

## Snapshot #40

### Leading an Inner City School to "Overall Excellence"

Thurgood Marshall Elementary School<sup>1</sup>  
Seattle, Washington

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## Introduction

Receiving national recognition for overall excellence would be a great honor for any school. Receiving such recognition from two different prestigious sources is even more impressive. And it is especially striking that Seattle's Thurgood Marshall Elementary School—only five years old and having a largely low-SES, minority population—should be the recipient of these coveted national honors.

The driving force behind Marshall's attainments is the inspired, energetic leadership provided by its principal, Edward O. Jefferson, and key members of his staff. Not surprisingly, their leadership activities are highly congruent with the research findings on effective leadership. Drawn from NWREL's *Effective Schooling Practices: A Research Synthesis—1995 Update* (Cotton 1995), these findings include

#### **2.3.1 Leaders Undertake School Restructuring Efforts as Needed to Attain Agreed-Upon Goals for Students.**

Administrators and other leaders

c. Identify kinds of staff development needed to enable school leaders and other personnel to bring about desired changes.

d. Study restructuring efforts conducted elsewhere for ideas and approaches to use or adapt.

#### **2.3.2 Strong Leadership Guides the Instructional Program.**

Administrators and other instructional leaders:

- a. Believe that all students can learn and that the school makes the difference between success and failure.
- c. Have a clear understanding of the school's mission and are able to state it in direct, concrete terms. They establish an instructional focus that unifies staff.
- g. Seek out innovative curricular programs, observe these, acquaint staff with them, and participate with staff in discussion about adopting or adapting them.
- i. Check student progress frequently, relying on explicit performance data. They make results public, and work with staff to set standards, use them as points of comparison, and address discrepancies.

### **2.3.3 Administrators and Other Leaders Continually Strive to Improve Instructional Effectiveness.**

Administrators and other leaders:

- a. Expect that educational programs will be changed so that they work better; they are never complacent about student achievement.
- d. Review programs and practices shown to be effective in other school settings for their potential in helping to meet school needs.
- g. Secure and encumber resources to support improvement activities, acquire resources from many sources including the community, and make resource allocations based on instructional priorities.

### **2.5.1 Administrators and Teachers Provide Programs and Support to Help High-Needs Students Achieve School Success.**

### **2.5.2 Administrators and Teachers Work to Achieve Equity in Learning Opportunities and Outcomes.**

### **2.7.3 School Leaders and Staff Collaborate with Community Agencies to Support Families with Urgent Health and/or Social Service Needs.**

### **2.8.1 Administrators and Teachers Involve Parents and Community Members in Supporting the Instructional Program and (2.8.2) in School Governance.**

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## **Situation**

Part of the 48,000-student Seattle Public Schools, Thurgood Marshall Elementary School is located in the inner city and serves approximately 300 students in grades K-6. A very diverse school, Marshall's population is over 75 percent "minority," and 58 percent African American. Twenty percent of Marshall's students are limited-English proficient, and about 17 percent qualify for special education services. There is a 52 percent annual mobility rate. Half of Marshall's students qualify for free or reduced lunch, and 62 percent live in arrangements other than two-parent families. By design, Marshall imposes no suspensions or expulsions.

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# Context

## A New Neighborhood School

In response to community preference, Seattle Public Schools, like many other districts, is moving away from an era of intensive busing of students to achieve racial integration, and toward a return to neighborhood schools. So it was that Thurgood Marshall Elementary School was created<sup>2</sup> in 1990 to serve students in its inner-city neighborhood, who for many years had been bused to schools in Seattle's north end.

Newly hired as the school's principal, Ed Jefferson, an African American and onetime student at the old Colman Elementary school, brought considerable personal insight into the needs of the community. In addition, he familiarized himself with the research on schools that successfully serve inner-city school populations, with their particular configuration of needs. He instituted a hiring procedure aimed at securing the kind of staff described in the research: he wanted teachers with at least five years of teaching experience and an interest in working with students like those who would be attending Marshall. His six-page, in-depth list of interview questions were posed to candidates by a committee reflecting the Marshall community—Jefferson himself, a teacher's union representative, two community members, and a representative from the private sector.

## The Comer Restructuring Model

In addition to influencing his staffing procedure, Mr. Jefferson's study of the research on effective schooling also made him aware of the Comer Restructuring Model developed by Dr. James P. Comer and his staff at the Yale University Child Study Center. He was immediately drawn to this approach because of its emphasis on involving parents—especially parents of color—and its aim of creating a caring community in which children can learn successfully. In 1991, Mr. Jefferson was introduced to Dr. Comer himself, and shortly thereafter began working with local Comer facilitator Eileen Maret to implement the model at Marshall.

A systems approach to school management, the Comer model involves all those associated with the school in establishing and maintaining a community in support of all of the school's children. The combined strengths of the school's adults—staff, parents, and agency representatives—are utilized through collaborative decision making to develop policies, procedures, and programs that improve both the academic performance and social climate of the school.

A key feature of the Comer program at Marshall is the School Planning and Management Team (SPMT), which guides program operations via the basic Comer principles of *no fault/blame*, *consensus decision making*, and *collaboration*. The SPMT includes the principal, counselor, nurse, speech therapist, a paraprofessional representative, and the chairpersons of the five SPMT subcommittees, as well as three parents—a PTA representative, a non-PTA parent, and a member of the business community. SPMT meetings are held in the evening to accommodate members' schedules.

The SPMT led the effort to develop mission and vision statements, a strategic plan that includes both social and academic goals, an adult development plan, and a comprehensive assessment and evaluation plan for all program components. All staff and many parents join at least one of the subcommittees of the SPMT, which focus on topics such as curriculum and instruction,

professional development, school climate, safety, training parent helpers, student and staff recognition, and public relations. Each subcommittee is responsible for implementing and monitoring portions of Marshall's strategic plan. Core SPMT members conduct teacher interviews three times each year, during which the strengths, accomplishments, and needs of every Marshall student are discussed and individual plans are established as needed.

As called for in the Comer model, Marshall makes use of a Mental Health Team that focuses on prevention of and interventions into mental health issues. A half-time school counselor and the services of a school psychologist one day a week are key components of this team. The team monitors schoolwide discipline and safety practices, and is responsible for adherence to research-supported practices in the areas of mental health and child development.

The Parent Leadership Team addresses the needs of parents, encourages parent involvement, coordinates agency involvement, and provides adult education. A Parent Room houses a food and clothing bank to help meet families' basic needs, as well as serving adults in need of a high school diploma, parenting skills, life skills, or general computer-based skills. Though not required by the Comer model, a key feature of Marshall's parent involvement is the written warranty Mr. Jefferson gives to the family of each student, promising that, if parents provide love and educational support, their youngsters will perform at or above grade-level standards. The warranty also specifies what actions will be taken at each grade level to support any student who needs extra help to move up to grade level.

Staff development that is congruent with principles of child development and supports school and district goals is an inherent feature of the Comer model. Marshall staff and their many community partners learn collaboratively to increase their ability to serve students well.

The Marshall PTA is involved in all major school decisions, and Mr. Jefferson and his staff conduct vigorous outreach activities to engage parent participation and support. An annual, half-day parent workshop familiarizes parents with the many ways in which they can support their children's school performance.

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## Practices

The product of a collaborative effort, Marshall's mission statement is,

We, the Marshall staff, in partnership with families and the community, teach, nurture, and learn from children and each other. We believe that all children can learn. Working together, we can make a difference in the lives we touch.

Expressions of the belief that all children can learn and learn well are everywhere observable across Marshall's program. The *Marshall Curriculum Guide* specifies activities and resources designed to achieve district and school goals for students, including individual empowerment and responsibility for learning, individual self-worth, the ability to work cooperatively, understanding and skill in language arts and mathematics, word processing and desktop publishing skills, problem-solving and other higher-order thinking skills. With the Comer model providing the overall structure, Marshall's staff and community carry out a variety of other programs and activities to assure that these goals are met. These are detailed in the following paragraphs.

## **Basic Needs**

Recognizing that basic needs must be met before teaching and learning can proceed successfully, Mr. Jefferson meets weekly with teachers and guidance counselors to discuss the needs of Marshall's students and determine appropriate educational, health, and/or social services. Family support and community service workers, who are funded by United Way, the City of Seattle, and the Washington Health Department, both provide services and make referrals to outside agencies as appropriate.

## **School Climate**

Given the powerful influence of school social climate on academic performance, Marshall has established Caring Teams—long-term, family-like groups of eight or so participants that involve every Marshall adult and student. Trust and mutual support are established in these groups over time. Counseling services, peer mediation, positive discipline, and violence prevention activities also contribute to a safe and supportive school climate. A recently implemented policy of mandatory school uniforms fosters esprit de corps, as well as drawing attention away from socioeconomic differences among students.

## **Community Relationships**

In addition to the many activities provided by and to Marshall parents, the school also has a number of business partners and partnerships with other educational agencies, as well as an Intergenerational Project which involves community people 50 years of age and older in interacting with Marshall students. Marshall has on-going collaborative relationships with Antioch University-Seattle, Seattle Mental Health Institute, Atlantic Street Center, Union Gospel Mission Youth Activity Center, Easy Madison YMCA, and the Legionnaire's Club.

## **Equity Provisions**

Marshall is involved in Washington State MESA (Mathematics, Engineering, Science Achievement), a statewide program established to address the needs of groups who are underrepresented in these fields. It is a partnership involving higher education, school districts, business and industry, government, and community organizations to provide African American, Hispanic American, American Indian, and female students with services to increase their interest, participation, and contribution to math, science, and engineering.

In addition, Marshall's Bilingual Orientation Center serves students who are new to the country. Many participants in this center are children from relocation centers, who have never attended school because of military conflict and disruption in their home countries. Staff work with these students to prepare them with the communication and social skills to succeed in school.

## **Monitoring Student Progress**

The Marshall Composite, the school's profile of academic achievement, is compiled each school year and shows individual student achievement in reading, math, and language arts. Standardized and locally developed assessment instruments are used to track student academic growth, and planning time is set aside for staff to collaboratively analyze the data and make appropriate instructional changes.

Three times each year, core members of the Support Team screen all students in the school via teacher interviews. Academic, behavioral, health, and social services needs are identified, with

school-level plans and community agency referrals arranged.

## **Other Programs**

Marshall is an Early Childhood Model site, which requires matching the instruction to each student's best learning rate and style. Gifted, special education, and Chapter 1 programs are provided to qualifying students, and Marshall is a magnet school in the area of science and computers. In addition, instruction in music, physical education, student council, environmental education, after-school tutoring, and other services are provided.

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# **Marshall's Children and Parents**

## **Bilingual Orientation Center**

A visit to the Bilingual Orientation Center revealed lessons in progress for students from Ethiopia, Laos, Bosnia, and several South American countries. Sitting on a rug in a corner of the classroom, students followed along in their books as the teacher read simple sentences. The alphabet and the numbers from 1 to 10 were prominently displayed on the work tables, each of which seats four students.

Originally established to serve each student for one semester, in reality the Bilingual Orientation center often supports children throughout their first year at Marshall—which is often their first year in any school. It is Marshall's practice to integrate ESL children into all school activities to build language and socialization skills and to avoid an "us-and-them" mentality.

## **Grades 2-3**

In a class serving regular and gifted program students in second and third grade, the children were engaged in composing short poems based on a rhyme scheme the teacher had given them:

Spike<sup>3</sup> in the cage,  
Spike in the cage,  
Take him out, take him out,  
Spike in the cage.

The exercise involved children working with a partner to compose a verse about something in their classroom and share it with the rest of the class. The teacher carefully explained the instructions and, after several pairs of students had presented their verses, she began asking the class open-ended questions, for example, "What do you see about the patterns in these poems?"

One student pair shared a verse based on the phrases "Heart in your body" and "Love and share." The teacher used this as an opportunity to reinforce Marshall's themes of sharing and mutual respect.

## **Grade 3**

In a third grade class, the teacher, Mr. Chow, remarked that he had 26 children in his class at this early point in the school year and hoped the class would not become larger. After discussing a story titled, "Mixed Up Mystery Smell," the students put away their materials in preparation for lunch. Mr. Chow reiterated instructions for proceeding down the hall in an

orderly manner

## **Parent Appraisals**

Parents' support of Marshall's programs and staff was evident in a late afternoon discussion with a parents' group. Highlights from this informal gathering included the following parent comments:

- From a Hispanic female parent: "You should have seen the school my son was in before we came to Marshall<sup>4</sup>. Before deciding on Marshall, I did quite a bit of research and checked everybody out. It was hard getting my son enrolled, but Mr. Jefferson helped every step of the way. I'm impressed about the dedication to all children that you see here."
- From a white male parent: "The staff here has a passion for what they do. Marshall is a safe, comfortable environment where parents are always welcome. Mr. Jefferson and the other people here... they're committed to the parent-school relationship."
- From an African-American female parent: "My son had a reading problem, and so the staff gathered around and mobilized to support him. The teachers have an open-door policy here....Last year's parenting workshop was excellent."

Each of these speakers gave high praise to Mr. Jefferson in particular, citing his tireless dedication and the support they and their children had received with academic and other issues.

Seventy-eight parents returned a school climate survey sent out by Marshall staff in 1995. Comprised of 20 positive statements (e.g., "I feel that the staff cares about my child/children," "My child's school is a safe and orderly place"), the survey asked parents to respond to each statement on a four-point scale indicating whether they strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree. Mean responses fell between agree and strongly agree for all but one of the statements, and that one had to do with the extent of the responding parent's involvement in school decision making.

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## **National Recognition**

These accolades are underscored in the April 1995 *Redbook* magazine feature, "America's Best Elementary Schools." Marshall is one of 60 schools cited for "overall excellence" in 1995, and Edward Jefferson is one of eight principals profiled. "[H]e always keeps his office door open," says the article, "for students who need a pep talk."

In addition, Marshall is one of six schools chosen as Demonstration Schools by the National Alliance of Black School Educators (NABSE) in 1995. Launched to identify high-performing schools with large percentages of African-American and low-SES students, the NABSE Demonstration Schools project called for nominations early in 1995. During a review process conducted by an on-site NABSE review team in the fall, Marshall met or exceeded all nine project standards.<sup>5</sup> Marshall representatives were honored at NABSE's national conference in Dallas, Texas in November 1995, and will receive support and technical assistance from NABSE in agreed-upon areas.

For more information about Thurgood Marshall Elementary School, contact Edward O. Jefferson, 2401 South Irving Street, Seattle, Washington 98144, (206) 281-6603.

1. Early in 1996 the school's name was changed from Colman Elementary School to Thurgood Marshall Elementary School. This change resulted from a request by the staff and community that this predominately minority school be renamed in honor of the late Supreme Court justice.
2. Actually, the school was *recreated*: A previous Colman Elementary School – in the same neighborhood but on a different site – had been closed down some ten years before.
3. "Spike" is the class's pet guinea pig.
4. I have taken the liberty of substituting "Marshall" for "Colman" in these quotations.
5. Project standards are in the areas of effective leadership, collaboratively developed mission statement, high expectations for students and staff, cultural excellence, relevant and effective criteria, student progress monitoring and reporting, safe and positive school climate, active parent and community participation, and civic responsibility and participation.