

Snapshot #24

**Restructuring Curriculum to Promote
Child-Initiated Activity**

**South Colby Elementary School
Port Orchard, Washington**

Jan Jewett

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Student investment in and willingness to use the processes and tools of learning can be significantly affected by the way schools structure and implement curriculum and instruction. This principle led staff of South Colby Elementary School in Port Orchard, Washington to undertake a restructuring process focused on research findings in early childhood education and effective school leadership and management practices. In *EFFECTIVE SCHOOLING PRACTICES: A RESEARCH SYNTHESIS/1990 UPDATE* (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory), the following school-level research findings are identified:

2.1.2 THE CURRICULUM IS BASED ON CLEAR GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

c. Collaborative curriculum planning and decision making are typical. Special attention is focused on building continuity across grade levels and courses.

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.

e. Building leaders know and can apply teaching and learning principles; they know research, legitimize it and foster its use in problem solving.

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.

p. Leaders express an expectation and strong desire that instructional programs improve over time. Improvement strategies are organized and systematic; they are given high priority and visibility; implementation of new practices is carefully monitored; staff development is supported.

2.3.2 ADMINISTRATORS AND TEACHERS CONTINUALLY STRIVE TO IMPROVE INSTRUCTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

c. Priority goals for improvement are developed based on review of school performance data; goals give focus to planning and implementation.

e. The full staff is involved in planning for implementation; specific recommendations and guidelines provide the detail needed for good implementation; plans fit the local school context and conditions.

SITUATION

South Colby Elementary School is located near the outskirts of Port Orchard, Washington on the Kitsap Peninsula, an hour away from Tacoma. South Colby is one of ten elementary schools in the South Kitsap School District. A K-6 school, South Colby serves approximately 458 students, most of whom are Caucasian and come from lower-middle- to middle-class homes.

Located in a semi-rural setting with few businesses nearby and few available resource agencies, South Colby has developed a strong identity in addressing the needs of children and families in its local community.

CONTEXT

Over the years, South Colby Elementary School has developed one of the finest academic programs in its district. Test scores have been high, and children have graduated with demonstrated skills in reading and math. The principal and staff became concerned, however, when evidence revealed that although children had acquired essential skills, they were not applying those skills in the context of their everyday lives.

John Lindley, South Colby's principal for the past fourteen years, reported that too many children were "turned off" to learning by the sixth grade, demonstrated poor attitudes towards learning and homework, and were unwilling to read. When surveyed, these children reported skills but no interest.

In 1987, Mr. Lindley was invited to sit on the National Academy of Science Forum on the Future of Children and Families and began to study research on retention, early childhood education, and alternative teaching methods. He found that these research findings were pertinent to the issues and concerns raised by South Colby staff.

Mr. Lindley organized the research materials into a notebook and began

sharing the information with staff members. In addition to validating their concerns, the materials suggested new directions by outlining an alternative, research-based teaching approach characterized by child-centered, developmentally appropriate teaching practices. For example, research supports the use of learning activities for young children which are active, focused on concrete and personally relevant materials, and self-selected for approximately one hour of the school day.

Staff involvement in studying and discussing the research and program development guidelines expanded from the kindergarten and first grade teachers to include second and third grade teachers as well. In addition, the discussions progressed from casual conversations in the staff lounge to a more formal system of biweekly meetings before school.

Out of these activities was born a schoolwide commitment to developing a program which would engage the learning interests and abilities of children, while reducing retentions and special education referrals. The staff as a whole became familiar with the research base supporting basic principles of early childhood education and developmentally appropriate practice as a way of reconceptualizing the school's--and the children's--role in learning, curriculum development, and instruction.

In his role as a member of the team which developed a standards document for the National Association of Elementary School Principals, Mr. Lindley collected still more materials and information for use by his staff. The NAESP document, **STANDARDS FOR QUALITY PROGRAMS FOR YOUNG CHILDREN: EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPAL**, raised complex issues for program developers, and when the Association of Washington School Principals indicated a need for help in addressing these issues, South Colby staff were able to bring their knowledge to bear on assisting in the revisions of the document, titled **HERE THEY COME: ARE WE READY?**

Focusing on South Colby's specific needs, staff prepared a systematic implementation strategy, a continuing staff development strategy, and a support strategy. Attending first to the kindergarten program and then to the first grade, staff worked to expand the age-appropriateness of the curriculum. For example, the daily schedule was redivided so that one third of the time each day was spent in large-group activities, one third in small-group activities, and one third in active learning opportunities where students could choose from among a number of open-ended learning centers. Additional changes included a commitment to expanding the whole language program and instituting heterogeneous grouping of students.

Resources for reorganizing the school's approach to curriculum and instructional implementation came from several sources. The staff development strategy included the decision to pursue a staff development grant, which has been awarded to South Colby from the Superintendent of Public Instruction each year from 1987 to 1991. This grant, the "Practitioner's Committee Workshop," has sent a team of six school staff members to meet once each year with a selected resource specialist for two days to develop and refine

plans for implementation of developmentally appropriate practices which encourage child-initiated learning.

During each year, the principal and the teachers from the primary team have met with an early childhood expert to design and implement a K-3 program using resources from the High Scope Foundation and the National Association for the Education of Young Children as initial guidelines. Modifications made during these sessions have included redesign of classroom configurations and routines, teaching and questioning strategies, selection of materials and equipment, assessment, report card modification, increased grade-level planning, and continuing pursuit of open communication with parents. During the 1991-92 school year, staff have concentrated on improving their communication and coordination of teaching strategies in order to increase continuity and consistency for children.

Follow-up to these practitioner workshops has included review of team efforts at monthly all-staff meetings, the development of vertical (across grade level) teams for support, observation and assessment of teaching strategies, decision making and continuing plans for staff development and support, including reapplications for grants in successive years.

Additional resources were made available through changing instructional methods. Money previously invested in textbook and workbook series has been reallocated for the purchase of trade books which are used in the whole language approach, math manipulatives, and other materials which are incorporated into the learning centers.

Mr. Lindley requires that a portion of the purchasing decisions be made in K-6 vertical teams so that staff members will see things globally, rather than provincially. Teachers were encouraged to visit and observe other programs where developmentally appropriate practices were being implemented.

Finally, in the initial stages of this effort, school resources were used to purchase substitute teacher time so that involved staff could get together for the planning and coordination of an integrated effort.

As noted above, staff decided to undertake slow, thorough, methodical change, in which the kindergarten shifted to developmentally appropriate practice during the first year, while first grade teachers studied and observed. The shift was then expected to move one year at a time through the grade levels. This would ensure that children's environments were consistent with their prior experiences.

In practice, however, the staff above the first grade level "caught on fire" and weren't willing to wait to begin implementing the new approaches. Committees made up of teachers grouped vertically across teaching levels study cooperative learning techniques, whole language articulation, practitioner's workshop grant restructuring processes, and computer software coordination, in addition to holding more traditional grade-level meetings.

The staff now conceptualizes primary-level skills as a continuum and works to

assist children in moving along that continuum. Classrooms have changed dramatically, and classroom structures and groupings have changed as well. The current goals of the staff include: (1) addressing the district-level "Student Learning Outcomes," which are currently organized according to grade level and are not articulated in ways which mesh well with the emergent "continuum" view in the school; and (2) developing staff communication skills which will enable them to take a comprehensive view of children and understand the school as a whole, rather than focusing exclusively on grade-level concerns.

SCHOOLWIDE PRACTICES

South Colby Elementary School has made a commitment to schoolwide use of a whole language approach to reading; a thematic, integrated approach to curriculum; cooperative learning techniques; and math programs emphasizing the use of manipulatives, including strategies from BOX IT AND BAG IT, MATH IN THE MIND'S EYE, and MATH THEIR WAY. Children have many opportunities to be active, decision-making participants in classrooms; much less teacher-directed activity occurs. Primary classrooms are organized into interest centers which allow children to select and pursue topics of their own interest. Blocks and many other manipulatives are available in all kindergarten and first grade classrooms. Second grade classrooms offer open-ended interest centers which children can explore and utilize for at least 45 minutes daily. Curriculum is developed in thematic units around topics of interest to children and teachers.

South Colby is currently organized around traditional grade-level classrooms. All classes engage in crossage tutoring, a practice which staff members feel has reduced competitive behaviors and encouraged mutual support among age groupings. During the 1991-92 school year, the school is operating a multi-age, fourththrough -sixth-grade classroom. Moving towards more multi-age groupings is of interest to the school staff.

School structures which affirm the school's emphasis on student cooperation, initiative and effort include monthly award assemblies at which two special awards are presented: the Principal's "Good Work Board" and "Super Students of the Month." For the Principal's Good Work Board, each classroom teacher selects children who have produced excellent work on one assignment, taking into consideration quality of ideas, neatness, accuracy and the student's ability and effort. Super Students of the Month are those children from each classroom, usually one or two per month, who typify the award title. Criteria are citizenship, work skills, positive behavior, responsibility, respect, effort, and cooperative attitude.

Ample evidence points to the success of these restructuring efforts in enabling the children to take charge and make use of their own learning skills. Staff perceptions indicate that children are happier, less competitive, bring in more materials and ideas from home to share with the school, and engage in far fewer conflicts in and out of class. Fewer referrals are made for special services, and the special education students are not as obviously set apart as in

previous arrangements. Parents report that their children, of diverse temperaments and learning styles, have found success in school and that the teachers and structure have drawn out the children's skills and enhanced their confidence.

In addition, school staff have documented specific ways this approach has improved student outcomes:

- Attendance has improved significantly over the past several years. In 1987, over 40 letters were sent to families of students who had been absent at least ten times during the school year. In 1990-91, fewer than a dozen of these letters were sent.
- Discipline referrals have decreased over 60 percent during this time period, suggesting that, as children become accustomed to active learning and the regular use of cooperative learning and problem-solving strategies, negative interactions and experiences are reduced.
- Retentions have been reduced from 12 to 15 children in the K-3 range to no retentions in 1990-91.
- The Child Study Team, which previously conducted an average of sixty or seventy primary staffings annually for students who were referred for behavior or learning concerns, had only twelve referrals for primary students in 1990-91.
- Library usage has increased dramatically. Circulation averaged 100 books a week in 1987. In 1991-92, circulation is over 400 books a week, with a marked increase in books checked out by second, third, and fourth graders.
- Student performance has improved on publisher's basal-related magazine tests for reading. This is particularly significant since the school no longer utilizes the basal series on which these tests are based.

CLASSROOM PRACTICES: OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHILD-INITIATED LEARNING

KINDERGARTEN

A visit to Ann Warren's kindergarten room revealed a carefully organized environment replete with opportunities for creative play, exploration, and problem solving. Typical areas such as easels, water table, science, art, listening, manipulatives, blocks, library, and puzzles were supplemented by a large, well-equipped doll house, a store corner, a stage and dress-up area, a paper chain table, a junk art bin, a jigsaw puzzle table, a rabbit cage, and an antique typewriter.

Each of these centers or areas was presented in an open-ended way which did not require or demand a particular type of usage or response from children. Children circulated freely in this environment. Working singly, in pairs, or in small groups, they explored and manipulated materials as well as creating and constructing various projects of their own designs. The teacher moved quietly among the activities and facilitated or extended the children's pursuits.

Two children discovered the force of the hot air emanating from the heat vent near the window and began actively experimenting with materials to see which ones could be made to fly up into the air. The flying pieces of tissue paper attracted the interest of the teacher and other children, who came over to discuss and explore the implications of this inquiry process.

Mrs. Warren's schedule includes additional time for child-centered and child-selected activities. The materials in the room incorporate more numerous and more elaborate opportunities for open-ended exploration and discovery than in the past. The High Scope training has enabled her to work more productively with children on planning, recording, and reviewing their work. Mrs. Warren reports that the shifts in South Colby's approach to schooling have helped her to feel more confident and comfortable with the teaching methods she is using.

FIRST GRADE

The children in Mrs. Joan Mott's first grade classroom were engaged in the daily period known as DEAR (Drop Everything and Read). This period can involve solo or buddy reading in pairs. Children were spread throughout the room, comfortably positioned at various levels--on the floor, on cushions, or sitting at tables. Eight children were sitting in the reading area reading books--either trade books or those which had been made in the classroom. Six children were seated in pairs at tables, discussing and reading magazines. Others pursued different activities at various places throughout the room.

Mrs. Mott rotated among children, carrying a set of cards on a ring--one card for each child--which she used to record the answers children gave to a set of comprehension questions which she asked as she circulated. There was a moderate level of noise, as children were talking quietly to each other. Almost all discussion was focused on the reading activities in which children were engaged. One child monitored the time and turned off and on the lights to notify the class of the end of DEAR time. The teacher immediately handed out coupons to children who were in the "reading position"--sitting alone or in pairs with appropriate reading material.

FOURTH/FIFTH/SIXTH GRADE

This multi-age classroom entered the library in the afternoon with Mr. Steve Kaio-Maddox and Mrs. Sara Simmons for the daily period known as "Resource Base Learning." Although children function in many different heterogeneously organized groups in this classroom, during Resource Base Learning children are grouped by age level to pursue research skills. Research tasks founded on an analysis of the scope and sequence of skills targeted for fourth, fifth and sixth grades are integrated into the curriculum through a simulation game in which class members imagine themselves as a group from another planet traveling through space and preparing to land on Earth.

Each group studies different, grade-level-appropriate aspects of this earth landing. At this time, students were studying harvest myths and the history of Halloween. Once grouped in the library, each set of students was oriented to its task either by a teacher or the librarian. Fourth graders were developing

research skills through the use of books as references, fifth graders were utilizing encyclopedias, and sixth graders were accessing indexes. After each group received an orientation, they pursued the identified tasks by exploring the available materials and discussing within each group the usefulness of the information obtained. Students discussed, asked questions, and made notes on the materials they reviewed.

Focusing on child-initiated activity and cooperative learning techniques has benefitted the staff at South Colby Elementary as well as the students. Staff members report that relationships are more collegial, teachers participate more in decision making, and the level of staff professionalism and leadership has risen. The principal's role has evolved in the direction of increased support and facilitation, as opposed to direction setting and "pushing." The school as a whole is benefitting from this focus on selfinitiation.