

Snapshot #10

Creative Staffing Arrangements Lynch Wood Elementary School Mukilteo School District

Kathleen Cotton

RESEARCH FINDINGS

What are the major research findings regarding school and district practices for improving instruction through innovative staffing arrangements? Because of the relationships between staffing and such elements as monitoring, grouping, leadership, and allocating time, research findings in these areas bear upon efforts to use staff more creatively. *Effective Schooling Practices: A Research Synthesis* (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory 1984) identifies relevant findings in several areas:

At the classroom level:

1.5 Learning progress is monitored closely.

- Teachers use assessment results not only to evaluate students but also for instructional diagnosis and to find out if teaching methods are working.

1.9 Instructional groups formed in the classroom fit instructional needs.

- Smaller groups are formed within the classroom as needed to make sure all students learn thoroughly. Students are placed according to individual achievement levels; underplacement is avoided.
- Teachers review and adjust groups often, moving students when achievement levels change.

At the district level:

3.4 Improvement efforts are monitored and supported.

- District supervisors monitor implementation of policies and procedures in individual

schools; they provide advice, clarifications, technical feedback and channel support services. In particular, they check on the progress of improvement efforts.

- Instructional support services assist local schools in their improvement efforts. Support staff provide consultation, materials development and training assistance on call; support services are very responsive to expressed building needs.

LYNCH WOOD ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

SITUATION

Lynch Wood Elementary School is a K-6 facility in the Centennial School District in southeast Portland, Oregon. The Centennial district serves approximately 4,700 students in one high school, one middle school, and six elementary buildings. Lynch Wood serves 520 students, 150 of whom receive free or reduced lunches. The student population is nearly all white. Fully three-quarters of the families in the Lynch Wood attendance area are renters, and there is a high transiency rate -- 32 percent annually.

CONTEXT

During the 1985-86 school year Lynch Wood began participating in the Onward to Excellence (OTE) program of school improvement. In keeping with the structure of the OTE program, principal Al Doan and the Lynch Wood leadership team studied effective schooling research, reviewed current school performance, and established goals and implementation guidelines to address identified needs.

Lynch Wood's initial school improvement goal was to raise the reading performance of Lynch Wood students, 40 percent of whom were reading below grade level. Needed curriculum and instructional changes were specified, but leadership team members quickly realized that achieving desired outcomes was going to require that staff be utilized differently than in the past.

Traditional reading instruction, in which the teacher spends perhaps 20 minutes with each of three groups, was viewed as an inadequate structure for producing meaningful gains. More than 20 minutes of direct instructional time per student needed to be made available. But where were the extra staff to come from?

Doan and the leadership team studied the ways in which regular classroom teachers, special education teachers, Chapter 1 teachers, and aides were used. They then designed a system to use these staff more effectively - - a system which also called for structural and scheduling changes.

A large doorway was cut in the wall between the Chapter 1 and special education resource rooms --a literal and symbolic breaking down of the barriers between programs -- and the new, larger area was renamed the Learning Center. Now, during first and second grade reading periods, all classroom, special education, and Chapter 1 teachers, plus the instructional assistants (aides) supported by categorical program funds, engage in 45 minutes of direct reading instruction.

Figure 1 displays the manner in which staff are utilized to serve three classes of second graders during reading instruction. The three classroom teachers ("Ts") normally work with groups of

fifteen in their regular classrooms, while the categorical program teachers and aides work with small groups of students in several different work areas in the Learning Center. Sometimes, though, regular and Learning Center groups change places, in Doan's words, "to keep them confused" -- that is, to make certain there will be no stigma associated with attending Learning Center classes.

No administrative matters or other interruptions are permitted during the 45 minutes of direct instructional time students spend in their small groups. Following this direct instruction period, children regroup in their regular classrooms to engage in practice, reteaching, or enrichment, as specified by the teacher.

IMPROVED READING GROUPS EXAMPLE:

THREE SECOND GRADES

Figure 1

Instructors

T T T Ch1 Asst. Sp. Ed. Asst. Ch1 Asst.

15 15 15 7 8 8 7 6 4
Students

In this model, students are grouped by need rather than funding source. All reading program staff receive inservice training to utilize the school's chosen reading program content and instructional strategies, which include a strong phonics component. Student diagnosis and instructional prescriptions are the responsibility of certified teachers who cooperatively plan presentations, materials, methods, modes, groupings and reinforcement, and coordinate the instructional activities of the aides. Initial placements are negotiated by teachers, with decisions made by the principal in cases where there is disagreement. The boundaries between groups are very fluid, with teachers conducting monthly reviews and frequently reassigning students as needs change. Students may also challenge their placement and move among groups.

While some of the special education and Chapter 1 staff work with students in the Learning Center, others work with their small groups in specified locations in the regular classroom. The preferences of regular and special program staff determine whether the in-class or resource room model is used.

Lynch Wood staff and parents are extremely pleased with the effects produced by this staffing pattern. For one thing, the greatly reduced student-teacher ratio has increased the amount of direct instructional time by over 200 percent. For another, only nine percent of Lynch Wood's students are now in the lowest quartile of the reading portion of the California Achievement Test. In addition, there are far fewer behavioral problems: placements are more appropriate, and thus there are fewer instances of acting out in response to frustration.

Another outcome about which Lynch Wood administrators and staff are especially gratified is the dramatic reduction in the number of referrals for special education staffings -- from fifty to ten in a year's time.

The staffing arrangement also greatly reduces the time required for transfer students to begin receiving appropriate services. Instead of the laborious and time-consuming referral process previously used, students are put through a quick screening procedure, and the classroom

teacher negotiates initial placement immediately with a Learning Center teacher.

Finally, the reading program structure avoids the problem of students being labeled and also permits the aides to feel fully a part of the instructional team.

What do categorical program monitors think about this way of using staff? Chapter 1, special education, and other federal program regulations specify -- and program monitors usually rigidly enforce -- a strict separation of program resources in order to prevent abuses. If program services are commingled, the reasoning goes, then funds will be commingled, too; and then we will lose track of whether special education resources are truly reaching special education students, Chapter 1 resources are reaching Chapter 1 students, and so on.

In the earlier days of program implementation, Lynch Wood was threatened with withdrawal of its Chapter 1 funding if non-Chapter 1 students continued to receive services from Chapter 1 staff. And there have been criticisms leveled at the practice of using noncertified staff (i.e., aides) to provide direct instruction.

Doan and his staff have found a variety of ways to continue Lynch Wood's effective staffing pattern, while also staying in compliance with categorical program guidelines. For example, although Chapter 1 guidelines specify that students must be performing below grade level to be eligible for services, the individual school is at liberty to determine what "grade level" is, based upon internal reviews.

Guidelines also provide for other kinds of flexibility, e.g., non-special education students can receive special education services if they are under a monitoring system. Moreover, it is within federal guidelines for the Individualized Educational Plans (IEPs) of special education students to specify that the students will receive Chapter 1 services.

As for the appropriateness of instructional assistants delivering direct instruction services, Doan points out that these staff members are closely supervised by Learning Center teachers, their decision-making power is limited, and therefore their provision of direct instructional activities should not be construed as encroaching on the territory of certified staff members.

Thus far, Doan and his staff have been able to satisfy program monitors that Lynch Wood's approach meets the letter and the spirit of categorical program regulations.

Future aspirations of Lynch Wood staff include expanding services to include upper elementary students and working to increase the percentage of students in the top quartile of the CAT reading subtest.

PRACTICE: CREATIVE USE OF STAFF IN AN ELEMENTARY LEARNING CENTER

Comprised of two classrooms with a large doorway between them, the Lynch Wood Learning Center is divided by bookshelves and screens into several small group work areas. The observation took place in mid-October, and the center was resplendent with an array of autumn and Halloween decorations made by the students.

Approximately fifty children -- most of them first graders -- were receiving phonics instruction in groups of four to eight. Daily performance charts on the walls provide opportunities for children to receive symbolic rewards for their learning successes.

Some of the activities conducted by the teachers and aides called for group responses, while others elicited individual responses from children. Children appeared interested and eager during the learning session, responding enthusiastically when asked to read and sound out words.

In a storeroom adjacent to the Learning Center a small group of third, fourth and fifth graders, whose reading skills were far below grade level, were receiving remedial instruction.

Both teachers and aides were instructing children according to prescriptions previously determined by the teachers, and teachers -- classroom and special -- were also responsible for determining group placement. Observing the small group instructional sessions, however, it was impossible to tell how children were classified or whether a given instructor was a teacher or an aide. This, in Al Doan's view, is one of the strengths of the program.

For more information, contact Al Doan, Principal, Lynch Wood Elementary School, 3615 SE 174th Street, Portland, OR 97236, (503) 251-2204.

*** Mukilteo School District ***

SITUATION

The Mukilteo School District is located in Everett, Washington on Puget Sound about 20 miles north of Seattle. The district serves approximately 8,000 students in eight elementary schools, two junior high schools, one high school, and an alternative school. District families range from the lower-income residents living in multiple-unit dwellings along Highway 99 to the well-to-do families occupying homes along the sound. Part of the district is in a "high-tech" corridor, which includes Hewlett-Packard, Honeywell, Boeing and several other companies. The Mukilteo student population is approximately eighty-five percent white, six percent Asian, one percent black, and eight percent Hispanic, Native American and other minority groups. Mukilteo is a fast-growing district, having increased by thirteen percent in 1987-88 and another seven percent as of November 1988.

CONTEXT

When an entire school district launches an innovative staffing approach such as Lynch Wood's, both the benefits and the difficulties increase. Staff of the Mukilteo School District have become intimately familiar with these benefits and difficulties since they began their Learning Support Program in the 1982- 83 school year.

Like Lynch Wood's program, the Mukilteo program was developed to increase services to students needing help beyond that available in their regular classrooms. The district has Chapter 1 programs in many of its buildings, as well as special education, a transitional/bilingual program, Chapter 2, and the state Learning Assistance Program for remediation in grades K-9. With the advent of the new program, a Learning Support Center was established in each of the district's eleven buildings, and students eligible for services under the various categorical programs began being grouped and served by need rather than program category.

Each Learning Support Center is coordinated by a teacher who is special education certified and therefore authorized to teach any student; these teachers are regarded as basic education teachers when teaching non-special education students. The district also employs one school

psychologist per building. Titled Learning Support Specialists, these individuals work directly with students and building staff, spending much less time conducting assessments and making referrals than traditional psychologists. This greatly reduces the time it takes for students to begin receiving appropriate services.

The Learning Support Centers are staffed by aides who are supported by categorical program funds and who provide instruction to students under the direction of the LSC teacher. Students receive 20-45 minutes of instruction daily, in each subject for which they are eligible. These services are agreed upon by the regular classroom teacher and LSC teacher.

The model allows for short-term, intensive, homogeneous grouping based on student need. As with Lynch Wood's program, placements are reviewed frequently and students move among groups -- or out of them altogether -- based upon changes in performance.

Although the Learning Support Program is a districtwide program, it is left to each building to determine how services will be structured. Models range from limited pull-out to in-class instruction, with an increasing move toward the use of in-class models at the elementary level. The district informs principals of the allowable amount of aide time within each program category; principals then hire accordingly and decide with their staffs which services will be delivered in the LSC and which will be provided in students' regular classrooms.

The Learning Support Program has allowed the district to double the number of students served through the categorical programs and to triple the amount of direct instructional time provided to each student receiving services. Non-program students also benefit, since program students' departure to the LSC or a designated corner of the classroom appreciably reduces regular class size.

The academic growth of Learning Support Program students compares favorably with that of categorical program students in other Washington districts, and NCE gains are similar across students from different program categories. District and building staff are very pleased with the program, as are the parents of participating students. Students themselves like the program, and LSC staff are constantly receiving requests from students without special academic needs to be able to attend LSC classes. There is no stigma attached to attending classes in the LSC, nor are the students receiving in-class services treated differently by their classmates. Aides working in regular classrooms will sometimes comment on the work of other program students or answer their questions so that all children in a class will regard both the regular teacher and the aide as being "their" teachers.

Al Doan's one-school program of commingled categorical services has thus far managed to operate with a minimum of negative response from program monitors. Mukilteo's program is much larger and more visible, and has therefore experienced more conflict with the monitors of categorical programs. "...the strings attached to categorical funds emphasize fiscal accountability, not program effectiveness," states a June 1987 Phi Delta Kappan article written by Mukilteo School District staff.*

The regulations governing the operation of Chapter 1 and other categorical programs are, to a considerable degree, open to interpretation. Mukilteo staff argue that state and federal officials often interpret these regulations in narrow and restrictive ways that discourage cooperative programs. Meanwhile, these fiscal monitors remain very concerned that categorical program monies go to serve the students they are intended to serve, and that the district provide thorough documentation of its spending.

Therefore, to be able to continue its highly successful Learning Support Program, Mukilteo staff have developed and implemented an elaborate, computerized tracking system to satisfy the accountability requirements of categorical program monitors.

A detailed description of the system and of "Homer," the computer program used to manage it, is outside the scope of this report. Basically, the system involves scrupulous record keeping regarding the time expended by each Learning Support Program staff member in each program category. Tracking forms are used to chart each person's chargeable time. Individual and building summaries are compiled, and the records for each school quarter are used to determine how payroll should be handled for the next quarter. The next quarter's records are then used to make needed adjustments, thus assuring that charges against program funds are a nearperfect match with actual service delivery.

A VAX 750 computer is used to process tracking system data, issue reports, and make payroll determinations. (The tracking program can also be run on an MS DOS machine.) Since the computer is connected by telephone to all schools in the district, LSC staff enter relevant program data for their school. The reports produced through use of the tracking system satisfy state monitors' requirements for accountability data, and the Mukilteo district is thus able to continue operating the Learning Support Program.

Since the tracking system is laborious, and because Mukilteo staff believe that Learning Support Program operations meet categorical program guidelines without such elaborate record keeping, efforts continue to influence monitors to take a broader view of the intent of the regulations governing programs. As a result of Mukilteo's efforts and the efforts of other districts employing innovative staffing arrangements, there is increasing discussion at the federal level about simplifying fiscal accountability requirements. Mukilteo staff hope this movement will eventually result in the district being able to dismantle its current tracking system in favor of a more streamlined one.

For the present, Mukilteo staff find their current system cumbersome, but worth it, because of the increased service provisions made possible through the Learning Support Program. Asked about what advice they might give to others considering setting up such a program, staff members from the Mukilteo central office offered the following:

- You need to know the regulations governing categorical programs as well as or better than the monitors know them.
- You need to be aware that there are different ways to meet the intent of the law and be prepared to argue for those ways that keep program operations feasible.
- You will probably need technical support for record keeping, since requirements are so extensive.
- You need to realize that district staff members who are responsible for managing different categorical programs are likely to be territorial about their programs and resistant to program cooperation. They must be given time and encouragement if they are to become willing to work together.

PRACTICE: THE MUKILTEO LEARNING SUPPORT PROGRAM

Visits to Challenger and Stickney Elementary Schools provided an instructive contrast in ways the Learning Support Program is structured in different buildings.

Challenger makes extensive use of a limited pull-out model, i.e., most program instruction takes

place in the Learning Support Center. At the time of the observation, some 50 primary-age children were receiving language arts instruction in groups of no more than six. Eight groups were in session in the spacious, two-room center. A typical group was made up of students who are eligible for various programs. Most were working on reading subskills, and the activities with which they were involved called for a combination of choral and individual responses. Aides appeared skillful at holding children's attention and keeping them engaged in the tasks at hand.

A brief interview with one of the Challenger LSC aides revealed that she has been working in that capacity for about a year and likes working with small groups of children, because more rapid progress is possible than in larger groups. This aide was aware of the classification of some of the children in her current groups (e.g., learning disabled, Chapter 1, etc.), but emphasized that instruction was based on each child's current need, not his or her classification.

In the course of the conversation with the aide and some of the central office staff, it was revealed that many of the LSC aides throughout the district are certified teachers or retired teachers who work as aides out of preference for the intensive, small-group format.

A short drive to Stickney Elementary School provided an opportunity to see the in-class model of the Learning Support Program in action. Except for a special education group, all program instruction is conducted in students' regular classes. The LSC teacher for the building and a member of the central office staff explained program operations and conducted a tour of various classrooms in which Learning Support Program groups were meeting. The tour included observations of:

- A group of first graders engaged in a writing activity. As the teacher oriented the children to the activity, the aide could be observed listening carefully so as to guide her group through the exercise.
- A group of first graders in a math activity. After the teacher orientation, the aide began working with a group of six at a semicircular table.
- A group of fifth graders -- two of whom are on IEPs -- working on math problems while an aide took them through problem-solving steps, displaying these on a blackboard. As in classes throughout the school, initial instruction was provided by the teacher; then monitoring and reinforcement activities were conducted by the aide.
- A group of sixth graders working on a spelling unit with an aide. This instruction took place in a storeroom adjacent to the regular classroom.
- A sixth grade classroom in which the teacher was working with a group of Learning Support students while the aide circulated during a seatwork activity of the rest of the class, giving particular attention to Learning Support Program students.
- A small group of Hispanic and Native American students working with a bilingual aide.

The Stickney LSC teacher described her role, indicating that her responsibilities include training aides by demonstrating skills and critiquing them as needed, coordinating instruction with teachers and aides, and making certain that aides are being used for instruction -- not just to clean up, prepare materials, etc. Part of her training efforts include teaching aides to provide activities using a variety of instructional strategies.

Screening of new students at Stickney is typical of the rapid assessment/placement process throughout the district. The school's goal is to get new students into a reasonably appropriate placement within two days; then more in-depth assessment can take place if necessary while the student pursues relevant learning activities.

More information about the Learning Support Program is available from Robert Rayborn, Director of Planning and Evaluation, Mukilteo School District No. 8, 9401 Sharon Drive, Everett, WA 98204, (206) 356-1260.

This publication is based on work sponsored wholly, or in part, by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), U.S. Department of Education, under Contract Number 400-86-0006. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views of OERI, the Department, or any other agency of the U.S. Government.

January 1989