Baker Middle School Case Study

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Baker Middle School

School Context: (All statistics from 1998-1999 school year)
Enrollment: 992
Grades: 6-8
Student Ethnicity: 80% African American; 12% Asian; 7% Latino; 1% White
Gender: 49% Female; 51% Male
Low Income: 90.00%
ESOL: 7.6%
Special Education: 16%
Suspension Rate: 92.4%

Performance Responsibility Index (PRI) Data:

Student Attendance: Percent of students attending 90% of days or more 1995-1999, and 85% of days or more in 2000.

	1995-1996	1999-2000
Baker Middle School	72.84%	71.20%
Citywide Middle School Average	69.15%	72.00%

Staff Attendance: Percent of staff attending 95 % of days or more

	1995-1996	1999-2000
Baker Middle School	64.04%	61.20%
Citywide Middle School Average	68.95%	58.40%

Promotion Rate:

	1995-1996	1999-2000
Baker Middle School	84.58%	97.30%
Citywide Middle School Average	81.50%	94.90%

Stanford-9 Achievement Test (SAT-9) Scores: Percent of Students at or Above Basic

	1995-1996	1996-1997	1997-1998	1998-1999	1999-2000
Math	14.13%	9.34%	13.38%	18.79%	12.60%
Reading	47.46%	40.14%	43.49%	48.94%	48.10%
Science	16.67%	17.99%	24.91%	21.99%	24.10%

Introduction

Middle schools across the nation face a major challenge: providing social and emotional supports for young adolescents at an important juncture in their development and, at the same time, offering a challenging curriculum that engages them, strengthens their literacy and numeracy skills, and develops their ability to think critically. Recently, middle schools have come under fire for attending more readily to the social and emotional needs of their students than the academic ones.[1] The story of Baker Middle School is one of a staff trying to do both under difficult circumstances.

When Dr. Helen Bender became principal of Baker Middle School in January 1997, she vowed, in her words, "to turn the school around." Baker's school climate and student achievement had deteriorated markedly in the previous few years due to poor leadership. Staff morale had plummeted and, to make matters worse, shortly after Dr. Bender's arrival, Baker was identified as one of 19 schools in the School District that declined in a system-wide measure called the Performance Responsibility Index (PRI). The centerpiece of the District's new accountability system, the PRI looks at such factors as SAT-9 scores, promotion rates, and student and staff attendance and provides rewards or added support depending on a school's performance. Because of its declining score in the PRI, Baker underwent intensive review by a School Support Team composed of central office staff, teachers and parents. The school was required to develop a plan for improvement that responded to the team's findings.

Baker's leadership group responded to these challenges by adopting a whole school reform model called "Talent Development," which offered the following:

- A core curriculum in the major subject areas.
- Professional development for teachers.
- Remediation for students who were not succeeding.
- Establishing Small Learning Communities (SLCs) within schools. SLCs are District-mandated and organized around a thematic focus, providing a smaller and more personalized learning environment for students.
- Implementing instructional practices identified in the research literature as effective with middle grades students, including interdisciplinary curriculum that involved students in independent research projects and cooperative learning.
- Mobilizing additional resources through extensive grant-writing and partnerships with community agencies to ensure that staff had the materials they needed to teach, and students had opportunities for extra support and enrichment experiences.

By 1999-2000, there had been significant progress in establishing a more orderly school environment and in pulling together resources directed at strengthening classroom instruction. Staff also reported that there was real momentum for instructional improvement. Students had made steady, if incremental, progress in reading, math, and science test scores between 1996 and 1999. Despite these efforts, however, overall progress was

[1] Jackson, A.W., & Davis, G.A. (2000). Turning points 2000: Educating adolescents in the 21st century. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

slower than in middle schools District-wide. In 1998-1999, the percentage of Baker students scoring at or above the Basic level in the Stanford-9 Achievement Test (SAT-9) for reading was 10 percent below the District average for middle schools; for math almost six percent below; and, for science eight percent below. The promotion rate increased by 10 percent between 1995-1996 and 1998-1999. But according to Dr. Bender, in the spring of 2000, close to two-thirds of Baker's eighth graders would have been "at risk" of not meeting the District's tougher promotion standard (which included passing all four major subjects, completing a multidisciplinary project, and scoring at Below Basic III or above on the SAT-9) if those standards had been put in place. This discrepancy raises some questions about why the promotion rate increased between 1996 and 1999. Teachers at Baker and other schools reported that they felt strong pressure to pass students who had not met course requirements in order to meet the demands of the PRI.

In 1999-2000 it also remained a question whether Baker's renewal efforts could be sustained and deepened. The principal remained the primary catalyst for school improvement. There was not yet a cadre of teacher leaders who had the expertise to support their colleagues in developing rigorous pedagogy in each of the major subject areas. Parental involvement was virtually non-existent. If Dr. Bender decided to retire in the next year or two (and she was eligible) or if Talent Development could not be sustained due to lack of funding, Baker's progress might easily evaporate.

School Climate

Baker Middle School is an imposing brick structure built in 1922. A ceramic mural features lively depictions of flowers, trees, the sun, moon, and stars and softens an otherwise stark exterior. In the past 30 years, the neighborhood Baker serves changed from middle-class and working-class White families to a more diverse and low-income population of African Americans and Latino and Asian immigrants. In 1998-1999, 90 percent of Baker's approximately 1000 students came from families living in poverty, 7.66 percent were linguistically diverse and participated in the school's ESL program, and 15.83 percent qualified as special education students. More recently, there was another significant change in Baker's student population. According to a school counselor:

> *About 15 percent of our kids are in foster care, and I'm not talking long-term, stable foster care. This is short-term care. The kids have experienced a huge amount of disruption in their lives and it's a constant struggle to reach them.*

There were also changes in Baker's teaching staff. Like other Philadelphia middle schools that serve a large number of students who live in poverty, teacher turnover had reached crisis proportions at Baker. Between 1995-1996 and 1998-1999 about 40 percent of its teaching staff was new to the school; half of these teachers were new to the School District of Philadelphia. Staffing problems included unfilled vacancies, new teachers not making it through the school year, and under-qualified teachers. (For example, in 1999-00, three teacher vacancies were not filled at Baker until February, and two of those newly-appointed teachers left before the end of the year. Four teachers were not certified, and another four were long-term substitutes.)

A strength of Baker's faculty was the way in which staff rallied around beginning teachers. The absence of this kind of support contributed to high teacher

turnover rates seen at many of the city's middle schools. A second-year teacher said, "I've only taught at Baker, but I've heard stories from other places. We get a lot of support here." Dr. Bender held weekly meetings with new teachers. (In 1999-2000 there were 17 new teachers at Baker.) "For the first three months we talked about what they need to know just to survive—how to keep roll books, make a referral." Most new teachers had a very hard first year at Baker, but they made it through, unlike some other middle schools where many left before December. SLC coordinators also provided support to beginning teachers. One new teacher said that her coordinator dropped in on her classroom several times a week to see how things were going and that his presence "sends a message to kids." Although another second-year teacher did not find the District's formal mentoring program helpful, she added:

> *There are other supports. The vice principal has formally observed me three or four times in the last two years. But she came into my class much more than that. She gave me feedback that was helpful. And she had gone over the observation form with me before she came so that I'd know the kind of things she would be looking for.*

Inside Baker's front doors, student work festoons the imposing marble hallway. Colorful posters, photographs of sports teams, and lists of students who made the Golden Attitude Club and the Honor Roll decorate the central hallway. An eight-foot banner stretches across the stairwell and displays the entire text of a Baker student's winning essay in the Mayor's African American Month Essay Contest. The hallway provides one indication of the school's commitment to building a learning environment that supports students and recognizes their achievements. The Golden Attitude Club, which three years ago had only a few students recommended by their teachers for responsible behavior, boasted more than 100 students in 1999-2000.

Flags representing the homelands of Baker students hang from ceilings on the second floor hallway. Banners mark entrances to each of the school's three small learning communities, sometimes using the new small learning community names—Business, Humanities, Health—sometimes referring to them by their old names—Red House, Gold House, Blue House.

In 1999-2000, adults were a visible presence at Baker, evidence of leadership's attention to creating an environment conducive to teaching and learning and to the recruitment of volunteers from community agencies, local universities, and businesses. A non-teaching assistant with a walkie-talkie sat at the front door with a sign-in sheet for visitors; small learning community coordinators in hallways talked to students and delivered supplies to classroom teachers; social workers from a nearby hospital led a support group for asthmatic children in the library; student teachers and interns assisted in classrooms; volunteer tutors worked one-on-one with students. A secretary immediately and warmly greeted visitors when they entered the office.

Adults were vigilant at Baker. Teachers routinely stood outside their classrooms during class changes. Non-teaching assistants kept their ears open for potential trouble. To maintain calm in the cafeteria, students were gathered in the auditorium for 15 minutes prior to going to lunch to participate in discussion groups. But bad things happened at Baker as they do in schools across the country. In 1997, a student was murdered walking home from school; in spring 2000, a special education student was pushed down a stairwell and

injured. A few weeks later, a random weapons search conducted by Philadelphia police turned up a seventh grade girl with a razor in her pocket. Students explained why the girl had the weapon, "She quiet. She keep to herself. There been trouble around her way. That's why she had that blade."

In the face of students with many needs, a second-year teacher said optimistically, "Our kids need a lot. But I feel there are many things in place here that can give them the support they need." However, there is little optimism when teachers contemplate what awaits their students when they graduate from Baker. The neighborhood high school, Underwood, has a dismal reputation. One teacher lamented:

> *It [the neighborhood high school] is a pit. And it's not exactly a motivator to know that, despite your best efforts to get students to achieve, they'll end up there and basically lose whatever ground they gained here.*

A cluster staff member said that she believed that Underwood subverts Baker teachers' belief that they could make a difference in their students' lives. She argued that there must be improvement in the whole feeder pattern of schools if the progress that Baker has made was going to make a difference for the students it serves. In focus group interviews, students said that they were doing whatever they could to avoid Underwood. Some had applied to as many as 10 of the District's special admission schools or programs in the hope of having at least one other option open to them. They also said that they and their parents were investigating charter schools as possibilities. In addition, Dr. Bender and a group of concerned parents were hoping to set up a ninth grade at Baker for the following year "so that the good kids who don't get in special admissions schools can stay here and not go to [the neighborhood high school]."

Instructional Priorities

In 1999-2000,Baker's instructional priorities reflected staff's commitment to a well-rounded educational program for young adolescents and concern for meeting the demands of the School District's accountability system. These priorities included:

- **Implementation of Talent Development, a whole-school reform model developed by Johns Hopkins University**. In 1997 Baker adopted Talent Development, a whole school reform model developed by Johns Hopkins University. The model included a core curriculum in the major subject areas, intensive support for students in need of remediation in language arts and math, and opportunities for students to explore career possibilities. Talent Development also provided "coaches" who offered workshops and in-classroom support to teachers to help them become adept at using the core curriculum.

- **Instructional practices that were developmentally appropriate for middle school youngsters, including small learning communities and interdisciplinary curriculum**. Baker's three small learning communities—Health, Business, and Humanities—provided students with opportunities to explore career pathways in depth. They were designed to reduce isolation and strengthen student/teacher relationships. Thematic curriculum encouraged students to make connections among the various

disciplines and between school and their communities. At Baker, SLCs developed and implemented thematic curriculum related to the SLC's focus. Individual teachers and teaching teams also used multidisciplinary projects as a way to tap into the interests of their students and offer them more opportunities for active engagement in their learning.

- **Enhanced test preparation. Teachers used published materials to help students develop their test taking skills**. Students were scheduled for test preparation several times a week in the months preceding the SAT-9. Some teachers were also increasingly integrating test-taking skills into their regular curriculum.

- **An emphasis on technological literacy to prepare students for the 21st Century**. In Spring 2000, the school embarked upon a new technology initiative. Dr. Bender saw the integration of technology into classrooms as the impetus that would tip the instructional balance to a more student-centered pedagogy in which teachers would be facilitators and guides to learning and students would be active constructors of knowledge.

Talent Development and a Core Curriculum

Dr. Bender first learned about Talent Development when she worked in a cluster office and was investigating improvement programs for high schools. She discussed why she thought Talent Development was a good match for Baker:

> *This is a veteran staff with a lot of strong teachers. But when we looked at test scores they were completely flat. My analysis was that teachers needed a shot in the arm. I decided that the best way to give them that was to bring Talent Development in here. Talent Development is our core.*

An SLC Coordinator explained that 95 percent of the faculty at Baker had voted to accept the whole school reform model because "Dr. B convinced us that we needed something that was research-based and Johns Hopkins has credibility." Dr. Bender believed that the District's new accountability system gave her recommendation to adopt Talent Development additional leverage with teachers. Worried that their school would again fail to make sufficient progress on the Performance Responsibility Index, teachers were more open to trying new programs. (In fact, when the School Support Team came to Baker to review its programs and offer recommendations for improvement, it praised Talent Development. The team's report reinforced to teachers the importance of staying on course with the program in order to increase student achievement and overcome the stigma of "low progress.") Another incentive for teachers to adopt the model was that they could earn in-service credits from St. Joseph's University when they attended Talent Development professional development sessions.

Talent Development's core curriculum filled a gap that many believed was missing in the District's reform plan. Children Achieving provided schools with content standards and eventually the Curriculum Frameworks which offered examples of lessons and units of study that were congruent with the standards. It did not, however, provide a curriculum scope and sequence, and instead, left the development of curriculum to the discretion of schools and small learning communities. Dr. Bender, like many of her principal colleagues, saw this as a critical weakness of Children Achieving. She

looked to Talent Development to fill the void.

Of the 13 teachers interviewed during the research for this case study, the majority expressed enthusiasm for the Talent Development curriculum. However, two Reading/English/Language Arts teachers pointed to a weakness with which the others agreed. They said that while they thought the literature was appropriate for their students, the Talent Development activities were not rich and varied enough to fully engage students. Dr. Bender shared these teachers' concern. She believed that early adolescents need more opportunities for active engagement in learning and she worried that the lockstep of Talent Development assignments in the literature strand did not foster a love for reading. One Baker teacher worked with an outside consultant to develop a series of "activity cards" that teachers could use with students to supplement the Talent Development language arts lessons.

We observed teachers implementing the Talent Development curriculum in two Reading/Language Arts classrooms. In each case, students were doing a set of assignments (vocabulary words, comprehension questions, open-ended writing assignments) related to a novel that the whole class was reading. Mrs. L., an eighth grade Reading/English/Language Arts teacher said that she appreciated the literature that the Talent Development curriculum provided and the in-class support she had received from the TD staff. In the class described below, Ms. L., an African American teacher, followed the lesson format provided by Talent Development closely. However, she also used her knowledge of her students—their families and their cultural backgrounds— to bridge the cultural distance between her students and the book's heroine, a White suburban teenager.

From a researcher's field notes, Spring 2000:

> *Ms. L reads aloud to her eighth graders from Madeleine L'Engle's A Wrinkle in Time. She stops occasionally to ask the class reading comprehension questions from the worksheet provided by Talent Development: Why does Meg get in trouble in school? What do people think about Meg's father's absence?*
>
> *She also inserts her own questions into the mix. These questions engage students in thinking about their own lives and stimulate a more lively discussion than those recommended by Talent Development: When you come home from school, what do you say to your mom? One girl says she talks to her mom about her day and that she calls her mom "Gorgeous" and her mom calls her "Sunshine." When a boy says, "I just say 'hey' and go up to my room," Ms. L chides him: "You mean you don't say, 'You're a beautiful woman and I love you'?" The class talks about saying positive things to their mothers and fathers; some students share negative feelings about a parent. It is clear that they trust Ms. L. and their classmates enough to share their feelings.*
>
> *Ms. L then sets up the writing assignment, "Adventures in Writing," suggested by Talent Development. She tells students to imagine themselves as Meg, the main character of the book. (Meg has lashed out at her school principal when he expressed concern about her family situation.) Ms. L. tells students that they are to put themselves in Meg's position and to write the principal and apologize for being rude.*

Students spend 15 minutes on this, and then some read their letters aloud. K's letter explains to the principal that she was feeling upset about things that were going on in her family. She tells him that he should not have pried into K's personal life and raised the subject of K's father. K asserts that the principal owes her an apology as well. Several of the letters are in this vein. Ms. L collects the letters and tells students that she will select some of them to be typed up for the anthology of work the class is producing.

Ms. L. then asks for students to pass in their vocabulary homework and when many say they didn't do it, she gives them time to finish putting the words in sentences. The boy next to me writes: Martin Luther King got his point across in ***serenely*** *ways. When I get mad, I get* ***exclusive*** *of others.*

There were several positive aspects to this lesson. It engaged students in a discussion of age-appropriate literature; it offered the opportunity for open-ended writing (the kind of writing task that the District's standardized test, the SAT-9 used). There were multiple activities during the class period and the teacher easily moved students through the tasks. The lesson was coherent and students were clearly familiar with the kinds of activities that occurred. Ms. L, an experienced teacher, used her knowledge of students and her ability to relate to their lives to enliven the discussion.

Students understood the writing assignment and were able to put themselves in Meg's position. Some of the students wrote spirited and cogent letters. However, most students had not done their homework assignment, a common occurrence in this class and others we observed. Additionally, most students rushed through the vocabulary assignment with an attitude of "just getting it done" and, as a result, used many of the words incorrectly. It was unclear if Ms. L would have time to follow up with students' errors or if she had other strategies for expanding students' vocabulary.

Although some Baker science teachers said that the science curriculum was the least well developed of the subject areas, others were enthusiastic about the support they received from Talent Development staff. One teacher described how the Talent Development trainers were catalysts for the kind of detailed curriculum coordination that was missing in the District's content standards and Curriculum Frameworks and:

Two trainers came in and we pulled out the standards and tailored a curriculum to fit with standards. It's a well-organized curriculum that incorporated the science kits I have available. There are some concepts in science that I'm not familiar with. Johns Hopkins has helped with that.

Cohen and Ball argue that such coordination is critical to improving student achievement.[2] Additionally, this teacher judged that Talent Development's professional development activities and in-classroom coaching had boosted her knowledge of the field.

Baker math teachers used "Everyday Mathematics," a curriculum developed at the University of Chicago and endorsed by Talent Development and the District's Urban Systemic Initiative, a national program to improve education and general scientific and mathematical literacy. Students who were not doing well in math received extra support through Talent

[2] Cohen, D.K., Ball, D.L. (1999). *Instruction, capacity and improvement*. CPRE Research Report Series RR-43. Philadelphia: Consortium for Policy Research in Education.

Development's computer-based instructional program. These students went to a computer lab and worked on math problems.

One teacher who was responsible for a classroom of students with special needs reported that Talent Development was vital to what she did in her classroom. She said that the Everyday Math curriculum "is fabulous for my kids. It's a hands-on curriculum and I use overheads to keep the kids' attention." This teacher attended the monthly Saturday sessions sponsored by Talent Development and noted that the facilitator for the program visited her room regularly to see how things were going.

In summary, Talent Development provided a specificity in curriculum that was lacking in the District's content standards and Curriculum Frameworks, and Talent Development staff offered leadership and expertise to the important work of coordinating curriculum within and across grade levels and enhancing teachers' pedagogical skills and their subject area knowledge.

Small Learning Communities

Small learning communities (SLCs), a central feature of *Children Achieving*, were intended to improve the conditions of teaching and learning by strengthening relations between teachers and students. They were also to be the primary vehicle for improving instruction as SLC teachers developed an educational program that was customized for their students and organized curriculum and instruction around an SLC theme (e.g., Communication, African American Heritage, Business, the Humanities). SLCs were sub-units of schools, and typically included 400 or fewer students across several grade levels as well as the teachers responsible for their instruction. Baker, like most of Philadelphia's middle schools, had experimented with a similar strategy, "the house structure," prior to Children Achieving, but its houses had included only one grade, rather than the vertical grade organization mandated by Children Achieving. Another difference was that Baker's houses had not had a thematic focus.

In 1998-1999, Baker established four small learning communities. Most House staff remained intact in the new SLC organization and House Directors became SLC Coordinators. (One SLC, in an annex, was closed in 1999-00. The three remaining SLCs were: Health, Entrepreneurship, and Humanities.) Baker, unlike some other middle schools, was successful at putting in place the basic building blocks for SLCs. Each had its own space in the building and each had a designated time when all SLC teachers came together during the school day to meet. (In many Philadelphia middle schools teachers had to use their preparation period to meet as an SLC. This often caused resentment among teachers who did not want to give up their individual prep time to meet as an SLC. At Baker, the principal and roster person were able to arrange the schedule so that teachers had planning time with their SLCs as well as all of their regular prep periods.) Additionally, at Baker, SLC coordinators had very limited teaching responsibilities which freed them to devote most of their time to their coordinator duties.

Small learning communities made sense to Baker faculty, who described students as lacking a stable, supportive situation outside of school. Teachers emphasized the importance of creating a sense of belonging for young adolescents. One teacher commented, "our SLCs give kids a sense of family and belonging at an age when they really need it." Others said,

> *Our students need to be in a smaller setting. They need that family feeling. You can already see a difference in*

what small learning communities are doing for kids. They're taking the edge off. This SLC is like a family. These are my children away from home. Students feel secure; they know who their teachers will be from one year to the next…These are kids; they act out. They need us to be sympathetic and firm.

Another reason that teachers were enthusiastic about SLCs was that they saw them as having a positive impact on student discipline. One SLC coordinator explained the relationship between SLCs and improved discipline in the school: "Kids and teachers want to be loyal to our SLC. This means that the kids want to behave, and the teachers don't want to jump to punishment without some steps." Teachers also reported that SLCs encouraged collaboration among faculty about how to handle difficult discipline issues. For example, one teacher explained her perspective on why SLCs had been such a positive innovation, "If I'm having a problem with a kid, I can send him to another teacher for a while. And I'll do the same for other teachers in the SLC. This is a big benefit to the SLC." Another teacher said, "We share a common philosophy about discipline that's helpful, especially for the newer teachers who often have a lot of problems with classroom management when they start out."

At Baker, small learning communities were not the only strategy for strengthening relationships between teachers and students. "Family groups," composed of 10-15 students and an adult staff member, met once a week for an hour during the school day. Family group members shared a snack together, played games, and had discussions. These meetings provided an opportunity for adults and students to interact in an informal setting. An SLC coordinator explained that he believed that the mentoring that went on in family groups was "especially important for this age group of kids because they are looking around and seeing a lot of possibilities for trouble. Family group is a place where we [adults] can try to stop that trouble before it ever happens."
In summary, Baker teachers saw SLCs as a win-win school reform, good for students and good for teachers. They were committed to small learning communities because they accepted the concept that "smaller is better." They believed that SLCs created a personalized, "family" atmosphere for their students, many of whom lived in harsh circumstances. Teachers also wanted to send consistent messages about appropriate behavior to their students and they saw SLCs as helping to get teachers and students on the same page about discipline.

Project-based Learning

Dr. Bender believed that while Talent Development provided Baker with its educational "core," it was "not the answer to everything." Steeped in the literature on the needs, interests, and intellectual development of early adolescents, she worried that Talent Development's curriculum provided too few opportunities for students to engage in active learning and used technology in unsophisticated ways, primarily to remediate kids in reading or math. Her thoughts were echoed in the comments of an SLC coordinator who said "our kids need the chance to do exciting things." A number of Baker teachers visited a Pittsburgh high school where, according to one teacher, they saw "kids doing videography, building motherboards, and other cool stuff. We realized there are ways to get kids engaged in projects."
This group and the Baker leadership team returned from that trip committed to establishing "project day" during which a teacher would work with a group of students on a long-term project. They realized that this would be a radical

departure for many teachers who "did not know how to plan and develop a learning project themselves, much less help a whole class of students do it." Talent Development consultants worried that this new effort would overwhelm teachers and distract them from learning how to use the Talent Development curriculum. Despite these risks, in 1998-1999, Baker instituted a "project day" on every sixth day. But several months into the school year, teachers said that they and their students were drowning in all that was being asked of them. The school revised its schedule to make project day once a month.

In the meantime, the District had begun promoting two initiatives, "project-based learning" as well as "service learning projects" that were based on pedagogical principles similar to Baker's "project day." All three aimed to make students assume a more active role in their learning and to ask and answer their own questions; all three addressed the District's cross-cutting competencies— multicultural understanding, communications skills and service to the community—outlined in its content standards; and, all three emphasized drawing on various disciplinary perspectives and community resources in the service of solving "real world" problems. Staff in the Office for Employment and Education were trained to offer professional development and other support to school staff interested in developing a project-based learning approach.

Projects at Baker varied tremendously in their intellectual richness, their organization, and the quality of work produced by students. Below are descriptions of three projects developed and implemented at Baker during 1998-1999.

- Ms. T, a teacher in the Health SLC, planned a project that related to the SLC's theme of social, emotional, and physical wellness. Her students watched the film " The Burning Bed" with Farrah Fawcett, the story of a woman who murdered her husband after years of physical abuse. The class discussed the movie and read some booklets about domestic abuse. And then the students made posters about domestic abuse. This project was similar to many we observed in our research. The topic was linked to the SLC's theme; the topic was socially relevant; a film (In many other cases it was a field trip or an assembly) served as the stimulus for a group activity; there was little or no independent research by students and exploration of the issue was thin; opportunities to develop reading and writing skills were limited.

- Ms. W's class of special needs students in the Health SLC completed a project related to a unit that they did on nutrition. After studying the major food groups, the class constructed a food pyramid made of tin cans. This project was the culmination of an extended unit of study. It offered students with learning differences an avenue that drew on the kinesthetic for experiencing the concepts and information they had encountered in the nutrition unit.

- Ms. G worked with the Philadelphia Museum of Art to develop an Asian Arts project, "Inner Visions." Over the course of the school year, students did several paper and book-making projects and studied how these crafts developed in the Orient. The students' efforts decorated the room, transforming it from a drab and deteriorating space to one that was lively and inviting. The project offered

students an entry into a rich cultural resource, the Philadelphia Art Museum. It tied the arts, literacy, and history together into a unit of study that was enriching and fun. In 1999-2000, Ms. G. explained why she did not repeat the paper and book making project: "There were so many other new things going on in the school and I just didn't have the energy." But she also said that the unit had been a highlight of her year and that she was currently planning a new unit, "cultural relations in the neighborhood," for the next year.

In 1999-2000, as part of the School District's new, more rigorous promotion requirements, eighth grade students were required not only to pass all of their major subjects, but to complete a multi-disciplinary learning project involving writing and research. At Baker, teachers were better prepared to undertake this requirement than at most other middle schools in the District. Below are descriptions of quite different approaches to projects undertaken by two Baker faculty members, both judged by their principal to be excellent teachers. Their students' reactions to instructional projects are also discussed.

In Ms. Foster's eighth grade class, students developed exhibits for the annual health fair held by their small learning community (SLC). The teachers in the Health SLC chose to have students' work on the Health Fair fulfill the new requirement for graduation from eighth grade. Each student identified a topic—such as AIDS, peer pressure, the cardiovascular system—and then worked independently, in pairs, or groups to prepare their exhibits. They developed questions such as "Where did AIDS come from?" "What is peer pressure?" "What do teens need to know about hygiene?" to guide their research.

Ms. Foster had not experimented with projects in the past. She described herself as a "fairly traditional" teacher who appreciated new ideas. In the summer of 1999 she attended a week-long professional development institute sponsored by her cluster as part of a grant from IBM. The goal of the institute was to help teachers integrate technology into their classrooms. At the institute, teachers worked in groups on a research project of their own design. Ms. Foster said that this institute was invaluable to her in thinking about how to work with her students on their projects. There she learned how to go through a whole project from beginning to end.

Ms. Foster encouraged students to conduct research on the internet, although this was not easy, because there was no internet hook-up in her classroom. (There was one computer and printer.) She also suggested that they identify community agencies and businesses that might provide them with information and resources that they could use in their presentation. For example, Angela, who worked on peer pressure, interviewed a community mental health professional who worked at the school. But some other students' efforts to connect their topics and research to the real world were of questionable educational value: two girls working on hygiene went to Rite-Aid and copied pharmaceutical company addresses from products so that they could write for information and sample products; another student spent a class period looking for community AIDS organizations in the phone book. Not surprisingly, students' products varied widely. One girl made a "comic book" in which she described different exercises and how they affected the cardiovascular system. One boy wrote a report on which performing artists had contracted AIDS.

A panel of SLC teachers assessed each student's presentation and students said

that this contributed to the sense of importance of their work. Almost all of the students we interviewed were eager to show us their projects and the real world usefulness seemed important to them. For example, Jamal was clearly excited about what he would share with others at the Health Fair:

> *So, I wrote like two pages about STD and AIDS but I got a lot more to write. And when I get done my writing, I'm gonna make a brochure about AIDS, um and I'm a pass'em out at the health fair.*

Students were also appreciative of the guidance they had received in developing their projects. Kiesha said:

> *We also have 'Reflections' which tells what you did so far. So like I have Step 1 and Step 2 and Step 3 and Step 4 [to complete the whole project] and so far I did Step 1 and 2. It's helpful because when I was working with other people in my group all the different things people was doing kept getting confused.*

But such structures and coaching were not always applied in ways that helped students develop deeper conceptual understanding of subject matter. For example, some of the essential questions students developed for their health fair projects did not lend themselves to rich intellectual exploration. Additionally, in this first year of the requirement, the assessment of a project's quality focused on form, not content.

> *We're going to be graded on creativity, appearance, the way you present yourself, the way you present your project, the ways it's set up. Stuff like that. So, basically, you just going to be graded on what you should already know.*

Health SLC teachers had not yet developed strategies for communicating expectations about the quality of a project's content.

In contrast, to Ms. Foster who was inexperienced in the use of projects, Ms. Wald's classroom curriculum was almost entirely project-based. For example, students were simultaneously producing the art and text for an "Alphabet Book" as part of their study of the Harlem Renaissance and conducting an inventory of neighborhood buildings. In the former project, each student was responsible for one letter of the alphabet. The production of this drawing actually involved several steps. Students imitated the style of several Harlem Renaissance artists and then chose a style for drawing their letter. Then, students chose a word that began with the letter they were responsible for and which was related to the civil rights movement (e.g., B is for "Bus Boycott"). They used that word in the illustration of their letter. When all the illustrations were complete, they were bound and published in a book.

An urban landscape architect and a School District employee whose job it was to promote community involvement in schools collaborated on a second project in Ms. Wald's class. Students toured the neighborhood around the school, noting which buildings were residences, businesses, or abandoned. They entered data from this neighborhood inventory in a spreadsheet and mapped them. They analyzed the data and prepared PowerPoint presentations for the mayor and other community leaders on their findings.

Ms. Wald's students felt empowered by learning experiences that offered them a chance to have their voices heard in the community. Diona told us:

> *I learned that mostly it's the people that are in charge that have more say in the government because they're*

the ones that step out and do something about how they feel and sometimes when somebody doesn't agree with their opinion, well instead of just, you know, just talking, they should at least do something to change, to change the other person's opinion [thumping the desk for emphasis]. So that they can make an opinion too.

Mary, another Baker student, agreed with Diona:

And if we, if we do show up at meetings and things, and tell them and tell the mayor what we need to do in our communities, we can get it fixed. It's not going to be done in a month or the same day that you say it's going to be done, but it will be done.

But students were also puzzled by Ms. Wald's teaching. In this exchange, Yung and Robin's sentences described their classroom:

Robin: Ms. Wald, she is, she's unorganized 'cuz one moment she gives us a project to do and then in the next moment like…

Yung: She gives us another one.

Robin: A month or a week, next week, she gives us a different project and then she forgets about the project she assigned before.

Yung: She cancelled it.

Robin: And then she just doesn't get, like, what she's supposed to do straight, so, it's kind of fun because she does give a lot of reports…it's fun when you do a lot of reports, especially with a group or something.

Still, Ms. Wald seemed to be able to provide the support necessary for students to take on and complete challenging, comprehensive projects. Her success seemed to stem from her emphasis on continuous revision. As Shakira explained:

[The teacher] will not let you go away if the paper is not perfect. She gave me an A on my paper, but she said she wanted me to write more, make it better. I was like I got an A already. Ain't nothing past an A.

Later, when she was asked whether the continual revisions required by her teacher helped her learn about writing, Shakira responded:

I learned about it, and I'm learning. Well, it's a gift… Sometimes I think of it as a gift.

Test Preparation

The District's new accountability system was a catalyst for increased attention to the measures of improvement included in the Performance Responsibility Index, including SAT-9 test scores, promotion rates, and student and staff attendance. After Baker was identified as a low progress school because of its declining PRI score, the school intensified its efforts to increase SAT-9 performance. For example, Dr. Bender made staff assignments with the test in mind, putting the strongest teachers in the tested grades and subjects. The school also revised how it organized teaching teams. Previously, the most common team was two teachers, each of whom taught two major subjects. (For example, one teacher might teach Reading/English/Language Arts and Science and the other Math and Social Studies.) An advantage of small teams was that teachers spent more time with a smaller number of students and could therefore build closer relationships with those students. But a disadvantage was

that often teachers were teaching in a subject area in which they might not have strong expertise and confidence. Dr. Bender reflected on the teaming structure:

> *We've had to re-think teams. It began to make more sense to move to four-person teams so that my best math and science teachers would only be teaching math and science. Teachers who aren't comfortable with those subjects don't teach them. Even so, we have math teachers who don't know the content they're supposed to be teaching.*

The school leadership team identified all students scoring at Below Basic III and targeted them for extra support in the hope that they would score at the Basic level. Seventh and eighth grade students received several periods of test preparation each week in the months before the test. These classes were based on workbooks produced by test publishers.

Classroom teachers were also encouraged to incorporate assignments and tasks that were similar to items on the SAT-9 in their daily instruction. The principal, in collaboration with cluster Teaching and Learning Network staff, organized an elaborate system of professional development on how to integrate test-taking skills into regular classroom instruction. Teaching and Learning Network staff taught demonstration lessons to a class while the teacher observed. The teacher then planned and taught a lesson and either a school administrator or a Teaching and Learning Network staff member observed and gave feedback.

In summary, Baker Middle School pursued an ambitious agenda for improvement: adoption of a whole-school reform model, a new curriculum in all the major subject areas, the creation of small learning communities and family groups, project-based learning, and extensive preparation for the SAT-9 test. One 25-year veteran teacher explained, "This is the first time it feels like we have a real blueprint for improvement." Dr. Bender believed that all of these initiatives were essential to ensuring that students would learn more and their performance would improve on the District's achievement measures because she saw that students' intellectual, emotional, and social needs as interrelated. If one aspect of the overall program was ignored, it jeopardized students' progress.

Most teachers reported that the direction for the school improvement was clear but they were also overwhelmed by the sheer number of changes they had to undertake and the complexity of things they were being asked to do. One teacher who had been encouraged by Dr. Bender to undertake a major service learning project with her students that involved working with several different community agencies said:

> *I'm tired and the kids are tired. Sometimes I get confused by all the things going on in our classroom at once and the kids get confused. We had the SAT-9 last week, the students' projects are due this week, and one group of students is meeting with the mayor tonight [as part of a service learning project]. It's too many balls in the air at once.*

Leadership

Administrative Leadership

Dr. Bender, a White woman in her 50s, brought a broad and deep knowledge of the interests and needs of early adolescents, middle school organization, and curriculum and instruction to her assignment as principal at Baker. She was well versed in what works in the classroom,

having spent a portion of her career coaching teachers. Dr. Bender had worked in the School District of Philadelphia for more than 25 years as a teacher, vice principal, and cluster administrator before she came to Baker. She transformed Baker from a chaotic school into one with momentum for positive change by: 1) establishing an orderly learning environment, 2) building an effective leadership team and encouraging staff to grow professionally, 3) using her knowledge to establish clear and widely shared instructional priorities, and 4) mobilizing resources for school improvement efforts through grant writing and partnerships.

Establishing an Orderly Learning Environment

Upon her arrival, Dr. Bender immediately went to work on establishing a school environment that would be conducive to teaching and learning. She began by focusing on Baker's non-teaching assistants and making them a strong team for dealing with noisy hallways. She put in place recognition programs for students with exemplary behavior and she tackled the cafeteria, which had had a chaotic atmosphere for as long as anyone could remember. School staff created Instructional Forum, a meeting where students talked about subjects that were on their minds for 15 minutes before they went into the lunchroom. Members of the leadership team reported that Instructional Forum offered a transition for students and served to focus them and remind them of appropriate lunchroom behavior. But Baker's central strategy for improving the climate for teaching and learning was the establishment of small learning communities which went into place in 1998-1999. Each SLC had a coordinator who was largely responsible for discipline. (The role of SLCs vis a vis student discipline will be discussed in more depth later.) When Baker was identified as a low progress school, Dr. Bender pushed to secure any additional resources available. An additional vice principal was allotted Baker and this extra administrator made a huge difference in how the school ran.

Developing School Leadership

Early on, Dr. Bender began sharing her knowledge of middle schools and middle school students with her staff by distributing articles, sending people to conferences, and talking one on one to staff. But, by her account, she did not rush to turn the school upside down, explaining, "I learned that you need to understand the culture of a school before you go in and try to improve it."

Dr. Bender looked for opportunities to showcase her school and her staff. She said, "I want to get them accolades for how good they are. And I want to get support for the neophytes." For example, at a conference for middle school principals, she arranged for two of her SLC Coordinators to be presenters in small group workshops. Teachers reported that she was always "encouraging us to go to this or that conference."

Describing herself as a "leader of leaders," Dr. Bender took the development of her leadership team seriously. She was careful in her selection of team members, invested in their learning, and met with her leadership team weekly. She adopted good meeting practices for leadership team meetings: providing an agenda, presenting notes from the preceding meeting. Discussions of journal articles became part of the routine, as did assessments of how new initiatives were working. For example, at one meeting the leadership team systematically reviewed the recent implementation of small learning

communities. Discussion revolved around the pre-planned questions: "What are we doing? Why are we doing it? What is, or is not working? Where are we headed? Where do we need to go?" Eventually, Dr. Bender relegated planning and facilitation of the leadership team meetings to members of the group. As her leadership team began to gel, she encouraged them to take action on some of the things they were reading and talking about.

Ironically, Dr. Bender did not think she received the same kind of support from her cluster leader and the larger district. She didn't mince words when she shared her views on the "forgotten role of the principal" in Philadelphia reform:

> *The District doesn't recognize the importance of the principal. They've turned their back on us. They're putting people in buildings with no support. There are all these new principals out there who don't have a leg to stand on. There's been a revolving door in our cluster office, no staff continuity and so their ability to be supportive is limited.*

She explained that while she liked all of the cluster leaders under whom she had worked, she questioned how the District expected cluster leaders to be instructional leaders and to work closely with principals when the central office made so many demands on their time. She said that she had had very little contact with her cluster leaders outside of the bi-monthly meetings she attended at the cluster office.

Some Baker staff described their principal as a "no-nonsense leader." Others saw her as unnecessarily "stern" with a tendency to lose her temper. Almost all respected her knowledge as a middle school educator. One cluster staff member put it this way: "Dr. B. has been wise in her selection of people around her. She has extremely good people. She chose a vice principal who is a very warm person and a complement to her own gruff exterior."

Communicating Instructional Priorities

Despite the many distractions of an urban school, Dr. Bender kept her finger on the pulse of what was going on in classrooms. She covered classrooms regularly for teachers who needed to attend meetings or professional development sessions, and she attended weekend professional development sessions with her staff. One week, Dr. Bender recalled giving a writing assignment to every student at Baker:

> *A different one for each grade. I sprang it on them. And I collected all the writing and I took it home and I read it. It's a pretty good barometer on which teachers are doing a good job in the classroom.*

Unlike some schools where principals do not make it into classrooms for formal observations until the spring and their feedback to teachers is cursory at best, teachers at Baker reported that administrators were clear about what they expected to see in a lesson and conscientious about feedback conferences after the observation. One Reading/English/Language Arts teacher described how Dr. Bender had influenced her teaching practice:

> *She's observed me three times this year and has been clear about what she expects. She wants me to be child-centered, to reflect on the lesson with the children, have objectives on the board [that relate to the District's new content standards] and be sure that kids know what they're doing. And she wants me to use hands-on activities and*

> *cooperative learning as much as possible.*
>
> *She has also said she wants us all to do more writing and so now I do a weekly writing process with my students. On Monday we brainstorm; on Tuesday they do a first draft; on Wednesday they edit for a particular focus and so on. I've also gotten their parents involved by having the kids read their writing to them for homework.*

Based on her observations of teachers, Dr. Bender made suggestions to teachers about articles they should read and professional development sessions that they should attend. She also spoke with the Talent Development coaches about what she had observed and what they could do to support individual teachers. All of these actions contributed to an environment where the quality of instruction was clearly a priority.

Mobilizing Resources for School Improvement

Dr. Bender was very successful at bringing resources to the school. Teachers expressed gratitude and admiration for her ability to get them additional materials for worthwhile projects they might not otherwise be able to do. (One big morale booster was exercise equipment donated for staff use by a local exercise franchise.) The school was involved in many partnerships. Community agency staff, Talent Development staff, and other school outsiders praised the principal for easing the way to effective collaboration. One TD staff person said:

> *If anything is going on in the District, I hear about it from Dr. B. She goes out of her way to keep me informed. There's some interesting bit of information in my box every time I come to the school. In so many instances, when outsiders come into urban schools to work with teachers or kids, the schedule has fallen apart or there's not a room, or there's no coverage for a teacher's classroom. This rarely happens at Baker because Dr. B. and her staff stay on top of such things. The school runs like a clock.*

Cluster staff provided staff development for teachers on the SAT-9 and they held information sessions for small learning community coordinators. In addition, the cluster had an IBM technology grant which focused on the integration of technology with classroom curriculum projects. A cluster-based staff member helped to plan activities around that grant.

Small Learning Community Coordinators

Strong SLC coordinators were a big part of the reason that Baker ran smoothly. They described their coordinator role similarly: "to make sure that teachers have a good environment for teaching." Two of the three coordinators had been House Directors and Expressive Arts teachers and were known for their ability to work with kids. They were assured in their approach to taking charge of discipline, which at Baker involved spending a lot of time talking to kids and their parents.
SLC coordinators also organized SLC activities and helped teachers plan trips and order supplies. But most of all they were conduits for information. They kept Dr. Bender informed of what was going on with their students and their teachers, what problems were brewing, and what problems had been solved. They kept teachers informed about what Dr. Bender was thinking, what initiatives the cluster office was pushing, and what Talent

Development coaches would be doing when they visited the school.

One SLC coordinator took a leadership role in the development of her SLC's theme and in giving teachers support around the theme. But the other Coordinators were much less involved in instructional leadership, even though the intention of Children Achieving was that SLCs would be the primary vehicle for ensuring strong curriculum and instruction.

Sustaining Change at Baker Middle School: Broadening the Leadership Base, Avoiding Reform Overload

Clearly, much was accomplished at Baker during Children Achieving. A strong leadership team was highly capable of managing the complicated daily routines and the frequent crises of an urban middle school. There were basic supports to help teachers engage with the long-term hard work of instructional improvement: opportunities for teachers to participate in content-based professional development, work collaboratively with other teachers, observe demonstration lessons by Talent Development coaches and Teaching and Learning Network staff, and receive coaching in their own classrooms.

There were also key supports for students. Baker staff was committed to attending to both the core academic needs of their students as well as their social-emotional well-being. They were pursuing improvement strategies aimed at strengthening the major subject areas and offering students opportunities for real world connections and active learning. Students who needed remediation received it, all students had the opportunity for close relationships with adults in small learning communities and family groups, and all students were involved in some type of independent learning project.

While the primary impetus for change came from within the school via the principal and her leadership team, the District's professional accountability system and adoption of the whole-school reform model, Talent Development, with its own external supports, were also important factors in the direction and intensity of change.

With all this said, on any given day at Baker, improvement felt sturdy at one moment, fragile at another. A number of people interviewed for this study worried about Baker's future if the principal left. As one teacher explained, "We're doing OK now, but I worry about what happens when this principal leaves. It could all go up in smoke."

The next stage of improvement at Baker may be the hardest. Instructional leadership at the school remained thin, especially in math and science. Although Baker exceeded its performance targets for 1998, the principal expressed concern about continued progress in math and science. (Despite some improvement, math scores remained abysmal.) Dr. Bender worried that these math teachers don't have the mathematics background necessary to teach pre-Algebra and Algebra and to do sophisticated problem-solving with students. Creating a strong science team was also a problem. Dr. Bender recruited several secondary-certified science teachers who transferred to high schools because they found many school youngsters difficult.

Clearly, one remaining challenge for Baker is the nurturing of teachers who are passionate about their teaching, their students, and their school, and who have the skills and inclination to risk becoming instructional leaders. This next layer of in-

school leadership is essential to deepening the curriculum and instructional improvements that were under way.

In light of the literature on the importance of parents in the school change process, it was also questionable if improvements at Baker could go to the next level without a substantial increase in parental involvement. Although not discussed in this case study, parents were noticeably absent in the reform discourse at the school. The principal acknowledged that this was an issue, but had no concrete plans to bring parents into the improvement process. There was not a Local School Council and the Home and School Association was defunct. Potentially, parent leaders could be advocates for the school in securing scarce resources, they could support their children's academic work, and they could sensitize teachers to students' home and neighborhood contexts. Tapping into parents as resources requires a sizeable investment of time and energy, but the pay-off could be significant for Baker's students.

Finally, in the words of an outside facilitator who knew Baker well, the school, particularly the principal, "will have to resist the temptation to overload teachers." She argued that although the recent technology push was tempting because there was money for it, there was the danger that it would derail improvement efforts already under way: "Can the teachers handle something else that will require intensive preparation? Teachers need to go deeper with changes in their classrooms. They need to learn about open-ended questioning and extending lessons so that kids have more opportunities to learn concepts." Many reform efforts, including Children Achieving, have been undermined because policymakers were not sensitive to how much they were asking of teachers. It remained to be seen whether this would happen at Baker.