach to teaching reading had a powerful influence on participants. "We found [Collins's method] very impressive. Once you begin to understand the elements of language, vocabulary and pronunciation come easily," says King. To further enhance its language arts program, in 1992 Shidler purchased a phonics program called Open Court for the school with Chapter 1 funds. "At every grade level we teach language arts as a block," King remarks. "Ours is an integrated curriculum in which our teachers teach reading all day long."

Computers have also played a major role in the turnaround at Shidler. The school's first classroom computer was donated by an Oklahoma City attorney. Since then, the school has received other donated computers, all of which are networked with one another and contain various mathematics, language arts and computer literacy lessons, along with several popular learning games. Shidler will also benefit from a recently passed bond measure; some of the revenue will go toward the purchase of computer equipment and science equipment in the Oklahoma City School District. King plans to have at least one computer for every three students when the school receives its share of the bond funds.

King routinely finds ways to showcase the teachers and students who exemplify Shidler's improvements and the direction in which he wants the entire school to go. For example, since recitations are a major part of the language arts program, King contacted Kiwanis Clubs, the local Chamber of Commerce, and other organizations, and told them that some of his students were available to deliver recitations of famous speeches, historical documents, and the like. "When teachers and students became aware that one class was being invited to give recitations and getting steak, baked potatoes, and acclaim," King says, "they wanted to get in on it, too." Now, many Shidler students have had the opportunity to give recitations at local civic clubs, government agencies, and other sites and to build self-esteem from sharing their work and having it acknowledged.

## **Practice: Learning Activities in Shidler's Classrooms**

At the time of the observer's visit to Shidler, the school's hallways were festooned with brightly painted murals chronicling Greek myths and featuring gods and goddesses -- the result of recent learning activities in several of Shidler's classes. In addition, since the Thanksgiving holiday was near, Thanksgiving-theme drawings and paintings were also on display. There were no graffiti in evidence either inside or outside of the school.

### **KINDERGARTEN**

Erma Coburn's kindergarten classroom was brightly decorated with maps, large phonetics flash cards, and proverbs written in clear handwriting. The enthusiasm of Ms. Coburn's students was palpable as soon as the classroom door was opened. Three computers were in one corner of the

room, where students took turns working on them.

Ms. Coburn had her students recite a phonics drill that was keyed to the Open Court alphabet and sound cards atop the blackboard. The entire class recited the drill, and Coburn took time out to ask different students questions about the sounds and characters displayed, as well as about the content of the lesson — the solar system, mapmakers, and other related topics.

Exhibiting highly developed language skills, the students also worked through some vocabulary exercises, focusing on key words in the proverbs that were displayed on the wall. Nearly every student responded to questions with complete sentences. Later, Coburn had the students count to 100 in Spanish and English, which they did with great enthusiasm. Several of the word drills were also conducted in both English and Spanish.

Each class at Shidler has at least one assistant, many of whom are fluent in both Spanish and English. However, both Coburn and bilingual assistant Dolores Diaz acknowledged that the students could greatly benefit from even more bilingual education. "We need more bilingual teachers and assistants," Diaz says. "Some children are still not getting a proper education, because they are not receiving enough instruction in their primary language." During a debriefing session held later in the day, Eugene King indicated that acquiring more bilingual staff members is one of his goals.

## **GRADE 4**

As soon as the observer entered the classroom of fourth grade teacher, John Roberts, he introduced her to his class and had his students sound out her name phonetically.

Working at their desks individually, in groups, or with the assistance of Roberts and teaching assistant Gilbert Oliver, students pursued bilingual activities. Fluency in English and Spanish is emphasized in Roberts's classroom, with students learning the pledge of allegiance and many songs in both languages, as well as learning to translate names from one language to the other.

At lunchtime, the students in Roberts's class go to the lunchroom, pick up their lunches, and then return to eat in the classroom along with their teacher and assistant. Roberts believes that the children benefit from this consistent adult presence through the school day.

Roberts's students are encouraged to bring their interpersonal conflicts to him, and when they do, he discusses the options available to them, without "handing them a solution." For example, two students were in conflict about the use of one of the computers. One went to Roberts and complained, whereupon he talked with both students to resolve the problem. When one of the two students was in another conflict regarding a computer later in the day, she made use of the same process for resolving the problem that she had learned from Roberts during the initial conflict.

Students also learn personal hygiene practices in Roberts's class. They all wash their hands in the classroom before lunch, and when lunch is over, they brush their teeth with toothbrushes Roberts has given them.

## **Results**

Along with the many anecdotal accounts of the school's improvements are the assessment data

indicating improvements in the reading skills of Shidler's students: their performance now compares favorably with that of other schools in the district. Many of the students are reading one or two years ahead of their actual grade level, and King speaks with special pride of one class of Shidler fifth graders, who are reading high school-level materials and exhibiting high comprehension scores.

Student performance data reveal improvements in language arts and mathematics as well as reading. The following chart depicts the increases in student achievement on standardized tests in recent years:

### **ITBS Percentile Scores**

	<b>Reading</b>	<b>Math</b>	<b>Language</b>
<b>1992-93</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>70</b>
<b>1989-90</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>56</b>

In addition, from the 1986-87 school year to the 1992-93 school year, school data reveal the following changes:

- An increase in Shidler's average daily attendance from 88 percent to 95.2 percent
- A 12 percent reduction in costs associated with vandalism (even though the cost of materials and labor increased significantly during this period)
- A 35 percent increase in parent participation in parent-teacher conferences
- A 61 percent increase in parent participation in school open-house activities.

King says it is difficult to pinpoint the most important causative factor for the academic progress and behavioral improvements of Shidler's students. He says that activities aimed at enhancing student self-esteem, the school's reading program, and the motivation and skill-building provided by the computers "are all key elements that interrelate to help us grow toward our goals."

In a debriefing session, King and fourth grade teacher John Roberts acknowledged that there is still a contingent of teachers that has not taken ownership of the Collins approach to developing reading skills and other methods adopted by Shidler. King says he uses attraction as a way of bringing teachers into the fold, rather than coercing them. "I walk them very slowly through the program, with changes being optional at first, and then eventually making them mandatory." This approach is apparently successful, since King estimates that only about ten percent of Shidler's teachers have yet to buy into the program.

How does King feel about improvements he has spearheaded at Shidler? "Good," he says, "but not complacent. We are never in the land of the 'done.' There is always more to do."

Superintendent Betty Mason states that the staff and students at Shidler Elementary School represent a special educational triumph. Dr. Mason was assistant superintendent when Eugene King was transferred to Shidler and was the district's coordinator of the Collins Project. As such, she has been very close to the changes that have taken place at Shidler. In Dr. Mason's words:

Principal King and his staff defy all false perceptions about poor children being unable to learn. Teachers are teaching there, and children are learning. Shidler Elementary School is a model school for urban students. The administrative leadership of Eugene King has made the difference.

For more information about the programs at Shidler Elementary School, please contact:  
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