

# Cooper Middle School

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## Cooper Middle School

<b>School Context:</b>	(All statistics from 1998-1999 school year)
<b>Enrollment:</b>	1,179
<b>Grades:</b>	5-8
<b>Student Ethnicity:</b>	18% African American; 4% Asian; 32% Latino; 1% Native American; 45% White
<b>Gender:</b>	47% Female; 53% Male
<b>Low Income:</b>	92%
<b>ESOL:</b>	9%
<b>Special Education:</b>	23%
<b>Suspension Rate:</b>	75%

### 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
Cooper Middle School	57.70%	59.20%
Citywide middle school average	69.15%	72.00%
District average	70.66%	72.20%

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

	1995-1996	1999-2000
Cooper Middle School	73.83%	54.40%
Citywide middle school average	52.10%	58.40%
District average	53.80%	62.9%

**Promotion Rate:** Percent of students who graduated in four years

	1995-1996	1999-2000
Cooper Middle School	49.09%	88.20%
Citywide middle school average	81.50%	94.90%
District average	81.80%	88.00%

**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	18.04%	14.03%	28.53%	33.43%	26.80
Reading	39.95%	44.68%	53.75%	59.10%	49.90
Science	17.27%	15.84%	27.93%	38.21%	27.90

## Introduction

The principal of Cooper Middle School, Mr. Thomas, listed the five top challenges faced by his school: overcrowding, special education classes, staff turnover, a lack of parental involvement, and an aging building. It is a school in a racially mixed, poor and working class neighborhood. It is one of a handful of schools in the city that has maintained a relatively equal mixture of African American, Latino, and White students over several decades. Its faculty is predominantly White and female and many teachers described close professional and personal relationships with their colleagues. In recent years, Cooper had made considerable strides in the areas of student attendance and student performance. Finally, it should be noted that the District teachers' contract expired in August 2000. This proved important to Cooper teachers as they voted whether or not to extend the day by six minutes to allow more time for teachers to meet. (In the end, Cooper' teachers defeated the school-wide referendum, waiting to see what the new contract would bring.)

Laid over these more factual realities about Cooper is a contextual tapestry of stubborn independence. Cooper is a school that, at times, seems indifferent to external resources, especially its cluster and the School District, and, as a result, may be viewed by cluster people and also insiders as somewhat aloof or isolated. Perhaps a more accurate description of Cooper would be "self-reliant." Although the school has often marched to its own drummer, it has successfully adopted many of the *Children Achieving* reforms. For example, the school has created five functioning small learning communities, and participated in many successful professional development programs

provided by the cluster's Teaching and Learning network staff to Cooper' faculty.

Certainly, Cooper faces many of the same challenges as other urban middle schools, including recruiting and retaining teachers, creating an intellectually rigorous curriculum, and providing meaningful professional development. Yet in meeting these challenges, Cooper has tended to look *inward* for solutions and answers, making decisions that reinforce a degree of insularity and entrenchment. Cooper' attitude is perhaps best summed up by an administrator who said, "Cooper' teachers are the best experts on Cooper." Several teachers voiced a similar sentiment.

There is another, more recent, story to tell about Cooper. In the last several years, the school has made expanded efforts to acknowledge student performance and attendance. When the current vice-principal, Mr. Jamieson, came to Cooper several years ago, the school publicly honored student athletes in school-wide ceremonies. By contrast, Cooper did not hold similar assemblies recognizing academic achievements; nor did the school have an honor roll. Now, three years later, there is an honor role at Cooper and the names of honor role students are posted at the school. Students who make the honor roll pay half-price admission to school dances. Student attendance has also been made public. Every morning, over the public address system, Mr. Jamieson announces the percentage of students in school that day. The school has instituted an incentive program aimed at getting students to school on time and staying at school. In the three years since these changes have been implemented, the school has experienced improved test scores and attendance. Mr. Jamieson offered an explanation of why students' test scores and attendance increased: "Grades now matter."

Cooper' emphasis on student performance and attendance has apparently paid off. In the several years just prior to spring 2000, the school's progress on the Stanford-9 Achievement Test (SAT-9) had improved dramatically relative to other middle schools in the district. However, in a mid-November (2000) phone call, an administrator reported that Cooper was "hanging in with the PSSA [the statewide assessment] but SAT-9 scores hurt us this year." The administrator concluded, "It's so disheartening because we worked so hard."<sup>1</sup>

## School Climate

From the outside, Cooper is an impressive, three-story building. It was constructed in the early 1920s and like many other schools in the School District, Cooper is not air-conditioned. This fact assumes importance on warm spring days and certainly during the summer months when the temperature inside the building rises. During interviews, when the administration and faculty considered their instructional options, like year-round schools and/or summer programs, the fact that the school is not air-conditioned was frequently noted. And yet, the school has offered programs in the summer. As Mr. Jamieson noted, "Physically, this place is falling apart. It's 77 years old. The public address system is from 1957." As of November 2000, Mr. Jamieson reported that there were 138 outstanding work orders to address physical problems in and around the school.

<sup>1</sup> As a result of its year 2000 test scores, Cooper was notified that it was a candidate for reconstitution of its faculty and is working with its cluster to implement strategies that would address student performance.

On entering the school, visitors are asked to sign in at a desk staffed by an older woman. Two magnificent marble staircases lead the way to the second floor where the central offices are located. In the expansive entryway, there are bright banners highlighting Skill Day, a weekly program designed to familiarize students with responding to open-ended questions. Pictures of students and teachers with improved attendance scores are posted on the walls. As one leaves the entrance, however, the bright posters and cheery pictures become scarce.

In their 1997-1998 School Improvement Plan, teachers described Cooper as racially and economically "diverse" and reported that Cooper' students "experience the typical problems of children growing up in the inner city." These "inner city problems" include "coming from single-parent homes" and "being raised by grandparents." The teachers concluded that education is often a "low priority" for the families of their students, who are struggling to make ends meet.

Like so many middle schools in the District, Cooper has suffered from a chronic teacher shortage. On August 15, 1999, at the start of the school year, Cooper had 16 teacher vacancies out of a faculty of 76. According to an administrator:

*Our teachers left for better schools...It's hard to recruit middle school teachers. We've lost some really good people. But we won the lottery with some [new] teachers. It's a constant struggle.*

The situation was not much better a year later. As recently as November 2000, the school had 13 teacher vacancies. The school year began with four new teachers, but had already lost two by November. When an administrator complained to the cluster leader about teacher shortages, the cluster leader replied that the situation at Cooper did not yet meet crisis level as

compared with other schools in the District. The administrator offered this analogy: "I'm [Cooper] in Stage I cancer and the other schools are in Stage III cancer."

In an ongoing effort to attract and keep teachers, one administrator facetiously described how she "sells" Cooper to prospective teachers: "I go down to human resources and I'm a carny vendor! 'Come to Cooper! Close to riverfront property!'" It is not an easy sell. A small learning community (SLC) coordinator told how she has used her reputation as a "community leader" in the neighborhood outside of Cooper to promote positive changes in the neighborhood. She said of her reputation and its effects:

*Kids look at me as someone who means business. And so do the parents. Some parents are afraid of me. That keeps the bullies and the drug dealers away. I go outside and tell them to get the hell away. I have community support, from VFW people and shop owners. I'm seen as a community leader. I've closed a neighborhood bar, a place of prostitution.*

The teacher's words reinforce the point that Cooper is a tough sell to teachers in large part because of its surrounding neighborhood.

## Instructional Focus

There are four primary activities and initiatives at Cooper that direct the instructional focus: small learning communities, test preparation, thematic instruction, and incentive programs. The small learning communities, theme-based subdivisions within the school into which students and staff are grouped, provide the structural support for test preparation, thematic instruction, and incentive programs.

## Small Learning Communities

Cooper is organized into five small learning communities (SLCs). Initially, the principal attended a cluster meeting that introduced the concept of SLCs, then returned to her school to share the information with her teachers. Subsequently, the staff held a Saturday workshop attended by most teachers to share ideas about SLCs and when teachers came up with five thematically distinct SLCs.

There has long been a general practice of "schools-within-a-school" at Cooper. Prior to creation of SLCs, the school was divided into so-called "Houses." Teachers at the school actively named and themed their new communities, which helped them to buy into the concept to some degree. However, despite a considerable sense of ownership by teachers in SLCs, in one instance, an SLC name chosen by the community was later rejected by the principal and replaced with a name approved by the principal.

Teachers also reported playing an active role in creating and shaping curriculum and instruction, having a strong voice at SLC meetings, and making discipline decisions.

The maintenance of SLCs has been somewhat bumpy. Each is headed by a coordinator, usually a more experienced faculty member. Starting in the fall of 1999, assistant coordinators were assigned to the five SLCs. According to teachers and coordinators, SLC staff did not participate in the selection of assistant coordinators; rather individuals for the new positions were "picked" by the principal. Several teachers expressed their concerns that there would be philosophical and pedagogical mismatches as a result. Furthermore, teachers questioned the legitimacy of a community in which members can be added or subtracted at

the will of the administration. According to one teacher:

*Every year we hold our breath that one of us won't be taken from our community. And we are a community!...Sometimes a teacher who doesn't share our philosophy will get put here. Arbitrarily assigning people [to SLCs] goes against [concept of] community...[It is] one of the most upsetting things...[They should] try to place people with similar outlooks together. We can request placement; it's generally honored but not always, affects the way things work.*

When an administrator was asked about the selection of assistant coordinators, she replied that individuals were eventually chosen because few, if any, volunteered for the uncompensated post.

Each of the SLCs at Cooper has a different theme: communication, working together, integration, cultivation, and setting a course. Of the Communication SLC, the coordinator said, "In today's time, spoken and written communication are important, especially in high school. Nobody sees you [when you apply for a job]. It's how you communicate, first on paper, then in person." According to the coordinator, the theme, "communication," is accessible and pragmatic to students and teachers. Moreover, it lends itself well to a variety of disciplines and is easily integrated with many topics. It is not, in the words of one teacher, "limiting" in scope and definition "like a theme of 'Rain Forest' is."

Students are "randomly assigned" to SLCs in order to form heterogeneous groupings based on gender, race, and ethnicity. Additionally no House has too many low-achieving or high-achieving students; these students "are peppered throughout the school." Perhaps because SLCs were relatively new to Cooper, and perhaps because students were deliberately assigned to SLCs to achieve racial, gender

and ethnic balance, teachers reported that communities, in the words of a teacher, "haven't developed reputations." When asked if one SLC was more popular than another, a teacher responded, "No," because efforts are also made to distribute the so-called "popular" students throughout the school's SLCs.

Small learning communities appear to be meaningful at Cooper, in large part, because of the shared history of many of the teachers. When SLCs replaced Houses, much of the House membership remained intact. According to one teacher, "They kept the House together. Five of us, including the coordinator, arrived at the school together." Thus, teachers in SLCs have been together far longer than the two or three years that SLCs have existed. At the same time, though, there was enthusiasm and excitement from many teachers about SLCs, countering any sense that SLCs were simply Houses with a name change. In describing their SLCs, teachers spoke of a sense of "family." Said one teacher:

*Teachers have gotten to know each other. We've gotten to know the children. Some of the eighth graders I have now, I had in fifth grade. I know when they're playing, when they need to be reprimanded. There's a strong sense of family.*

Since the formation of small learning communities, some teachers have reported fewer behavioral problems and improved academic performance. Moreover, teachers noted that the common themes adopted by SLCs provided teachers and students "a nice foundation." A second teacher offered a pedagogic rationale for SLCs: "We know the order of the teaching [sequence] and expectations. You know what's expected of you and you have certain expectations for students."

## Test Preparation

In 1997, in light of their poor showing on the SAT-9, Cooper staff examined school data to determine the school's strong and weak areas. In looking at the data, they decided to target students who fell in the lowest of the test's achievement categories, Below Basic III, as well as Basic level students. When an administrator was asked why Cooper targeted Basic III students, she replied:

*These kids have the best chance to get back on track. Get them over the hump. Get them at grade level. Get the D students to become C students.*

Cooper's strategy was to move Basic III students to Basic or above and to maintain or increase the level of students at Basic to a level of Proficient or above. To implement this strategy, the school instituted Skill Day. The vice-principal explained the basic premise of Skill Day as "Making kids understand the format of the [SAT-9] test, not the test itself. ...Give kids practice on the test. How do you attack those kinds of questions?" A rationale and definition of Skill Day is provided in Cooper's 1998-1999 School Improvement Plan:

*Our goal is for improvement in general with a keen focus on increasing our SAT-9 test scores. Subsequently, we have implemented a "Skill Day" once a week. On that day all of our academic classes are required to focus on either open-ended or enhanced multiple choice experiences for our seventh and eighth grade students.*

Before initiating Skill Day, Cooper's teachers received professional development around open-ended and enhanced multiple-choice formats. The cluster staff provided some professional development, but one administrator lamented that there was not much direction from the cluster office.

To better understand what happens during a Skill Day lesson, consider the following assignment from an English/language arts teacher at Cooper. Students, after reading the children's fairy tale, *Cinderella*, were asked to reconsider the familiar story.

## Character

### *Get the Big Picture*

- What was the relationship between Cinderella, her stepmother, and her stepsisters?
- Why did each of the above characters react differently in similar situations?
- Why, do you think, each of the characters, Cinderella, the stepmother, and the stepsisters acted the way they did?

### *Take a Closer Look*

- How might the story have changed if the stepmother and stepsister had been kinder to Cinderella?

### *Be a Critic*

- When this story was written, what age group do you think he or she was writing for? Why do you think that?

## Setting and Plot

### *Get the Big Picture*

- What is the main story problem?

### *Take a Closer Look*

- Describe either the steps taken or what happens to the main character to solve the problem.

*Be a Critic*

- Who would enjoy listening to or reading this story?

**Theme/Writer's Craft***Get the Big Picture*

- If you had to choose a name for this story that would help tell what the story was about, what would it be?

*Take a Closer Look**"Poor Girl Weds Wealthy Prince"*

- Why might the author write this particular headline? What headline would you write? If you were a reporter, how would you write this story? What would it say?

*Be a Critic*

- Did the author use any special technique(s) to get his/her message across? If so, what?

There appeared to be faculty-wide commitment to Skill Day, increasing the likelihood of its success. Moreover, the wide support teachers gave to Skill Day revealed something deeper. By embracing Skill Day, Cooper' teachers demonstrated a united and consistent instructional front. Indeed, the only criticism heard regarding Skill Day was that it did not go *far enough*. An assistant SLC coordinator enthusiastically supported Skill Day but contended:

*My argument, everyday should be Skill Day. When it comes to writing, we need to teach kids the language of the test. Kids need to know what is being asked. You don't prepare for the SAT-9 in one day; it's a constructivist orientation all the time. Some drill and kill, I admit. You go over things in a variety of ways.*

As indicated in the opening charts, the SAT-9 scores of Cooper students in reading, math, and science improved in the years between 1995 and 1999. The vice principal and principal both credited Skill Day for student progress. However, referring to the increasing expectations set for each school by the District's school rating system, the Performance Responsibility Index, the vice principal issued a caveat about the school's steady improvement: "The bar keeps being raised each time. Each year the bar gets higher." The vice principal was not confident that Cooper would meet its targets in 2000. When asked why, the vice principal listed a number of obstacles:

*A change in feeder pattern. We no longer have Marshal [an elementary school with slightly higher performing students] which is marginally better than Martin, that's made a difference. ...The caliber of kids is different. Fifteen hundred teachers in the District left. Our teachers left for better schools. We were faced with 16 vacancies on August 15...It's hard to recruit middle school teachers. We've lost some really good people. But we won the lottery with some [new] teachers. It's a constant struggle.*

In addition to Skill Day, Cooper also started a program called The Saturday School "At Risk" Program in January 2000. This was a response to the School District's new, more rigorous promotion and graduation requirements, targeting students who are at or near failing one or more academic subjects. Parents of "at risk" students are notified by letter of their child's status. The letter reads, in part:

*We do not want your child to fail. Together, we can help your child find success in school. We strongly encourage you to register your child in the Saturday "At Risk" Program. This program is designed to give extra help for students who have failed one or more major*

*subjects...We want your child to have opportunities to find success. However, the responsibility for success in school must primarily rest with the student. Failure to do homework assignments, complete projects, or study for tests will result in poor or failing grades. Only students earning passing grades in ALL major subjects will be promoted. If there is anything, as a school, we can do to assist you in helping your child, please contact the school at [number].*

The weekend program was offered on 15 different Saturdays throughout the winter and spring of 2000. As of the second marking period in the spring of 2000, nearly half, or 438 (out of 1000+) Cooper students were failing one or more of their academic subjects. The Saturday program was funded, in part, by Chapter I funds, of which Cooper receives \$70,000. When the program was first introduced, 180 students registered but by the third month, attendance had dwindled to about 60 or 70 students. In planning the Saturday school, Cooper used booklets the District produced as a guide in outlining what fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth grade students needed to know to be promoted to the next grade. An administrator offered a rationale for the program, "The biggest impediment to school survival is math and reading skills."

Something else at Cooper that has apparently influenced test scores. In 1997, the school began to collect baseline data tracking grades school-wide and by SLC following each report period. According to the School Improvement Plan, this approach allows "...for fine-tuning of instructional strategies, if an SLC is not meeting the school standards."

To more fully understand how Cooper uses data, a glimpse inside one administrator's office is offered. It is here, in this cramped, third-floor office where the administrator, "Mrs. Redding," spent time crunching

numbers. Describing herself as "data-driven," Mrs. Redding said, "You can't fine-tune the instructional program without something to hang it on." As an example, Mrs. Redding displayed several spreadsheets on her computer which tracked daily attendance of students and teachers, individually and by SLCs. There was also a detailed spreadsheet that tracked students' academic progress. About the academic progress spreadsheet, Mrs. Redding said:

*The week that grades come in is hell. I go through every report card, individually, and red dot 'at risk' kids. A lot of data entry. We're having a dance tomorrow night. If you're an 'at-risk' kid, you can't go. We're changing the paradigm of the school. Now, grades matter.*

Mrs. Redding was extraordinarily familiar with the various indicators for Cooper' academic improvement, including the Chapter I assessment, SAT-9, PSSA, and student attendance. At a glance, she could tell you the names of students passing and/or failing their academic subjects (by reporting period). She was frustrated that, with the exception of student attendance, Cooper often received these indicators *after* faculty had already defined their instructional programs for the next year. There have been times when Mrs. Redding has received news about her school's performance from the local paper before receiving information from the School District.

Although Mrs. Redding considered report card data valuable, she complained that information often comes back to the school [from the cluster or District central office] grouped by teacher and school and not by individual SLCs, which undermines "the whole thrust of *Children Achieving*." Mrs. Redding expressed frustration that the District did not "program their network" to sort materials by SLCs. As a result, Mrs. Redding spent considerable time with data,

sorting through and grouping it, to come up with a meaningful assessment of the five SLCs. Mrs. Redding acknowledged that the District had made some effort to break down data by SLC, but said she frequently found it inconsistent. She said: "We want it to be consistent. It looks different every time."

About her devotion to numbers, Mrs. Redding declared that her decisions must be data-driven. "I can't be a gunslinger," she stated. She offered an example from the 1998-1999 school year of why she remained so data-driven: "Until the second marking period, I would have thought that the seventh grade was the strongest and the fifth the weakest." After grades came in, Mrs. Redding was surprised to discover that fifth grade scores were strongest and eighth grade scores weakest. Analyzing numbers has often yielded evidence that has contradicted teachers' and administrators' suspicions and hunches. It is for this reason that Mrs. Redding continues to crunch numbers. And yet, despite her best efforts, a discouraged Mrs. Redding said:

*Here I am, the best navigator the Titanic ever had. But what do I do now? How do I make a fundamental difference? There's not enough time, not enough teachers.*

## Standards and Curriculum

Finding ways to explore the thematic element of each small learning community through the standards and curriculum was a major focus for staff, although not a new one. Several years ago, as the school transitioned from Houses to SLCs, a primary goal was, in the words of an administrator, "...to look at what we mean by 'thematic curriculum.'" Many teachers identified thematic curriculum as one of Blevin's top priorities. Cooper partnered with the Penn Literacy Network, a program that provided professional development to

teachers on writing and reading and also aided Cooper in developing their thematic units.

For the most part, the five individual SLCs were responsible for developing curricula that was consistent with their respective themes. However, while individual SLCs enjoyed considerable latitude regarding their curriculum, teachers said they kept the new academic standards and curriculum frameworks in mind, key components of the District's *Children Achieving* reform agenda.

As an example, consider the Communication SLC. During the 1998-1999 school year, the broad topic "communication" was divided into four thematic units: (1) getting to know you (2) multicultural celebrations (3) biographies—"now and then;" and (4) survival. Because of "interruptions," primarily testing, the coordinator and several teachers expressed doubts that the SLC would get to the fourth thematic unit. Regardless of the specific thematic elements, the coordinator said that there is an overall emphasis on reading, writing, oral skills, and open-ended questions. Also, students keep journal books and logbooks and students participate in demonstrations in front of their peers. For example, a field trip to a local park required students to (1) determine cost per student for the food and equipment needed for the trip (math) and (2) look for particular objects in the park that were collected and brought back to Cooper for classifications and discussion (science). An English-language arts lesson had students making collages using photographs, magazine clippings, and written statements. The collages were displayed for the entire community. For a social studies segment, each grade took a decade in history and researched famous people, trends in dance, music, clothes, literature, etc. Students performed and dressed appropriately for their decade and

each classroom displayed their decade for a final project. Final displays were taped for a video presentation. These varied activities all underscored communication while also integrating disciplines and topics.

School-wide, teachers reported playing an active role in creating and shaping curriculum and instruction in their SLCs. Teachers often met during the summer, “when we’re rested,” to identify and create thematic units to support the SLC theme. According to one teacher:

*In this house, we’re very active. I consider myself to be a strong math and science teacher. We all tend to be on the same page. Whatever I’ve wanted, I’ve gotten to include. All teachers have a voice, some choose to say more than others... Within the community, discipline[subject matter] experts take on the responsibility for writing particular segments of units. For example, a teacher strong in math will take the lead on math activities, leaving another teacher with a background in ELA [English Language Arts] to lead on language arts. There seems to be a lot of mutual respect within the community with teachers recognizing their own strengths and weaknesses and relying on each other to develop and plan lessons and activities.*

Still, however, there were holes. As one teacher in the Communication SLC observed:

*We have four units. I’m a content area teacher... I don’t build my lessons around the thematic units. We adapt when we can. The other teachers read books. I’m more limited with a pre-algebra textbook. [For example] The unit, “Getting to Know You” did not lend itself well [for use in a math class].*

In general, teachers were enthusiastic about the District’s adoption of new standards and curriculum frameworks and

the pursuit of standards-driven classrooms. These new reforms, along with a focus on developing SAT-9 test taking skills, helped teachers develop curriculum and provide added instructional and thematic consistency between classroom instruction and Skill Day.

Many had felt the standards and curriculum frameworks were long overdue. One teacher observed that they:

*...[give] us a guideline, a focus, something to work toward. I think it was much needed. When I first came here, I couldn’t believe the lack of structure. Had I not taught science before, I’d have been totally lost. [There were] no science books [at Cooper]. No real focus on different curriculum areas. I was appalled.*

Now, according to another teacher: “Everything we do is based on the standards. It’s very standards-driven.” Another teacher praised the new standards and frameworks for directing her teaching:

*This is the first time I’ve taught fifth grade in eight years. It’s my bible. In thinking about science... [Students] had to learn about celestial bodies and kinetic energy. I’m checking [the frameworks] to make sure I’m covering what I should be covering. Life Science is coming up. [I’m using the frameworks] to make sure I’m doing what I’m supposed to be doing. I know what they’re going to get in sixth grade. I’m planting the seeds of knowledge and they’ll grow in the next year. That’s how the standards were set up.*

Another teacher reported using the new standards and curriculum frameworks “almost every day” as part of her lesson planning. She explained that she referred to the documents for new ideas and to guide her in making sure that she is covering some standards in her daily lesson planning.

An SLC coordinator offered her definition of the new standards:

*Lessons that give children experiences that they can take on to real life. Things related beyond just what's in school. Not just memorization, but all kinds of experiences and relating them across subjects.*

At least one teacher expressed concern that the new standards might be counter-productive, pressuring teachers to 'dumb' down the curriculum to help their students receive passing marks. He said:

*As we go into standards, there seems to be a mixed message. The administration is putting pressure for not failing kids...And the ELA [English Language Arts] standards now require 25 books. Some people respond to pressure by dumbing down. This is not good either. [Paying] lip service to standards. Standards are more a stick than a carrot for teachers. But then again, this may all be a part of the learning process. May be that this is the struggle. But I don't get the sense of a developmental process and putting kids first.*

While teachers generally applauded the new standards and frameworks, there was some feeling among teachers that students were, "...not ready for some of the standards, but we're accountable." Lamenting the lack of professional development around the new standards and frameworks, the teacher continued, "We had some brief staff development on standards, but it will take a tremendous amount, and I go back to that students aren't ready." Another teacher concurred and said one of the biggest obstacles to student success is that many students do not have the basic skills upon which to build. For this reason, some teachers reported using a variety of teaching methods, including more traditional techniques. One teacher admitted to using workbooks for the simple reason that her

students responded well to the "drill and repetition" of traditional workbooks. She said:

*I use a combination of cooperative learning, hands-on, and, I admit to you, repetitive workbooks. It wouldn't be what I choose, but it's working. Kids say, 'Oh, I like these packets!'"*

Other teachers also acknowledged using more traditional approaches that complemented the new standards-driven classroom and thematic curriculum. One teacher said that her students learned material in a "variety of ways" and that included a "constructivist orientation," but also "some drill and kill."

## Incentive Programs

As noted earlier, Cooper instituted an attendance incentive program (together with a performance incentive program) to reward perfect attendance. The end result was considerable improvement in student attendance between 1997 and 2000. The average daily attendance during the 1999-2000 school year was, according to an administrator, about 85 percent "with spikes." This was a big improvement from 1997 when attendance was running at about 75 percent. An administrator painted the school attendance issue in more graphic terms and said, "On average, [the equivalent of] one SLC doesn't come to school every day." (On the day the administrator was interviewed, 161 out of roughly 1000 Cooper students were absent.) The administrator also cited another troubling statistic related to attendance, the school's drop-out rate. "A big dilemma at Cooper," he noted, is that "56 percent of kids who start in September aren't here in June."

Cooper responded to low student attendance by developing a computer spreadsheet to monitor attendance by

grade and SLCs. Attendance information was broken down by SLC and announced daily over the public address system. Every week, the SLC with the best attendance received the school's "attendance banner" to display outside their SLC office. Cooper also worked with the local truancy court. Many students who were frequently skipping school were required to make a court appearance with their parents. Cooper has also linked student attendance to students' participation at school events and activities. For instance, students identified as "at risk" were not allowed to attend certain school functions, such as dances. Various prizes and gift certificates were given to students (and teachers) with perfect attendance.

Attendance monitoring has helped Cooper identify problem areas for individual SLCs. As a result of monitoring attendance, it quickly became apparent that the attendance of one SLC had dropped below the school-wide average. The administrators and SLC teachers were able to respond quickly and worked with the SLC to develop and implement attendance strategies. Consequently, the average daily attendance for that particular SLC improved from 78 to 88 percent.

Individual SLCs were also making attendance a priority by making it public. An SLC coordinator said: "Every month, I type up the kids with perfect attendance. They are recognized at assemblies...It's a big deal." One SLC coordinator said that individual classrooms with perfect attendance are rewarded with pizza parties. Another SLC coordinator said, "For attendance, we're giving breakfast in the classroom."

Cooper also emphasized teacher attendance. Staff was expected to come to work every day and the school recognizes perfect attendance on a monthly basis. Teachers who have perfect attendance receive a "no lesson plan" permit

redeemable for any week during the year. The names and pictures of teachers with perfect attendance were displayed in the school and announced over the public address system. According to the 1997-1998 School Improvement Plan, Blevin's goal was "at least a two percent increase in staff attendance for the school year."

When the vice principal was asked about teacher attendance, he said:

*It's a little better but I'm faced with more faculty dealing with long-term issues, long-range crises. There are health absences. And every time you put a substitute teacher in the mix, it takes away from the instructional program, it affects the whole school, not just one classroom. Mental health days, it's hard working here. We lost two holidays this year [because of snow]. [There's a] lot of young moms in this school. Kids get sick, they gotta go.*

An SLC coordinator said teachers in her SLC have "great attendance except for our crises." Crises included maternity leaves, car accidents, and health problems. This same coordinator said that if teachers are able to anticipate their absences, they leave detailed plans for substitute teachers. The coordinator said, "We don't have a lot of mental health days here."

## Leadership

### Administrative Leadership

In the past several years, Cooper' leadership has alternated between the principal, Mr. Thomas, and an acting principal, Mr. Jamieson, who served when Mr. Thomas took a sabbatical. Consequently, there were more interactions and conversations with Mr. Jamieson than with Mr. Thomas. Mr. Jamieson appeared to be well-respected at

Cooper, most importantly, he appeared to be a very visible and engaged administrator, an instructional leader who visited classrooms, observed teachers, provided valuable feedback, and engaged with students. Teachers commented that he was accessible and supportive.

For the most part, teachers spoke approvingly of the administration with two exceptions. The first concerned the selection of new SLC assistant coordinators. Teachers felt that individuals were “picked” by administrators regardless of their philosophical and pedagogical “fit.” The administrators contended that when the new position was advertised, teachers didn’t apply, leaving them with no choice but to make appointments. The second exception concerned the naming of an SLC when teachers’ selection of a name was rejected by Mr. Thomas.

Generally, though, teachers approved of school leadership. One SLC coordinator was especially approving of the academic and attendance goals advocated by the school leadership. She said:

*There has been a strong message from administration on the SAT-9, on being at work on time, and attendance. Very strong leadership on this issue. ‘We want you here.’ It’s communicated through memos. There are a lot of meetings.*

However, this same coordinator was critical of the lack of information generated by the administration and the often contrasting spins given information and events. She said:

*But for the whole faculty, often there’s not enough information out there, and there are often different spins on things.*

## Teacher Leadership

In so many ways, the five SLC coordinators functioned as traditional vice principals. They handled student behavior and discipline concerns, student and teacher attendance, and initiated parental contact. On top of these many demanding responsibilities, they were also instructional leaders. However, with the assumption of responsibility for student discipline coordinators reported that most of their time was devoted to that and communicating with parents.

The SLC coordinators wore numerous hats, including “mini-principal,” disciplinarian, master teachers, facilitator, mentor, and manager. Of these many hats, one SLC coordinator identified herself first as a “teacher.” Of her other hats, the coordinator said, “I’m somewhat of a principal, but without pay or responsibility.” Indeed, reconciling her professional identity as a teacher and peer with her role as a coordinator often created awkward moments. She said one of her biggest problems is the “difficulty dealing with all the [staff] personalities.” She added: “You have to sometimes correct teachers and that makes me uncomfortable. I’m a teacher...It’s hard going to the principal to talk and tell about another teacher.” Asked about her numerous hats, and students’ perceptions of her, the coordinator laughed and said, “I have a walkie-talkie, so kids see me as an NTA [non-teaching assistant]. I’m also the lunch lady and they constantly ask me, ‘What’s for lunch?’”

In addition to being school leaders, SLC coordinators also served a vital communication function. Coordinators met regularly with the principal and with each other and held weekly meetings with teachers in their communities. In addition to imparting information to teachers and administrators, SLC coordinators also acted

as formal and informal liaisons between the two groups. However, further threatening the important communal aspect and communication function of SLCs was the high staff turnover at Cooper and the loss of several highly regarded teachers.

Complementing the formal, once-a-week meetings were frequent, informal meetings which occurred daily— as a quick conversation in the hall, a shared lunch, a brief gathering between classes outside the SLC office, or teachers ducking into the SLC office after something specific and leaving with information about something else.

Generally, the SLC coordinators were regarded as leaders within their individual communities and throughout the school. They were an experienced and respected group of teachers who worked with their colleagues to establish an instructional tone and culture. Leadership at Cooper was distributed among the principal, the vice principal, and the SLC coordinators. The difficult challenge at Cooper was, first, to recruit and keep good teachers and, second, to support and encourage new and remaining teachers to “step up to the plate” and fill the leadership voids. As one SLC coordinator observed, “We have strong leadership, people come forward but it’s often the same people [teachers].”

Adding to the teacher turnover problem is the high teacher vacancy rate at Cooper. As recently as fall 2000, at least one administrator was covering three classes a day and there was still an eighth grade class with no teacher and no permanent substitute. According to an administrator, Cooper began the 2000-2001 school year with a 10 percent loss of its experienced faculty and several teachers out on extended medical leave. The situation was especially dire since the school system could not back-fill the positions [with substitutes].

## Parental Involvement

There appeared to be very little parental presence or participation at Cooper. When asked about the issue of parental involvement, the principal, Mr. Thomas, observed, “After-school programs and Saturday School are taking over the role of parents.” The one area where parents were very visible was in matters related to student discipline. On several occasions, parents were observed in the offices and hallways of small learning community coordinators.

In the fall of 2000, there was an eighth grade class that had no permanent teacher. Pinch-hitting teachers and an occasional substitute covered the class since no long-term substitute had yet been appointed. What made this distressing situation even more disturbing for the principal was the fact that the students’ parents were not “raising arms” over the situation. The principal contrasted the indifference of Cooper’ parents with their suburban<sup>2</sup> counterparts and contended, “They would be raising arms in the suburbs.”

While Cooper addressed parental participation in its 1998-1999 School Improvement Plan (SIP), actual parental engagement was minimal. According to the SIP:

*We encourage our parents to come to school for Home and School activities such as regular meetings, special workshop, and make and take activities. In an effort to develop a sincere positive relationship between our parents and the schools, we will again sponsor a “Family Day.” The school will be open on a Saturday, providing breakfast and the opportunity to*

<sup>3</sup> F. Newmann, W.G. Secada, and G.G. Wehlage, *A guide to authentic instruction and assessment: Vision, standards, and scoring*. Madison, WI: Wisconsin Center for Education Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1995.

*meet key people in the school such as administrators, the nurse, counselors, as well as the SLC coordinators and teacher teams.*

Some teachers regarded Cooper' parents as the chief obstacles to students' learning. These same teachers reported that they found it difficult to involve parents in SLC and school-wide activities. One teacher said:

*The students at this level [middle school] demonstrate a lot of behavioral problems in the classroom and the parents do not seem to get involved with the school to help alleviate these problems.*

Although there is a Home and School Association at Cooper, the principal said it is not active. At a recent back-to-school night (fall 2000), parental turn-out was not strong. While clearly frustrated with the lack of parental participation, the principal offered an explanation, saying that the hourly jobs and work schedules of so many of his students' parents made it difficult for them to attend school activities like "Saturday Family Day."

## Professional Community

Historically, teaching has been an isolated activity, largely performed behind closed doors and in isolation from colleagues. Challenging the long-standing solitary nature of teaching is new research that concludes that "strong professional communities" within schools contribute to student achievement. According to Newmann, Secada, and Wehlage:

*Schools that operate as strong professional communities contribute to student achievement and to equitable distribution of achievement, whether measured in*

*'authentic' or conventional ways...Schools with strong professional communities were better able to offer authentic pedagogy and were more effective in promoting student achievement.<sup>3</sup>*

If, as Newmann, Secada and Wehlage suggest, strong professional communities contribute to student achievement, then the recent formation of five distinct small learning communities within Cooper makes both organizational and pedagogical sense. The challenge is for Cooper not only to create the structural conditions that support the development of strong professional communities, but also to *value* opportunities for teachers to collaborate, reflect, and meaningfully participate in designing curricula and defining the school's vision; in short, to sustain and nurture a *community of teachers*.

The formation of SLCs and the development of professional community was not without problems at Cooper. In the fall of 1999, SLCs received assistant coordinators and, as noted earlier, SLC members did not participate in the selection of assistant coordinators. Several teachers protested that the notion of "community" does not mean much, if, in the words of a teacher, "...teachers are moved around at the will of the administration." A teacher described how the sense of community is threatened when teachers are transferred to other small learning communities. She said:

*What a mess! They want us to bond yet they can move us around at will. It doesn't make sense. Our [improvement plan] is our third rewrite. I know it! I don't know about other houses...I'd be lost in another community!*

There appears to be strong professional community as evidenced by teacher collaboration within SLCs. However, as noted elsewhere, the challenge at Cooper is to nurture and encourage teachers to

move into leadership positions. The challenge is especially pressing because of teacher vacancies and teacher transfers. And yet, the challenge also presents the school with an opportunity. Perhaps the presence of strong SLC coordinators encouraged some teacher complacency. Now, however, with the loss of some teachers, and the on-going teacher vacancies, more teachers need to assume a more active leadership role. As noted earlier, for the most part, house membership remained intact and there were several examples of teachers being together for five years or more. This closeness lent itself to successful collaborations between teachers. In the following account, a teacher describes the strong sense of professional community that developed in her SLC:

*The people I work with, they have a lot of ideas and they are willing to try different ideas, even risky things... You have to have the support of others. You have to have the support of others. I would not try such new things by myself. There's lots of sharing materials and ideas. Always someone to bounce ideas off. The support of [SLC Coordinator] is unbelievable. She's the glue.*

Another teacher said:

*A lot of teachers in [our SLC] have the same teaching style. They like students engaged with others. A lot of us have taken Penn Literacy classes. I've taken four. They gave us a chance to reflect on what we were doing, what was working. The ideal of looking at how you're learning, what are you learning.*

While a strong sense of professional community appears to flourish *within* SLCs, there is some concern that the arrangement contributes to feelings of competition *between* SLCs. The vice principal described an unintended

consequence of small learning communities:

*It has a downside because teachers and students are identified with the SLC, not the school. Common faculty time is signed away to the SLC and the faculty don't see themselves as part of the school.*

A SLC coordinator echoed the concerns of the vice principal. The coordinator worried that teachers feel isolated from other teachers in the building. The coordinator said she personally has not experienced isolation because she meets regularly with the two vice principals and the other coordinators. The coordinator said of SLCs, "Sometimes it doesn't foster collegiality across the building."

There is evidence, however, that teachers go outside their small learning communities to form collaborations with other teachers. One teacher, an assistant coordinator, referred to herself as the "language arts guru" while another SLC coordinator is seen as the "science guru."

Late in the 1999-2000 school year, another event occurred at Cooper that offers insights about professional community and how it is defined and manifested at the school. Cooper' teachers overwhelmingly voted down a "time-banking" referendum that would have lengthened their workday by six minutes. The additional time would be "banked" and, according to the initiative, "...utilized for faculty meetings and professional development obligations, as stated in the contract between the...Federation of Teachers." In other words, the measure would have given teachers time to meet. However, the measure failed 48 to 17. It was the third time Cooper teachers defeated such a measure. From the teachers' perspective, extending the day by six minutes did not make sense for pedagogical, logistical, and physical reasons. One teacher offered her "mathematical perspective" in opposing the initiative:

*Six minutes a day is 30 minutes a week. [By] the end of the school year, it's three days and some hours...In return, kids are losing 10 instructional days through early dismissal days. On early dismissal days, kids are not here to work. And there are shortened periods, maybe 20-30 minutes. Ten early dismissal days a year is lost instructional time. And we're listening to 'crapola' professional development that's not meaningful. We need conflict resolution, practical things, managing stress. What's the trade-off? Those six minutes. The longer the school day, the worse it is. Try teaching math at 3:15. Plus, we already have four early dismissal days.*

Perhaps the biggest obstacle to the banked time initiative was the uncertainty of the new contract. When asked about the initiative, one teacher shrugged her shoulders and said, "It's a contract year and it's a bad time to vote as teachers don't know what's in the contract."

While teachers' reasons for not supporting the measure varied, what was striking was the relative solidarity of the faculty in opposing the measure. The Teacher Learning Network facilitator, a cluster individual charged with providing on-site help to teachers, also noted the teachers' solidarity on the issue, although she perceived it as wrong-headed. She said:

*One thing they won't do is bank time. It would lengthen their day and would give them a meeting time. But they refuse to do it; it gives the administration more power. They just limp along.*

Notably, in this example, the notion of "professional community" was broadened to include *all* teachers, rather than just those teachers in one's SLC. However, the definition was not so broad as to include the cluster. This example points to the gap between Cooper' teachers and teachers now assigned to professional development

roles in the cluster office. That is, there was a clear sense of "us" and "them" rather than a feeling of common purpose. This perspective was also noted by a cluster staff person who said that Cooper' teachers tended to lump the cluster together with the School District administration, rather than view them as two separate entities. This puzzled the cluster person, because she credited the cluster leader for working hard to create a tone and culture in which "the cluster was not set apart from the schools."

One was struck with the professional and personal closeness of so many of Cooper' teachers, especially within SLCs. The closeness is, in part, the result of the fairly seamless transition from houses to small learning communities that kept house membership largely intact. One teacher said of her small learning community, "Because we're so strong, if somebody doesn't fit in...it's a clique. We've a pecking order. If you join us, you have to adapt to us." Another teacher also described her SLC as "strong" and said she would be "lost" if she were transferred to another community. Many of the teachers interviewed likened their membership in their respective SLC to being members of a "family," complete with disagreements and arguments, but also having shared common goals, philosophy, and loyalty. Teachers also reported fewer behavioral problems and increased academic performances, corroborating the findings of Newmann, Secada, and Wehlage that professional community contributes to academic achievement.

Unlike some SLCs at other District schools, Cooper' teachers participated in the naming and theme creation of their communities which was instrumental in hooking teachers into the SLC concept from the beginning. Furthermore, most teachers reported assuming an active role in creating and shaping curriculum and instruction, and having a voice at SLC

meetings. In this way, teachers 'own' their communities; they feel responsible for the SLC's success and the success of all its members— teachers and students.

## Teachers' Instructional Practices

Most Cooper' teachers, as well as the principal and the vice principal, reported that their classroom practices have changed in the six years since the implementation of *Children Achieving*. They credit a variety of factors for these changes. Notably, many teachers credited their membership in SLCs for influencing their practices in the classroom. One teacher credited the computer with changing her teaching practices:

*I've used more projects, more rubrics, more alternative assessments. The computer has changed how I teach, how I present material to my kids, graphics, and computer projects.*

Another teacher described how her teaching changed to include more student interaction:

*I do a lot more responding to what we're learning. We do written responses. Say we're reading about living in colonial times. I'll have children respond to what they think about the reading. I'm using the reading and doing more across the curriculum, like writing.*

An administrator credited the [now former] superintendent and *Children Achieving* for the changes she observed in teachers. When asked if teachers' practices have changed, she exclaimed:

*Oh, God, yes. Here's an accolade to the superintendent. We're getting away from 'chalk and talk' and 'the sage on the stage.' Most of the younger teachers are better at*

*it; they have a lot of energy and enthusiasm. [Teachers are] integrating different disciplines.*

In our observations of Cooper' classrooms, we found evidence of more thoughtful, standards-based lessons, as well as more traditional classes. Two contrasting classrooms observations from researchers' field notes follow:

### Classroom A

**Teacher: Ms. Jenkins**  
**Grade 7**  
**Subject: Math**

Ms. Jenkins is an apprentice teacher with no educational background, who came to Cooper a month after school opened. By "apprentice," we mean that Ms. Jenkins is not yet a certified teacher, but is enrolled in a certification program. Several Cooper individuals described Ms. Jenkins as a teacher who is trying to deliver a challenging program to her students.

Today's lesson consisted of several math problems done by Ms. Jenkins on the board. On the board, the following is written: "Continue lesson combining like terms. Like terms have the same variable and the same exponent." There were also three problems on the board:

$$10a - 12a - 6$$

$$-6x + 2 - 4x$$

$$3 + 3p - 7 - 4p$$

Ms. Jenkins walked through these three problems to combine the like terms. It is time-consuming, because the students are calling out, making jokes, talking to their neighbors, and Ms. Jenkins is constantly stopping to tell students they should listen to what she is doing so they can do their homework. She asks questions, but rarely do students answer. Instead, she simply

gives students the correct answer. After about 20 minutes of this, Ms. Jenkins says to the students: "Now we'll move to solving equations. You should solve for the variable." She writes the following on the board:

$$4c + 3c + 7 = 63$$

Ms. Jenkins encourages the students to work on the problem. It looks like about three students are working on the problem. After a few minutes, Ms. Jenkins asks the class if anybody has the answer. No one did, so Ms. Jenkins works it on the board. She combines the like terms and asks, "What kind of equation is this?" No one answers. Most students are not even looking at the board. She answers her own question, "Addition." She then walks through the steps and ask, "Why do we divide?" Again, she offers the answer, "Use the opposite of the operation." Ms. Jenkins puts another problem on the board and tells students she wants them to work it. Ten students seem to work on it. It is almost time for the class to end. Ms. Jenkins distributes a worksheet for homework.

#### *Researcher's comments and analysis*

This classroom is pretty bare. The desks are arranged in rows about 3-4 students deep. Along two walls are blackboards, windows run along one wall, and there are bulletin boards with a couple of posters on one wall. Student worksheets are hanging on a string that is hung across one corner of the room. There is no computer, but there are textbooks on a shelf by the teacher's desk. This is a depressing room. Ms. Jenkins inexperience showed not only in terms of classroom management, but how she approached the mathematical material and organized the lesson. It was painful to watch. The students were out of control, with only a few trying to do the problems. Students did not know the answers to her

questions about the operations, and the only questions that she asked were related to procedural steps.

### **Classroom B**

**Teacher: Ms. Bitner**

**Grade: 6**

**Subject: Science**

At the beginning of class, the sixth graders, 12 girls and 16 boys, are seated in two sections of rows (three seats deep) with an aisle down the middle. The teacher, Ms. Bitner, a White female, introduces the topic to the mostly African American and Latino students. The topic is a weather project. Ms. Bitner tells the students they are allowed to work either individually or in small groups of two or three. She distributes a handout, which states:

*Each student is required to participate in a weather project. You can work alone or in small groups, however, the topic, type of project, and group members, must be cleared with Ms. Bitner by Friday, March 31, 1999. These projects can take many different shapes and forms...Following are some ideas for projects: make a model, teach a lesson, predict the weather, create some audio/visuals, and design an experiment.*

For the remainder of the class, students rearranged their desks, moved around the room, talked to each other, huddled with classmates, and consulted books on weather that were displayed on a shelf. Ms. Bitner circulated throughout the room, stopping at each desk or group of desks to answer students' questions and to distribute a planning worksheet. Students were to complete the planning worksheet by the end of class. For the most part, students appeared engaged and enthusiastic.

Two girls were observed discussing doing a project on hurricanes and atmospheric pressure. The two girls got very excited thinking about how they could use a small fan to simulate a hurricane. Ms. Bitner told the students "...to read, do some research, do something more than a written report."

Near the end of class, Ms. Bitner asked the students if they needed more time to complete the planning worksheet. Most students answered, "yes." In response, Ms. Bitner announced she would postpone tomorrow's lesson and give students one more day to decide on a project, complete the planning worksheet, and clear the topic with her.

#### *Researcher's comments and analysis*

Throughout the lesson, the students were remarkably respectful and obedient, and on-task. Ms. Bitner used equal parts humor and firmness to keep the students quiet and on-task. She referred to students as "ladies and gentlemen" and used endearments "sweetie," "my love," "darlin,'" and "honeybunch" when talking to individual students. She was quick to compliment, "she's one of my best science students", but also quick to admonish, "I don't remember asking you to talk. The talking part comes later." In this class, Ms. Bitner played the role of a facilitator more than a traditional teacher. It was a much less structured classroom and required more active engagement from students.

## Internal and External Supports

As observed at the beginning of this case study, there is a sense of independence and insularity about Cooper, a reliance on the school's own talents and resources. There is a bit of 'being in the world but not of it' about the school. Cooper staff tended

to see themselves as possessing sufficient expertise within their own school to move ahead without the need for, especially, intervention or assistance from the cluster. Summing up this perspective was an administrator who observed, "The experts [Cooper' teachers] are here, and so Cooper is doing professional development on its own turf, with its own teachers." And yet the school has formed many successful partnerships with outside organizations, including First Union Bank, Big Sisters of Philadelphia, LULAC (League of United Latin American Citizens), the local library, and the local police district.

A number of teachers were involved with the Urban Systemic Initiative (USI), a national program to improve scientific and mathematical literacy. Teachers who have attended USI professional development have returned to their schools and provided turn-around training to their colleagues. One teacher credited her USI experiences for strongly influencing her teaching and also her thinking on how students learn. As a result of her USI sessions, this teacher began incorporating hands-on activities and cooperative learning in groups, relating material to the outside world, and asking students to write about what they had learned. Another teacher spoke highly of both USI and the Penn Literacy Network:

*I've attended a couple of things that were District-wide. When curriculum frameworks came, we had a workshop on the SAT-9. [We got] USI professional development for some of our math and science people who have gotten a lot of hands-on things. Also, learning about systems and making connections among different branches of science. USI training for 4-5 teachers offsite and then turn-around training...Penn Literacy Network has been helpful to individual teachers over the years. It does writing across the curriculum. There's been stuff that start people toward the beginnings of portfolio assessments. This is*

*a powerful tool, but not enough training for it to really take hold and make a difference yet.*

Some teachers grumbled about the cluster staff, saying “they are not doing enough” and “I don’t know what the cluster is supposed to be doing.” One teacher said:

*[We get] little support from cluster. When we were part of a region, [a larger citywide structure] we had an Instructional Support Teacher for a day a week. She would help with the classrooms. Since [there has been] a cluster, no support. Haven’t seen the TLN people, may be that’s personnel shake-ups. Seventy-five percent of our kids are Below Basic [on their SAT-9]. If we don’t get support, we’ll be ‘Keystoned’ [reconstituted]. Sometimes an outsider is helpful, and we’re just not getting that anymore.*

Another teacher said:

*I don’t think they’ve [cluster] impacted my life as a teacher. [The TLN] comes to our school [and shares math strategies]...Any representative could do that... When the cluster office came to a Saturday School meeting, I found that—I don’t want to say I was offended—but I was very turned off. [The cluster office] wanted us to limit Saturday School just to eighth graders. I was real annoyed at that...They wanted Saturday School teachers to tell parents not to send their non-eighth grade students! We couldn’t do that! [In the end, the teachers did not limit Saturday School to eighth graders.]*

There seemed to be a perspective, at least among teachers, that the cluster was simply a short arm of the District, and not a separate entity. That is, there was an “us” and “them” feeling at Cooper— “us” being Cooper faculty, staff, and students, and parents, and “them” being most everyone else.

## Conclusion

Like most urban middle schools, Cooper is continually challenged by understaffed classes, inexperienced teachers, and the loss of experienced teachers. New teacher leaders are emerging, but not fast enough. Many of the remaining experienced teachers are overwhelmed with the task of covering classes other than their own. Teacher recruitment and retention are perennial concerns. As late as November 2000, one eighth grade class did not have a permanent teacher. Compounding staffing issues are student concerns. Ninety-two percent of the student population is low-income, and 23 percent are classified as requiring special education. Describing the student population, one administrator frustratingly exclaimed, “I have 80 kids taking medication. I have a small pharmacy! And God knows how many aren’t diagnosed.” And, increasingly, according to one administrator, parents are depending on Cooper’ teachers and staff to assume more parental responsibilities, including after-school tutoring and Saturday School.

Remarkably, though, from 1995 to 1999, Cooper experienced a dramatic increase in their reading, math, and science scores. The school has creatively responded to low test scores and low student attendance by challenging a culture that celebrated athletics and ignored academics. “We’re changing the way we operate,” said an administrator. More specifically, Cooper has implemented incentive programs to entice students to come to school on time and stay for the day. A new school-wide honor roll publicly recognizes student achievement. Two new programs, Skill Day and Saturday School, were adopted to familiarize students with prototypical SAT-9 questions and to provide academic help to students at or near failing. The school’s five small

learning communities provide the necessary organizational, structural, and, perhaps most importantly, communal support, for students and teachers.

Cooper has moved ahead aggressively to computerize academic and attendance data that has enabled staff to track the academic status and progress of individual students and SLCs, as well as student attendance, both individually and by SLC. Detailed computer spreadsheets allow staff to target individual students and SLCs that need special attention. But as one administrator observed, detailed spreadsheets can take an urban school only so far; they cannot compensate for teacher vacancies, teacher flight, leadership voids, and parental disengagement.