

Introduction

These seven cases are the product of several years of study of three elementary schools, two middle schools and two high schools that are part of the Philadelphia School District and were part of the *Children Achieving* Challenge systemic reform which began in 1996. Through numerous school visits, researchers from the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) and Research for Action (RFA) took the pulse of the *Children Achieving* reform, and gathered a sense of how the reformers' vision and strategies were interpreted by those implementing it at the ground level. Each case study tells a story that raises interesting questions. Discussions about decisions made and actions taken may help future school leaders as they prepare to tackle the kinds of situations these cases outline.

Elementary Schools

Elementary Schools showed the most progress during *Children Achieving*. There were many reasons for this including a focus on literacy, the establishment of full-day kindergarten, and content-based professional development. The three cases presented are examples of what was rather typically seen in schools making steady improvement.

At **Evans Elementary School** teacher leadership played a powerful and critical role in creating spirit and direction for the school. Prior to the Challenge reform, teachers at Evans had already adopted the Coalition of Essential Schools reform model as a means for bringing about change. The unified focus on this model buoyed the teachers through several principal changes until the current principal arrived ready to implement the *Children Achieving* agenda. With a strong professional community already in place, the principal developed additional sources of leadership that helped to maintain the momentum needed to build and sustain change. Evans is a good example of how distributed leadership can be an effective management tool.

Evan's principal brought a focus on literacy to the school. She encouraged the development of a strong parents group which had the help of an outside parent organizing group, the Alliance Organizing Project (AOP), funded and supported by the *Children Achieving* Challenge reform. In addition, the principal effectively utilized the skills of an effective cluster staff member whose focus was on teaching and learning. By using the leadership of the teachers, parents and cluster in addition to her own personal skills, she could expand and deepen the sense of ownership for the reform, broaden the impact, and accomplish more than she alone would have been able to do.

Elements of *Children Achieving* were evident at Evans. *Children Achieving's* emphasis on student achievement helped to reinforce what the teachers and principal were trying to do. The strong parents' organization and the use of the AOP were part of the reform's agenda as was the focus on early literacy. In some instances, *Children Achieving* underscored previous endeavors, in others, *Children Achieving* provided the impetus for change.

Redding Elementary School is an organization that built on an historical strength as a way of improving teaching and learning. The library, always important at Redding, became even more so, after the school received additional funding to add library staff, and after parents, teachers, and the principal worked together to make the library a central part of instructional reform. School staff members adopted the Library Power reform, opened the library to parents and pre-kindergarten children, and taught students at even the youngest grades to take-out books independently. In addition, the librarian became a valuable resource to teachers, gathered supporting materials for their lessons and offered collaborative programs that complemented what was happening in the classroom.

At Redding, there was a shared commitment to creating a real learning community and to improving the school. The principal was hardworking and dedicated and made the school more child-centered. Her leadership in building a school that was broadly collaborative separated it from other schools. Under her leadership the entire school community created a proposal

for their own school reform. She believed in working with new teachers and in finding good professional development opportunities for all teachers. While the school was an inviting and comfortable place for parents, they never became involved in the governance of the schools.

The library focus at Redding reflected the *Children Achieving* emphasis on both early literacy and student achievement. The establishment of full-day kindergarten, also a result of *Children Achieving*, along with the early literacy focus and the strong library program all helped to increase student achievement especially in the early grades. In addition, *Children Achieving's* accountability system created a positive pressure on teachers to encourage them to put forth their best efforts.

Ward Elementary School illustrates how a dedicated principal's inability to build internal social capital to support change ultimately limited the impact of her own efforts. The principal demanded much of herself and her staff and, not unlike David Hornbeck, the superintendent of the Philadelphia School District at the time, had a strong belief in *Children Achieving*, but was unable to garner a shared belief among teachers and parents.

The principal was effective in maintaining strong partnerships with neighboring universities and community organizations and did raise additional funding from outside resources. Test scores increased but she never developed staff allegiance to the reform in the school; there was a feeling of compliance but not enthusiasm. The consequence was

poor staff morale and a lack of belief in and support for *Children Achieving*.

In many ways, Ward exacerbated the negatives of the *Children Achieving* reform. Just as the reform with its ten point plan too often overwhelmed those trying to implement it, so too, at Ward, the technocratic approach of the principal was often too much for the Ward staff. Instead of buffering the constant demands from central office, the principal imposed them all on the staff believing that good results would follow. And while there was some increase in student achievement, staff members resented the numerous new initiatives and never developed the camaraderie or energy needed to bring lasting change.

Middle Schools

Middle schools in the Philadelphia School District share several problems including teacher turnover, which is the highest in the city. Middle school teachers constantly mention student discipline as a major concern and the teacher turnover is partially a reflection of this reality. Likewise a constant influx of new teachers only adds to classroom instability and to poor student behavior. The two middle schools reviewed in our case studies, Baker and Cooper, are atypical of others in Philadelphia and have a greater than average record of success in the Philadelphia School District.

When the *Children Achieving* reformers identified **Baker Middle School** as a low performing school, they did the school a favor. Baker was placed in a

'school support process' because of low student performance and this gave Baker's new strong, effective principal the leverage for change that she needed to motivate and lead the staff. The principal quickly made organizational changes that helped to reduce the feeling of chaos in the school. Then she worked with the staff to identify and implement a whole school reform model, Talent Development. The small learning communities, which are part of Talent Development, were well used by staff and helped to create closer relationships between teachers and students.

Children Achieving reform strategies worked at Baker, and together with a strong principal and a motivated staff brought some increases in student performance but little or no progress in math. One reason for the improvement in test scores is the result of time spent on test preparation exercised, much of it of the drill and kill variety. Still some instructional change has been made at Baker.

Cooper Middle School has a talented and stable teaching force that worked collaboratively to improve instruction. When a new principal arrived, he put a new emphasis on academics—from the simple step of establishing an academic honor roll to the more complicated step of using standards to improve curriculum. At Cooper, grades now matter and students and teachers know it.

Cooper staff relied on themselves, rather than on external partners to create new strategies to change instructional practice. Whether this

provincialism at Cooper is a strength or a weakness may only be answered in the next few years as Cooper teachers retire and new teachers change the mix that has been fairly stable for some time.

Cooper staff effectively use data to make school and instructional decisions. When data was examined to look at student attendance, for example, administrators could more easily identify and target problem areas and solutions. Teachers also examined student test data and then worked to increase student performance by using the *Children Achieving* curriculum frameworks to develop new strategies.

The small learning communities, part of the *Children Achieving* strategy, were especially strong at Cooper and helped to decrease student discipline problems and create positive relationships between teachers and students. They had, however, limited impact on teaching and learning.

High Schools

High schools in the Philadelphia School District showed almost no progress over the course of *Children Achieving*. They have entrenched belief systems that were the hardest to change of all three grade levels. The teachers typically doubted students' abilities to succeed and showed the most skepticism in believing that any reform can bring substantial or lasting change.

High schools received the least support from the *Children Achieving* reformers who concentrated mostly and first on elementary schools and then

middle schools. There was no constant focus on improving high school. In addition, the size of the high schools makes change harder since small improvements tend to get lost.

Finally, Philadelphia students arrive in high school already far behind. By the time they have reached ninth grade many students are performing far below grade level and the change needed to bring them to a basic level is enormous.

The principal at **Memorial High School** took on the hard issues at the heart of *Children Achieving*. He strongly believed the 'mantra' of Superintendent David Hornbeck, that "all means all," that every child can succeed. However, his belief alone was not enough to garner the support from the teachers in the school and his failure to build internal capacity led to low teacher morale and a teacher mindset of "us against them."

The school had strong teacher-student rapport partly due to the success of the small learning communities. This success, however, did not extend to improving curriculum and instruction in any meaningful way. While the principal tried to bring instructional improvement by imposing a new math curriculum and other instructional strategies, his autocratic approach did more to anger staff who were excluded from these decisions than to create any real momentum for change.

The teachers needed more internal supports such as time for planning and professional development opportunities in order to build an internal capacity that could lead to sustained student improvement.

Walker High School is a predominately Latino school where too many teachers have a cultural bias that gives them low expectations for their students. Against this difficult environment, a new principal, himself a graduate of the high school and a product of the community, entered as an advocate for the students and the reform.

He instituted structural changes that laid the groundwork for real instructional change including block scheduling and the adoption of the Talent Development reform model that included the creation of ninth grade academies.

The teachers were less receptive to the *Children Achieving* reform than in other schools, seeing it instead as just one more attempt in a long line of attempts to bring change. They had a wait-and-see-attitude which made it difficult for the principal to build any real internal support for *Children Achieving*.

There was little real evidence of the impact of the reform other than the adoption of the Talent Development model which was approved by *Children Achieving* reformers.

From the Editors:

This case study notebook will be, we hope, a helpful tool for educators working with current and potential school leaders who are interested in tackling the enormous challenges that exist in urban schools.

In each notebook, we have provided an overview of the *Children Achieving* Challenge theory of action, a brief

history of its inception, and a review of research methods used by researchers at the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) and Research for Action (RFA). In addition, we have included a glossary that explains some of the terms and acronyms found in the cases.

Finally, each case begins with what we feel are questions and thoughts that are central to each case. Many educators will find other questions at the heart of the cases and we encourage them to do so.

These cases tell a story of the implementation of a systemic reform in the sixth largest school district in our nation; they also tell very real and human stories that are easily transferable to many schools and school districts across the United States.