

Snapshot #33

**Engendering School Improvement Through Strong
Instructional Leadership**

**Sale Elementary School and the Demonstration School
Columbus Municipal School District
Columbus, Mississippi**

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Research Findings

Effective schooling research identifies schooling practices and characteristics associated with measurable improvements in student achievement and attitudes and excellence in student behavior. One of these "effective schooling practices" is the element of strong instructional leadership.

What are the research findings regarding district, school and classroom practices for improving student achievement via instructional leadership? Consistency in the findings across a great many studies using a variety of methodologies is strong. *Effective Schooling Practices: A Research Synthesis 1990 Update*, published by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, indicates that there are several effective instructional leadership practices contributing to a positive school climate and culture. These include, at the *school* level:

2.3.1 Strong Leadership Guides the Instructional Program

- c. The leader has a clear understanding of the school's mission and is able to state it in direct, concrete terms. Instructional focus is established that unifies staff.
- f. The principal and other leaders seek out innovative curricular programs, observe these, acquaint staff with them, and participate with staff in discussions about adopting or adapting them.
- g. Leaders set expectations for curriculum quality through the use of standards and guidelines. Alignment is checked and improved; priorities are established within the

curriculum; curriculum implementation is monitored.

i. A safe, orderly school environment is established and maintained.

j. Instructional leaders check student progress frequently, relying on explicit performance data. Results are made visible; progress standards are set and used as points of comparison; discrepancies are used to stimulate action.

k. Leaders set up systems of incentives and rewards to encourage excellence in student and teacher performance; they act as figureheads in delivering awards and highlighting the importance of excellence.

r. Leaders involve staff and others in planning implementation strategies. They set and enforce expectations for participation; commitments are made and followed through with determination and consistency; leaders rally support from the different constituencies in the school community.

2.4.1 There are High Expectations for Quality Instruction

f. The principal and other school administrators hold high expectations of themselves, assuming responsibility for student outcomes and being visible and accessible to staff, students, parents, and community members.

2.7.1 Parents and Community Members are Invited to Become Involved

a. Administrators provide ongoing support to parent involvement efforts. At the *district* level:

3.4.1 Improvement Efforts are Encouraged, Supported , and Monitored

f. Building managers participate in ongoing programs of staff development focused on strengthening instructional leadership skills; building administrators are also encouraged to pursue other professional development activities.

These practices can all be found at both the Demonstration School and Annie T. Sale Elementary School in the Columbus Municipal School District, Mississippi. The *Onward to Excellence* (OTE) school improvement process has been used there to enhance existing leadership practices and to develop new ones, which have contributed to increases in student achievement. Leaders include staff from all milieus--district office, principals, OTE team coordinators and members, and faculty, including noncertified staff.

**COLUMBUS MUNICIPAL SCHOOL DISTRICT,
COLUMBUS, MISSISSIPPI**

Situation

Columbus, Mississippi, located near the Alabama line in the northeast corner of the state, has a population of nearly 24,000 of which 51.2 percent are African-American and 48 percent are Caucasian or "other."

During the 1993-94 school year, 5,840 students were enrolled in the district's schools. Fourteen buildings house one high school with students in grades 11 and 12; one high school serving students in grades 9 and 10; two middle schools, one for grade 8 and one for grade 7; ten elementary schools, of which three have grades K and 4-6, four have grades K-6, and three have grades K-3; one alternative school with grades K-12; and a vocational center with grades 11 and 12. In each of the elementary schools there are specialists in the areas of physical education, music, library, art and counseling.

The student population in the district is 72 percent African-American and 28 percent Caucasian, Asian, and Hispanic students. District school improvement director, Gerald Scallions, notes that a 28 percent non-African-American enrollment is relatively high for Mississippi, where many families send their children to private schools.

In May 1994, residents of Columbus passed a \$17 million bond which included funding for the reorganization of the school district. The plan calls for considerable reorganization of the district's schools, resulting in one high school with grades 9-12, one middle school with grades 7 and 8, one elementary with grades 5 and 6, nine elementary schools with grades K-4, and the vocational center serving students in grades 11 and 12.

Context

The Weyerhaeuser Company Foundation established a partnership with the district in 1989 and initially provided a grant for districtwide school improvement through training of OTE leadership teams in all of the district's schools. Weyerhaeuser's rationale for providing this support is that aid for school improvement is part of its stewardship in communities in which Weyerhaeuser plants are located.

In the fall of 1991 the district was awarded a Weyerhaeuser International Paper Company Foundation school improvement grant. Use of the OTE process was tied to the state requirement for staff development and the professional recertification program for teachers. This research-based school improvement process was adopted by the Columbus School Board and is included in the district's long-range master plan for renewal.

The domain of OTE process is the local school level, where it is used to improve student performance in three areas: academic achievement, attitude, and social behavior.

In each of the 16 OTE school sites in the district, those involved in the process decide what learning goal(s) to set and develop plans to achieve the goal(s). Then, in 1993 Weyerhaeuser gave \$100,000 to the district to implement the OTE plans. At the end of the 1993-94 school year the schools were expected to report to the company regarding spending levels and progress towards achieving the OTE goals.

Practice: District Support For School Improvement

Gerald Scallions, who is responsible for organization and management of the OTE process, provides some background information. With regard to the two schools that are the focus of this article, Scallions notes that both the Demonstration School and Sale Elementary School have made very productive use of the OTE process and the Weyerhaeuser Company Foundation Grants in their school improvement efforts. Both schools, he points out, have high minority populations and higher achievement levels than their demographics would predict.

In his OTE organizing and managing efforts, Dr. Scallions asserts that he does not interact only or even chiefly with school principals, but rather counsels with the OTE chairpersons/coordinators of the individual schools. In this way, he communicates respect for a basic feature of the OTE approach: that the leadership team, with the principal as a team member but not the chairperson--manages the school improvement work within each school. Dr. Scallions comments on the district's role in the Sale Elementary School and Demonstration School successes detailed in the following pages: It involves "going back and reviewing the steps of the OTE improvement process, repeatedly calling the building coordinators, and reinforcing the OTE principles."

DEMONSTRATION SCHOOL

Situation

Established in 1907, the Demonstration School is the first and only laboratory school in the state. Since the Depression era, it has been operated jointly by the Columbus School District and Mississippi University for Women (the first public-supported college for women in America), on the campus of which it is located. The district provides about 80 percent of the school's operating expenses, primarily from Minimum Foundation Funds from state and local revenue. The 1991-92 school year per-pupil expenditure was \$3,860. Small classes, parental involvement, and its advantageous position on a college campus were the foundations on which the school grew. Today, it is still characterized by small classes and a "homey" atmosphere.

The K-6 classroom teachers are required to have a minimum of a masters degree and three years' teaching experience at the elementary level in order to qualify for an assignment at the Demonstration School. Regular full-time teachers are paid on the same salary schedule as other teachers in the district, although they receive a small stipend in recognition of their services to the university's lab school. In addition to serving as principal, Alma W. Turner holds the post of assistant professor of education, with responsibility for teaching a methods course held in a Demonstration School classroom for the teacher training program of the university.

In recognition of her exemplary leadership, Mrs. Turner was nominated and selected by her fellow principals, through a statewide search sponsored by the National Association of Elementary School Principals and the U.S. Department of Education, to represent Mississippi as its Distinguished Principal for 1994.

There is a 20:1 ratio of students to classroom teachers at the Demonstration School. Pupils are organized into traditional graded classes, with some cross-grade grouping in reading to provide

for individualization. At the present time, the school maintains one room for each grade level from kindergarten through sixth grade. Additional instructional areas include remedial reading and math, gifted, a media center, and a well-equipped "Writing-to-Read" computer lab.

The school's population of approximately 180 students reflects the community in its ethnic composition (57 percent African-American, 42 percent Caucasian, and 1 percent "other") and in its fairly wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds. Some parents are in the professions, but, for the most part, the children are from the homes of middle- to low-income skilled and unskilled workers in neighborhoods surrounding the university campus. Residents rent and buy houses in the area so that their children can attend the Demonstration School, a neighborhood-zoned, desegregated school with no busing, which was a unique situation in the district prior to the recently passed bond-financed reorganization plan.

Context

At the Demonstration School the OTE leadership team, together with the rest of the faculty, reviewed SAT total reading battery scores in the school performance profile and determined that the scores in reading, the weakest area, were decreasing. There was a drop of 10 percent--from 56 percent in 1990 to 46 percent in 1991--in students performing in the top two quartiles. From 1988 to 1991 there had been a steady decline in NCE rankings--from 58.5 to 50.0.

Demonstration School staff members chose the improvement of SAT reading scores as the school's improvement goal on the rationale that "if students could read well, they would perform better on tests and on future jobs." They set a long-range goal for the next three-to-five years to have at least 90 percent of their students scoring in the top three quartiles of the SAT. The short-range target for the 1992-93 school year was to increase students' performance scores in the top three quartiles to 75 percent from the 1991 score of 69 percent.

The OTE leadership team involved the entire Demonstration School staff in reviewing the effective schooling research related to the improvement of reading. Being located next door to the university library made the information easily accessible. The staff selected instructional methods and techniques shown by their review of the research to contribute to the improvement of student performance in reading. Ideas selected included use of computers for instruction and practice, study skills, strategies for dropout prevention, peer tutoring, mastery learning, motivational strategies, techniques for working with at-risk students, and classroom management.

Virginia Lindsey, school librarian and OTE leadership team member, believes that the "step-by-step organization of the OTE process" is the reason it has worked at the school. While conducting the literature review, she learned about a grant that was available for the purchase of computer software. She completed an application, the school was awarded a grant, and staff used it to purchase a Macmillan reading program and two computers. That first successful grant application ignited the school's improvement efforts. Funding has been provided via the Weyerhaeuser OTE grant for the purchase of placement tests, "TestBest" practice SAT tests from Steck-Vaughn, and the "Connections" reading tutorial series with listening libraries from Macmillan/McGraw Hill.

Practice: Buildingwide Reading Promotion

Books keyed to the adopted reading program were purchased for the school library collection. The librarian also developed a collection related to instruction in formal reading skills in grades 3-6 and informal reading skills in grades K-2. In support of the library, the PTA funded a committee of parents, students and staff to operate an "Adopt-a-Book" program. Relatives and friends of Demonstration School students purchase the committee's selected books. They then donate the books, in which dedication plates are affixed, to the library.

Parents and community volunteers conduct a Junior Great Books program for all the children in all the grades. Volunteers are trained by a local coordinator who has received training from the Great Books Foundation. Groups of eight to ten students meet each week with volunteer discussion leaders. All the children take the books home, and they are expected to read the books or to have the books read to them by parents or other adults.

Each morning for 15 minutes everybody in the building, including the janitor and visitors, silently reads for pleasure. This sustained silent reading program named STARS (Students That Are Reading Silently) was made possible by a Weyerhaeuser Company Foundation grant. A wide variety of children's fiction and nonfiction books are marked with a star and circulated amongst the classrooms. These books are not checked out; they are meant to be read in the classroom during STARS time.

Students have enthusiastically taken to the idea. One fourth grade boy says he looks forward to each morning's reading session: "The best thing," he said, "is having time off from doing work." Asked about her favorite school subject, a sixth grader replied, "Reading. The time of day that we start reading is good. I like the program a lot. I read all kinds of books and spend a lot of time doing that." A girl in the second-grade likes to read and look at colorful pictures in books. "I like playful things about cats and dogs," she elaborates. A first grader thinks reading is fun, adding, "I like to look at the pictures and read about the 'Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles'." Book-It, a program sponsored by Pizza Hut restaurants and promoted by the staff, is also popular with the students. Free pizza is the students' reward at the end of each month for reading a minimum number of pages.

An emphasis is placed on book reports by the classroom teachers. Further evidence of supporting an appreciation of books was the evening book and author party hosted by the gifted education program.

Everyone is important at the Demonstration School; respect for all people is taught and modeled. Desired behavior, speech, dress, etc. are emphasized. The children are taught that, because of the uniqueness of their laboratory school, it is everyone's responsibility to set a good example. One hears teachers admonishing wayward students with a mild, "Where are you from?" followed by a controlled chorus of "Demonstration School!" "Students know how to behave" avers the principal, Alma Turner. Her quietly and seriously spoken, "You have disappointed me," serves to discipline an unruly child.

The results of emphasizing desired behavior can be seen during the students' lunch. Observing the social graces, everyone sits at a table before anyone starts to eat; napkins are in laps, and the decibel level of talking is low.

The children's comfort in this environment is evidenced by the school's receipt of an award for the previous four months for having the highest rate of attendance in the district.

Results

There was an increase from 72 percent of students' SAT reading scores in the top three quartiles in 1992 to 74 percent in 1993. That gain was slightly below that year's goal of 75 percent; however, that goal was surpassed in 1994 when the percentage of students scoring in the top 3 quartiles was 76 percent, moving the school closer to the long-range goal of 90 percent.

More information about the Demonstration School and its programs is available from Alma Turner, Principal, Demonstration School, 429 South 11th Street, Columbus, Mississippi 39701, 601/329-7358

ANNIE T. SALE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Situation

Annie T. Sale Elementary, a K-3 school with an approximate enrollment of 280, is surrounded predominantly by separate houses in a well-kept residential community. However, 70 percent of the children are bused to the building, with the majority coming from two large housing projects and several federally subsidized housing units. Currently, children in grades 4-6 who reside in the attendance area are bused to a "pair" school--a situation that will change with the recently passed bond. About 65 percent of the students are African-American. The free and reduced-price lunch rate is about 62 percent, and the mobility rate approximately 20 percent.

Each self-contained classroom of kindergarteners, first graders, and second graders has the services of an assistant teacher for the entire school day, and one of the third grade classes has a full-time Chapter 1 aide. In considering the district's reorganization plan, Principal Rebecca Taylor notes that it may be problematic for some of the approximately 30-member Sale faculty, because the selection of staff for schools following the reorganization will be influenced by seniority. Transfers will possibly affect Sale's "sense of family." Ms. Taylor notes, however, that districtwide use of the OTE process will ease the difficulties associated with upcoming changes, since everyone is familiar with the same concepts, terms, and improvement steps.

Context

Standardized testing data showed that 1991 NCE scores had declined to the 48.7 percentile across the board on the SAT. Remediation efforts, which had been underway for several years, had been largely ineffective. The challenge faced by the staff was to find ways other than remediation efforts to improve learning and raise the low SAT scores. Because the staff did not want to reduce emphasis on the basic skills by isolating a single curricular area, they decided to establish as their goal improving performance on the overall test battery. They also concluded that it was enrichment that was needed, not more remediation. The adopted goal statement is, "The students shall show an increase in the total battery Normal Curve Equivalent (NCE) scores as measured by the Stanford Achievement Test. At the end of one year students will be performing at a total NCE score of 52 and at the end of three years they will be performing at 57."

The Sale Elementary School improvement prescription (that is, the written set of practices, methods, and techniques derived from research on schooling and from craft knowledge) was developed in the early 1992-93 school year. The faculty and staff were divided into six teams to read the effective schooling research and to identify teaching strategies and other effective practices related to their goal. The most powerful, manageable, and usable strategies appear in the final prescription.

After reading the research on learning styles, the staff concluded that the tactile/kinesthetic style is one style that all young children utilize. That style choice led to a plan for using manipulatives in mathematics and across the curriculum to raise overall academic achievement. Cooperative learning was also identified as a research-supported approach for addressing different learning styles.

The staff development plan for 1993-94 was designed to move the school towards its goal by focusing on the use of manipulatives across the curriculum to respond to the learning styles of K-3 students. Staff also identified ways to establish and communicate high learning expectations to students.

Practice: Enriching The Curriculum

The process by which the staff developed the building's math centers illustrates the effective leadership at work in the school. The staff cooperatively compiled a list of the math skills to be addressed via use of manipulatives organized in learning centers. Ms. Taylor assigned each teacher and herself a math skill for which to develop a center. Action steps were then implemented, calling for each person to:

1. Research her objectives or activities and materials
2. List specific costs, catalogues, or resources
3. Meet with team to review sample activities and materials
4. Order enough materials for each classroom
5. Compile kits for her activities with specific directions for each
6. Hold inservice meetings to demonstrate the use of each activity where needed.

The result was several impressively planned and executed math centers housed in large plastic garbage bags stored on the school's stage and shared by staff. The key to the success of the self-checkout system is the staff's openness, cooperation and mutual support. Before the annual SAT, the math centers, organized by grade level skills, are set up in rooms for entire classes to visit and use. During my time at Sale Elementary, I observed a Chapter 1 assistant supervising students from three different classes using math manipulatives.

In a previous year, the science centers were developed by the same process as that used in creating the math centers. Once a year all of the science centers are set up in the gym for one week. During that week, classes are scheduled to use the centers appropriate to their grade levels. The centers are also used during the year in classrooms. Mrs. Belue, one of the kindergarten teachers with a strong interest in science, uses activity centers with a science emphasis throughout the year in her classroom. Each child goes to two of the eight centers each day with one or two other children. On Fridays, the children are given a free choice of centers after completing the week's work.

Walking around Sale Elementary reveals additional sights that underscore the school's strong focus on learning, e.g., a spot video and photographs of students using the math and science centers, and an evolving outdoor classroom with a math and science focus located just outside the library's window wall.

Results

Rebecca Taylor reported that the Sale staff met the first year's short-range OTE goal and set another short-range goal for the second year. They are also working toward a long-range goal for the building.

The SAT-8 is a standardized achievement test of basic skills. All Sale students were tested during the month of April for the years 1989 through 1994. For grades 1-3 there has been a four-year steady increase in total battery NCE scores, from 48.7 in 1991 to 54.6 in 1994. The long-range goal for spring 1994 was 57, so there is room for continued growth.

Ms. Taylor reports that the students exhibit more excitement now about math. Their behaviors have improved, particularly at those times, such as cooperative learning periods, when no direct instruction is occurring in the classrooms.

Those desiring more information about Sale Elementary School are encouraged to contact Rebecca Taylor, Principal, Sale Elementary School, 520 Warpath Road, Columbus, MS 39702, (601) 327-1482.

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