

Walker High School Case Study

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Walker High School

School Context: (All statistics from 1998-1999 school year)
Enrollment: 2,425
Grades: High
Student Ethnicity: 18% African American; 2% Asian; 77% Latino; 3% White
Low Income: 91%
ESOL: 24%
Special Education: 19%
Suspension Rate: 44%

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
Walker High School	32%	27%
Citywide high school average	47%	49%

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

	1995-1999	1999-2000
Walker High School	75%	64%
Citywide high school average	54%	63%

Promotion Rate: Percent of students who graduated in four years

	1995-1999	1999-2000
Walker High School	32%	45%
Citywide high school average	49%	60%

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	1.00%	2.58%	2.20%	5.27%	4.60%
Reading	8.21%	12.37%	12.93%	20.44%	24.40%
Science	0.00%	.79%	1.46%	2.64%	5.60%

Introduction

Walker High School is a large Philadelphia comprehensive high school with a predominantly Latino student population. Unlike other Philadelphia high schools, Walker enjoys a new, well-maintained facility, a relatively stable faculty, and dedicated, if small group of parents ready to support the school.

After the *Children Achieving* reform began, Dr. Jones, a new principal came to Walker and quickly embarked on an ambitious reform initiative and adopted a whole-school reform model, Talent Development. His effort improved school climate and established a new school organizational structure. Changes such as the establishment of a Ninth Grade Academy and block scheduling contributed to creating closer, more caring relationships between teachers and students. While the majority of Philadelphia high schools struggled to adopt some aspects of *Children Achieving*, Walker was one of a few to attempt a significant reform effort.

Some of these have paid off. For example, the school has shown promising gains in the ninth grade as a result of the reform's concentration on the creation of a Ninth Grade Academy. However, despite the principal's hard work and good intentions, the reform has not had an equal impact on the core areas of curriculum and instruction. We explore some of the possible reasons for this below, including a large, but overcrowded school building, a lack of resources, and a culture of low expectations for students.

School Context

A Safe Haven in a Distressed Community

Walker High School sits in the heart of a community that is home to one-third of Philadelphia's Latino community. In addition to Latinos, some African Americans and a small number of Whites live in the area. The Latino population consists predominantly of Puerto Ricans who migrated since the 1950's looking for greater economic opportunity.

The neighborhood has deteriorated greatly since the 1970's, witnessing a steep loss in jobs and a steep rise in poverty and crime. Despite these challenges, "there are a myriad of small and medium-sized community groups, religious congregations, and individuals who have dedicated themselves to renewing the area despite their limited power."¹

Built in 1988, the present Walker High School replaced a crumbling and antiquated facility located several blocks away. The new building represents the culmination of a major organizing effort by the community and the school's former principal to create a new facility. Walker High School is bordered by a cemetery on one side and abandoned factories on the other. The school is unusually spacious for a Philadelphia school and has a 16-acre campus with an open plaza in front and a large athletic field in the back. One teacher observed, "It's not a typical Philadelphia high school. It looks like a community college.

¹ E. Gold, Community organizing at a neighborhood high school: Promises and dilemmas in building parent-educator partnerships and collaborations. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1999, p. 68.

We have a great facility here.” Once you enter the well-maintained school, the campus feels safe.

Walker has many entrances but as part of its adoption of the Talent Development model, it devotes one entry to ninth graders only, while the main entrance is used by visitors and by students in tenth through twelfth grades. This separate entrance for the Ninth Grade Academy opened in the fall of 1999 and allows ninth graders to go directly to their small learning community (SLC) on the third floor. The relative privacy of this arrangement limits the likelihood that mingling with upperclassmen will lead to friction and discipline problems, and creates a sense of cohesiveness and safety.

The building feels safe. In fact, in the 1999 Teacher Survey, Walker teachers reported markedly safer school conditions than other Philadelphia schools.

Ensuring safety and creating a climate conducive to learning have been priorities of the current principal, Dr. Jones, since he came on board three years ago. His commitment to safety was visible during researchers’ visits to the school. At one point, he asked the police to block the street in front of the school to prevent gang members from disturbing students. Since then, the city has posted police cars outside the school every morning and afternoon, permitting only parents and city buses to enter the street. In addition, every morning the principal, himself stands at the entrance as students walk through metal detectors. Parents have also identified safety as a major concern and with the help of Alliance Organizing Project (AOP), a parent organizing group, they have worked to improve conditions at the school.

Although the building is clean and calm, it is overcrowded. Originally built to hold 1,900 students, the school now houses 2,400. The school cafeteria is bright and spacious compared to other Philadelphia high schools. Nevertheless, because of the overcrowded conditions, lunch times must be staggered with some students assigned to have lunch as early as 9:30 a.m.

School Context

With the decline of the community’s once thriving manufacturing base after World War II, jobs and middle class residents fled to the suburbs, leaving behind a racially isolated population in an area with one of the highest rates of abandoned property in the nation. Schools in the neighborhood provide only a temporary respite from the hurdles of poverty, unemployment, drugs, crime and inadequate health care that young people must cross in their passage to adulthood.

Today, of the approximately 2,400 students who attend Walker High School, 78 percent are Latino, 18 percent are African American, three percent are White, and two percent are Asian and others. Most come from low-income families, whose first language is not English.

Walker High School derives its current identity from a blend of past and present. As a school that produced the workers that built this once flourishing industrial community, Walker displays the handiwork of its current students with pride and celebrates the rich cultural heritage and linguistic diversity of the community. At the same time, these aspects of the school echo negative stereotypes about Walker students, who are often characterized as

limited by “language barriers,” or by their “vocational/non-academic” career choices.

As you enter the large, well-maintained school building, you notice evidence of the kind of craftsmanship that once typified this formerly industrial community. In the spacious atrium, teachers excitedly point out examples of student work arrayed beside portraits of former principals and ceramic murals celebrating Puerto Rican and African American culture. A shiny metal owl, the school mascot, sculpted by students in the school’s welding class, stands proudly in view. Teachers often invite outside guests to enjoy a meal in the elegant faculty restaurant lounge run by students who are learning restaurant management. Towards lunchtime, aromas of fresh-baked pastries waft from the culinary arts classrooms.

The hallways hum with a mixture of English and Spanish. In the central office, bilingual signs are the norm and the principal and some teachers talk with students and parents in Spanish. Students joke around in Spanish in the cafeteria.

Use of Spanish is generally accepted in this building, although it might not be necessarily welcomed throughout the school. According to the cluster staff, some teachers view bilingualism as a deficit rather than an asset. The Walker cluster bears the stigma of being the “ESOL” (English as a Second Language) cluster and has a difficult time filling teacher vacancies. This unfavorable image permeates student culture as well. One parent leader reported that African American students sometimes complain that the school is a “Spanish” school that does not serve their needs.

Walker’s six small learning communities (SLCs) and two additional programs

reflect the divide between an academic versus a vocational emphasis. Some SLCs are perceived to have an “academic” focus, preparing students for college, while other SLCs with specific “vocational” focus are perceived to be less rigorously academic. In addition, the school offers two programs for students with special needs: a multicultural program for ESOL students and a Twilight School for students who are at risk of failure because of absenteeism, behavior problems, or family situations. The school is trying to alleviate the tracking inherent in having both academic and vocational SLCs by implementing a core curriculum for all students. The newly established Ninth Grade Academy is expected to contribute to this effort. Currently, however, the perceived academic and vocational divide remains.

A New School Identity—Talent Development

The effort to promote a new identity for the school is also noticeable in the building. The Ninth Grade Academy, the newest feature of the school, is a separate SLC for ninth graders. It is one of the key components of the Talent Development High School (TD) model adopted by the school this year. Developed by Johns Hopkins University, it attempts to create a caring and family-like atmosphere that addresses the special needs of ninth graders in an effort to stem the high freshmen dropout rate. A large banner that reads “21st Century Ninth Grade Success Academy” hangs over the special entryway. Displays in the Academy hallways tout student accomplishments, show attendance data, and list the names of honored students. The

Academy's goal (ninth grade promotion) and the strategies (creating teams) are visually enforced by motivational slogans posted in the hallways, such as "Team A: Targeting to the 10th grade," "Team B – Best of all," "Team C, the Champion!" and "Team D, Dare to Succeed."

Summary of Changes in Achievement

As part of its *Children Achieving* reform agenda, the School District of Philadelphia adopted a system of performance measures and goals for each individual school, based on Stanford-9 Achievement test scores, test participation rates, and staff and student attendance. The system is called the Performance Responsibility Index (PRI). From 1996 to 1999, the combined PRI score for Walker increased from 27 percent to 34 percent, although the school's earlier score was 13 points lower than the District average, and its later score was 16 points lower. Walker's ten-point gain paralleled the average gain (10.5) made by high schools in the District during that period.

An analysis of Walker's PRI data from 1996 shows that the school's average daily attendance was significantly lower than the average for other city high schools that year. By 1999, Walker's student attendance had dipped even lower, while the high school average citywide had risen. The principal justified this by saying that non-traditional students, such as students from the Twilight School and others with long-term absences, were included in the data. Walker staff attendance paralleled the average attendance of high school staff. Walker's persistence rate—the percent of students graduating in four years—increased slightly 1996 to 1999,

but was still below the high school average.

Walker's SAT-9 Scores rose slightly during this same period. At the high school level, the test measures eleventh grade performance only. The school's reading scores increased most significantly, rising from 8 to 20 percent from 1996 to 1999. However, Walker's reading score remained 17 points lower than the high school average. Scores for math and science were also lower than the average high school scores in the District, but the gap was not as significant as it was for reading.

It is important to note that rigorous reform efforts started late during the *Children Achieving* years at Walker. As mentioned earlier, the new principal came to the school in 1997 and the school first implemented the Talent Development reform model in 1999, placing a stronger academic focus on the ninth grade. Positive results from the reform started to emerge in the later years.

The Philadelphia Education Fund reported dramatic improvement in a survey of Walker ninth graders they conducted during the first year of Talent Development implementation. The percentage of students promoted to the 10th grade increased by 65 percent from 1998 to 1999. Ninth graders also made a significant gain in math test scores. An abbreviated form of the SAT-9 was given during April 2000. These scores were compared to results on the eighth grade SAT-9 and scores rose.

The school is beginning to make promising gains in the ninth grade. As these ninth graders are promoted and as the implementation of Talent Development expands to the whole school, the school may see more significant improvement in achievement.

Leadership

Like many other comprehensive high schools in Philadelphia, Walker High School had a turnover in principals during the middle of the *Children Achieving* initiative. Dr. Jones came on board in the fall of 1997, upon the retirement of the former principal, who had led the school for 12 years.

Previously a principal in one of the neighborhood's middle schools, Dr. Jones entered Walker High School with over 25 years of experience in the Philadelphia School District. A Latino male, he is seen as a "product of the North Philadelphia Latino community" he currently serves.

Dr. Jones demonstrates a commitment to the community and enjoys the respect of parents who regard him as a successful Latino who was himself a graduate of Walker High School. He attended the local community college and went on to earn his Ph.D.

An advocate for change, Dr. Jones models high expectations for students. He has set safety and organizational change as priorities in his reform. However, his instructional vision remains unclear.

The Principal Echoes the *Children Achieving* Philosophy: All Children Can Achieve

Dr. Jones openly affirms his confidence in his students' ability to school staff and the larger community. He urges people to realize that it is adults who need to change their attitudes and approaches to students. In an interview, he said:

My philosophy is that the only reasons why we are here are because of students...Educators have to change our mentality. We need to approach our students from the point of view that our students DO HAVE the ability and capability to be successful...we have to raise expectations, and we have to demand more and we have to insist.

While he is aware that some teachers take a far more pessimistic view, he emphasizes what is possible. Describing the qualifications for a teacher leader position, he said,

[Effective team leaders] focus on what we have. They extend a positive attitude to their students. They don't complain about how behind the students are...They accept where the students are and work from there.

Despite his busy schedule, he tries to attend parent/community meetings and reinforces the positive image of the students and the community. In a meeting with community members, he made positive remarks such as, "We have the best kids and the best parents."

The Principal as an Advocate for Change

Like many other high school principals, Dr. Jones focused his early reform strategies on organizational rather than instructional changes. In his first year at Walker, he emphasized school safety and climate. In his second year, he worked on adopting the Talent Development model and employed it as tool for organizational change.

The principal's focus on organizational changes was influenced by his own theory of action: If organizational changes are made to improve school climate and to provide time and opportunities for teachers to collaborate, then student attendance will improve and instruction will improve, and these changes will result in higher student achievement. However, these assumptions did not offer a vision of what effective instruction looks like.

Parent Involvement

The *Children Achieving* reform envisioned a new relationship between schools, parents, and communities. It advocated for more participatory relationships among parents, schools and the community. To foster a more proactive role for parents in school change, *Children Achieving* formed an intermediary group called the Alliance Organizing Project (AOP). The AOP provided training and support for community organizers who in turn brought parents together to address their concerns and collaborate with educators to achieve change. Nevertheless, in many high schools, this vision of empowering parents as educational leaders was not fully realized due to the limited

understanding among school professionals of the nature of this new parent-professional collaboration. (Gold, et al. 2001)

Walker was a rare example of a high school that demonstrated the possibility of changing the nature of parent involvement. With the support of the AOP, a group of Walker parents were able to actively contribute to the reform process. They networked with one another, got the school to address their concerns, collaborated with the principal, and set agendas for change. Nevertheless, challenges remained for the school in promoting a constructive dialogue between teachers and parents.

During *Children Achieving*, Walker parents were involved with school reform through several avenues. Chapter I funding made it possible for the school to offer special activities and provide valuable information to parents. While these activities fostered some level of interaction between parents and a few teachers, they did not provide a place for parents to address their concerns or to participate as leaders in school change.

The school also established and elected a Local School Council. At least 30 percent of Walker parents had to participate in the election in order for the representatives to be recognized as legitimate. However, many parents did not perceive the voting process as valid. They believed parent representatives were selected because of their close relationship with teachers rather than their ability to represent and advocate for parents and the community.

AOP supported Walker parents to play a more proactive role in school change. Recruited and trained by AOP staff, a small group of parents came together to launch two successful initiatives.

In 1998 a group of parents organized a safety campaign that resulted in getting lights for the outside of the building. This effort made both parents and students feel more comfortable attending evening school events. Parents also succeeded in getting lights for a nearby underpass where many youngsters had been mugged going to and from school.

The parent group was also concerned about student achievement. The group identified low reading scores as a major concern and worked closely with the school librarian to implement a reading campaign. Concerned that students were not reading outside of classes, parent leaders surveyed the students on what literature they were interested in reading after school. Armed with this information, the parents then collaborated with the librarian, to write grants to raise funds for the purchase of new books. Today, the library has a special section filled with reading materials requested by students.

Parent leaders were also part of the process of adopting the Talent Development program. During the planning year of the initiative, some parents joined teachers and students on a trip to visit Talent Development schools in Baltimore. After the trip, parents were invited to attend a faculty meeting to report on what they observed and to voice their opinions about the model.

AOP brought parents together to identify issues that are important for their children's education. It provided parents with a secure environment for skill-building and helped them organize strategies for school change.

Principal's Role in Promoting Parent Involvement

Walker parents also worked well with the school principal. As mentioned earlier, the principal was "a product of the community," and believed that parent involvement was critical for school improvement. He reinforced the notion that parents and students are the school's "clients." His vision of parent involvement was to include parents in various decision-making processes at school. He valued parents as resources and collaborated with them to improve school safety. The parent group was invited to be a part of the principal's leadership team. However, the idea of parents as educational leaders has not been widely accepted by teachers. There is not a forum for parents and teachers to come together as partners. Teachers rarely attended parent-led meetings, and parents were seldom invited to SLC meetings to share their ideas. Walker has a positive principal-parent relationship; nevertheless, integrating parents and teachers in the reform effort remains a challenge.

Adoption of a Whole-School Reform Model

The Role of the Principal in Implementing Change

While the *Children Achieving* initiative was launched in fall 1995, Walker began its reform efforts in earnest when Dr. Jones came on board in 1997 and began

to identify strategies for change. The *Children Achieving* plan advocated adoption of a whole-school reform model. However, apart from identifying various models, the District and cluster did not offer any substantial resources or assistance. Several other high schools were planning on implementing the Talent Development model in particular, and District staff attempted to bring the participating principals together. However, the group never developed. Unsupported by the District and the cluster, Dr. Jones made this a personal endeavor. Despite the challenge of communicating the reform plan throughout such a large school, incorporating outside consultants into the school community, and implementing the model faithfully without sufficient resources, Walker High School became one of the first Talent Development high schools in Philadelphia.

Talent Development Model

Talent Development was first introduced to Philadelphia middle schools in 1995 and was adopted in high schools in 1999. Developed by Johns Hopkins University's Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk, the model provides a comprehensive package of specific changes in school organization, social relations, and instruction for students. The model design calls for implementation to occur over three years: one planning year and two implementation years, with school reorganization as the first priority followed by changes to instruction. Dr. Jones received information about Talent Development at a cluster meeting in May 1998 and immediately contacted the local Talent Development

organizational facilitator who was promoting the model for use in Philadelphia high schools.

Communicating About the Reform to the School Community

The school started to plan for the adoption of Talent Development in the fall of 1998. In the fall of 1999, the Ninth Grade Academy and a Twilight School, which placed students with severe behavior problems in an after-hours alternative school program were both established. Small Learning Communities were reconfigured as a result of the creation of the Ninth Grade Academy, and professional development focused on instructional methods and curricula for the Talent Development program.

The principal worked closely with the Talent Development organizational facilitator and at the same time, tried to make collaborative decisions with teachers and parents about the adoption. Teachers and parents insisted on the need to "adapt" Talent Development to the special needs of Walker. For example, prior to the Talent Development adoption, some math teachers obtained training for the Integrated Math Program recommended by the Urban Systemic Initiative, part of the District emphasis on science and math curriculum. Some felt the new Talent Development curriculum was not aligned with these efforts. Parents and ESOL teachers expressed concern that Talent Development was designed for Baltimore schools with a predominately African American population and did not sufficiently address Walker's bilingual/bicultural issues.

Responding to these concerns, the principal promised that the school would shape its own Talent Development model, explaining to staff, “We need to mold our own structure, given our strength and talents. We will build the Walker model.” However, the principal found it extremely challenging to communicate about these changes in a school as large as Walker. Despite several attempts to obtain teacher buy-in, a teacher vote to accept the changes never reached the same 75 percent approval rate of the initial vote to adopt. The principal, however, insisted on the change and the adoption proceeded. As a result, resistant teachers became critical of the Talent Development consultants and of the principal whom they perceived as more allied with them than his own teachers. Reflecting on the adoption, Dr. Jones said,

I think it was both perception and reality. People perceived the Hopkins’ staff was making decisions. That was not the case, but people saw the Talent Development staff making the decisions on what happens next year. Part of it was that whenever people had questions about Talent Development, they went to the Hopkins staff. He responded to their questions without informing or checking with me. That made people think he was making the decisions.

To resolve staff’s anxiety about being taken over by an outside partner, the principal sent a memo to staff explaining that the Talent Development representative served the school as a consultant, not as a decision-maker.

The Lack of Resources: Another Challenge for Implementation

The lack of resources also affected the implementation of the Talent Development program. For example, one important aspect of implementation was the creation of Small Learning Communities (SLC), including a self-contained SLC for the ninth graders, with its own separate entrance. This posed a quite a challenge for a school with limited resources.

The direct cost for implementing the Talent Development model averaged \$180,000 per school. It was funded through state and District-allocated Title I funds, school budgets, the U.S. Department of Education and private foundations such as the Pew Charitable Trusts. These funds covered the costs of Talent Development consultants, facilitators, facility renovations, marketing materials, curriculum consultation and professional development.

According to the Talent Development organizational facilitator, Walker’s costs have been higher than the average. While the School District of Philadelphia and Johns Hopkins University provided some funding, the school had to pay for the increased staff time required for block scheduling and professional development, additional costs for physical changes to the building and hiring teachers for Twilight School. Because *Children Achieving* emphasized the adoption of a comprehensive school reform model and Talent Development was one of the models recommended by the superintendent, Dr. Jones assumed he would receive more support than he ultimately did. His disappointment is reflected in the following comment:

It [extra resources] was promised, but instead now they [the central office] tell me to use plan B. There is not enough juice in the orange to squeeze out plan B.

Despite these challenges, in the fall of 1999, Walker was one of the first high schools in Philadelphia to adopt the Talent Development model. Several other schools would adopt the program the following year. Talent Development brought about several changes including:

- 1) **Implementation of block scheduling.** Block scheduling contributes to creating a more orderly environment by reducing the number of times students pass through the halls from room to room. The new system also offers students an opportunity to earn eight credits rather than five in a year, providing an incentive to advance more rapidly and helping improve the school's promotion rates. Block scheduling also enables students to concentrate on one subject and attain a greater depth of knowledge. Longer classroom periods permit students to master each step before proceeding ahead and gives teachers greater latitude to develop creative instructional approaches and encourage student interaction.
- 2) **Creation of a Ninth Grade Academy.** By organizing a separate, self-contained program for ninth graders, the school provides a more nurturing environment for this vulnerable population. The

intensive academic preparation provided by the Academy curricula better equips incoming students to make a successful transition to the demands of high school. Interdisciplinary teams of teachers share a daily common prep period to give them time to develop supports for individual students, as well as time to create team activities.

- 3) **Autonomous, self-contained Small Learning Communities.** All SLCs have been reconfigured to include a core curriculum and a career focus, with the aim of bridging the academic and vocational divide.
- 4) **More professional development opportunities for teachers.** Talent Development staff provided a summer institute and on-going instructional support for implementing the Talent Development curricula.
- 5) **Creation of a Twilight School.** The Twilight School was established to remove students with discipline problems from regular classes. Students with severe behavior problems were sent to this after-hours alternative school program.

Professional Community

Too Big To Be Unified

Walker has a large but stable faculty of 154 teachers. While many Philadelphia

comprehensive high schools suffer from a high turnover of teachers, Walker has been successful in keeping experienced teachers. But despite this relative stability, the sheer size of the building inhibits teachers from coming together as one community.

During the adoption of the Talent Development Model, the large size and the complexity of the organization at Walker created a barrier to effective communication. Teachers on the third floor complained that they never saw the principal and frequently referred to the administration "downstairs." Some acknowledged that the large size of the school made it extremely challenging for the principal to communicate with the entire staff. Teachers learned about decisions concerning the school through rumor and word of mouth.

A 1999 survey of Philadelphia teachers conducted by CPRE indicates that the level of collaboration among high school teachers was substantially less than among elementary and middle schools. Walker was no exception. Again the size and the complex structure of the high school made it difficult for teachers to come together as a community.

Further compounding this difficulty was the fact that Walker had converted its former "charters" into Small Learning Communities as part of the *Children Achieving* initiative. Teachers had already been assigned to SLCs, and each SLC included students from within each grade level. The introduction of the Talent Development model in 1998-1999 and the creation of the Ninth Grade Academy disrupted these allegiances. At that point, all SLCs were reconfigured to accommodate a separate SLC for ninth graders only. Teachers did not know which community they would be assigned to in the following year and, as a result, felt less

invested in their SLCs. Many of the pre-existing communities stopped holding SLC meetings while the reconfiguration process was underway.

Nevertheless, researchers visiting the school observed some indicators of teacher collaboration. At one of the SLCs, the staff collaborated to create interdisciplinary projects and design a team-taught American Studies course. Provided with the daily common prep time, the Ninth Grade Academy met almost every day to discuss students, and agreed that they enjoyed working in a small team. Other SLCs were less collaborative; teachers instead invested energy in their own departments, especially in math and science.

Teachers' Views on Reform

The 1999 Teacher survey indicated that the perception of *Children Achieving* was not as positive among high school teachers as it was among elementary and middle schools, and again, Walker was no exception. Teachers' skepticism toward reform was also observed during the adoption of the Talent Development initiative. Teachers "distanced" themselves from the reform efforts because it was so closely associated with Dr. Jones and because they had seen other ambitious efforts come and go in the past. One teacher, who supported the principal's decision on Talent Development, reluctantly shared his colleagues' pessimistic view of reform. He noted:

They [the teachers] have this historical perspective. They've seen different principals and superintendents come and go [and] totally disperse what the last leader was doing. So there is a feeling in the building that in two years

or so, Dr. Jones is going to move on to another position...and Talent Development will be gone. A lot of teachers, instead of changing their approaches [according to the initiative], just wait and expect it to go away. It's the way teachers look at administrators and administrative policies. That's a shame because I think Talent Development has a lot of possibilities of making a lot of changes, as long as the administration sticks with it. I think the block scheduling and the higher level of responsibilities SLC created for teachers really make a better learning environment. I hope it continues.

Ninth grade teachers were affected most by the reform. Their professional responsibilities expanded as they assumed the role of nurturers of young ninth graders. Their association with colleagues changed significantly when they were expected to meet daily with small interdisciplinary teams of teachers to discuss their students. Many ninth grade teachers reported "teams" as the best feature of the Talent Development model. They believed that the establishment of the Ninth Grade Academy enhanced students' experience at Walker. In fact, ninth grade students themselves agreed and praised the block scheduling, and the teacher teams, which they said helped to create closer relationships with their teachers. They noted that the Ninth Grade Academy had a caring and supportive environment that was contrary to their expectations about high school.

Teachers' Views on Students

The SLC structure and block scheduling were intended to create a more

cohesive, family-like environment for students. Teachers had an opportunity to get to know each student well and to spot learning difficulties early and intervene before they grew into larger problems. Throughout the school, teachers agreed that the SLC structure was beneficial to the student/teacher relationship. The 1999 Teacher Survey supported this view. Among all the various *Children Achieving* strategies, the introduction of the SLCs, was one of the few changes that teachers believed had a positive effect on school.

In general, Walker faculty felt that SLCs were helpful to students, providing them with a sense of belonging. During the interviews, teachers spoke favorably about their students by saying, "We have good kids," "I love my kids, they are nice kids."

However, there were few teachers who shared the core belief of *Children Achieving* that all children can achieve at high levels. Teachers rarely spoke about their students as academic achievers. The majority of teachers interviewed, even those who most enthusiastically adopted educational reforms in their teaching practices, assumed that their students would not go on to college.

The 1999 Teacher Survey supported this view: Walker teachers scored markedly higher than other high schools in their perceptions of obstacles to student learning that were beyond control. They believed that there were many factors that prevented students from learning, such as lack of basic skills, lack of motivation, high mobility, and poor attendance.

The Talent Development representative described the need to change the mindset teachers have about students in urban high schools, saying:

The bottom line is that schools have been experiencing failure for a long time---; there is a widespread concept that high school kids can't succeed. Our model believes kids can change. We have to start with adults.

Instructional Focus

Although more than half of Walker teachers reported in the 1999 Teacher Survey that they had changed their teaching strategies, classroom observations suggested that the majority of classroom instruction still consisted of traditional lecture and fill-in-the-blank exercises.

The instructional focus, as identified in Walker's School Improvement Plan, was to establish a stronger core curriculum and to work on the basics. Nevertheless, the reality in the past few years has been that more emphasis was placed on reorganizing school structures, rather than on reforming teaching practice. As mentioned earlier, the principal believed that certain structural conditions needed to be in place prior to promoting instructional changes.

One of the big responsibilities as an administrator is...I needed to get rid of [teachers'] excuses [for not changing their practice.] Now that I've done that, it's the time to begin to concentrate on instruction and to improve instruction.

The principal identified block scheduling and the instructional consultation from Talent Development as tools to change instruction.

Block Scheduling—Hopes for Instructional Change

The transition to block scheduling was one of the most significant changes in the school during *Children Achieving*. It allowed for longer instructional periods with time for more in-depth focus. The principal believed block scheduling was the best hope for instructional change. The principal made the decision to implement block scheduling one year before the adoption of Talent Development. Most teachers appreciated block scheduling as a means to create deeper and more positive relationships with students, but not all saw it as a means of making significant changes to their teaching practice.

Block scheduling was introduced to the entire school in 1998-1999, in a kick-off retreat at a major hotel at the beginning of the year for about 50-60 teachers. Anticipating teacher anxiety about this transition, the principal invited an outside facilitator from Talent Development. The principal emphasized in his opening remarks that the school would provide a safe place where teachers could take risks and experiment with this new structure in a "no-fault" arrangement.

The Talent Development facilitator provided a prescriptive format suggesting teachers include a minimum of three activities in each class period. He recommended that teachers maintain the use of individual assessment tools, but adopt a range of other strategies, such as peer critiquing, peer discussion to talk about the learning process, and cooperative learning. Following this retreat, teachers were provided with other workshops on how to teach in larger blocks of time.

Teachers generally agreed that block scheduling had improved the climate of the school. Staff appreciated the way that fewer class changes had resulted in decreased chaos in the hallways. A number of staff members also reported that students appreciated the opportunity to earn eight, rather than five, credits in a year. Some teachers said that block scheduling had resulted in changes to their instruction. A science teacher noted:

In the science department, we were charged with making a real paradigm shift. It ties in with block scheduling... Teaching in blocks restricts you to teaching fewer concepts. We are continuing to restructure courses. We are trying to devise the best creative techniques.

A math teacher said, "I am doing less chalk and talk because of the block scheduling. I have them doing group work and working cooperatively."

Talent Development as an Instructional Program

The Ninth Grade Academy was the entry point for Talent Development to strengthen instruction throughout the school as a whole. Talent Development staff introduced their ninth grade curricula: Freshman Seminar, Strategic Reading, and Transitional Math, and offered a summer institute for the Ninth Grade Academy teachers consisting of four half-days of instruction.

Professional development for teachers is one of the core components of Talent Development. The most significant support came in the form of "Curriculum Coaches," who provided personalized,

on-site instructional support for ninth grade teachers. During fall 1999, coaches visited the Ninth Grade Academy one-and-a-half days a week, observing classrooms, giving teachers feedback, demonstrating lessons, and answering questions about the new curricula.

The coaches provided opportunities for the teachers to see concrete and "real" examples of what is possible in terms of improving teaching and learning in their own classrooms. However, this kind of partnership with external consultants was generally slow to develop, particularly in a professional community in which a collaborative culture still needed to be cultivated internally. One of the coaches reported that Talent Development was often seen by teachers as bringing organizational, rather than instructional change. "What I saw lacking [in Talent Development] was the instructional component. For reform, we have to have teachers who are prepared."

Despite their intention to implement Talent Development in all classrooms, the coaches noted the difficulty in trying to affect changes to instruction. One coach stated:

[Using TD curricula] has been difficult for veteran teachers and new teachers... Teachers that have two to five years experience, they seem to be more open to change. They are braver. To ask veteran teachers to leave their traditional way of teaching is a leap for them.

Some teachers decided not to use the Talent Development curriculum and requested that the coaches not come to their classrooms. Facing this resistance, one of the coaches identified teachers who were using the curriculum effectively and hoped they would

provide convincing examples to other teachers. Teachers often used the Talent Development coaches for menial tasks, including asking them to get equipment for the classroom, such as overheads, or to communicate with Johns Hopkins about the status of the delivery of materials.

Teachers were generally unexcited about the new curriculum and the coaches' presence at school. Asked what supports they needed from Talent Development, they reported needing more materials and funding to implement the activities that Talent Development recommended. For instructional ideas and support, they would rather go to the department head, or other subject teachers whom they've known for a long time. Coaches' struggles were not a surprise for the Talent Development organizational facilitator who promoted the model to Philadelphia schools. He believed that the coaches needed to establish a good working relationship with the teachers before discussing the instruction.

The Talent Development organizational facilitator plans to emphasize "team building" among teachers, and work to develop a trusting relationship with teachers and Talent Development staff.

Classroom Instruction

In a majority of classrooms observed, the teachers appeared to have control and respect. As mentioned in the previous section, SLCs and Ninth Grade Academy teams provided a greater feeling of community in the classrooms throughout the school.

The following examples show Walker teachers attempted to use the strategies emphasized in the reform, such as

incorporating multiple activities into a block scheduling period, and connecting their subject to the real world. A social studies teacher, Mr. E, is new to the teaching profession having previously worked in the military and private industry. Mr. O is an experienced science teacher. Both teachers are caring, committed to teaching and have excellent classroom management skills. Nevertheless, their perceptions about students' future seem to inhibit them from assigning students more demanding tasks in the classroom.

Sense of Belonging in the Ninth Grade Academy

Mr. E's ninth grade class was not a "typical" high school classroom. A researcher's field notes describes:

With walls covered with students' work and an aquarium and a terrarium, set by the window, Mr. E's Social Studies classroom has a feel of a "middle school" (in a positive way). Mr. E. tries to develop a sense of belonging in the classroom. Everyday he gives students a check-in journal in which they rate their feelings of the day (For example, from 5 -- feels great-- to 1-- I am depressed. If they want to elaborate why they feel that way, they can write in the journal). A sense of responsibility is also enforced: as Mr. E has gotten to know his students, he assigned different roles for students according to their personalities. For example, Lisa, who is outspoken and forthcoming, is a disciplinarian. When she finds students becoming destructive in the class, she tells them to be quiet. Mark, who is an organized person, is a class accountant. He

keeps track of money the class has raised for the upcoming New York trip.

The researchers observed a class lesson about Roman civilization. The 90-minute period consisted of three different activities. First, they read and discussed a poem from ancient Rome. Group work followed and then small groups of students worked together to find answers for a “fill-in-the-blank” exercise assigned by the teacher. The group later had a short homeroom discussion about a fundraising event for their New York trip.

The researcher’s field notes describe the dynamics of the class:

After the group work, one representative from each group goes up in front of the room and reports. Students are extremely focused. They make sure they get the answers by asking the presenter, “Wait, I can’t hear you.” “Hold up!” “Okay. Go on.” The presenters seem to know how to lead. They say “Okay, are you ready?” “Did you get it?”

The students ran the presentation smoothly. The teacher was almost invisible—there was no moment when the teacher had to discipline the class. The teacher did not correct the students’ answers either. All the clarifications and corrections were done by the students. There was a clear sense of trust and collaboration in this classroom. In the interview, Mr. E said that he belongs to a committed team of teachers in the Ninth Grade Academy. The positive tone of his classroom is a reflection of his commitment and trust in his students, buttressed by the support he receives from within the school’s professional community:

I don’t mind doing legwork, organizing the bowling party, the car wash, fundraising. I go visit them at home in the evening. I take kids to look for a job on Saturday. The only way for kids to get ahead is to help them, and get them to trust me. The team leader, Ms. A doesn’t mind doing work after school. She doesn’t mind working for kids. Teachers on this team don’t mind. And as you know, not enough people do that.

However, the worksheet, the major task of the lesson, did not require higher order thinking: it did not challenge the students to think critically or demand more elaborate writing skills. In the interview, Mr. E said if he gets students engaged, then they come to school. He stressed the importance of student attendance. Students’ attainment of higher academic skills was not his priority. He talked about the reality of student life. He does not expect them to proceed with a college education. Knowing the economic background of his students, Mr. E thinks these students need to work immediately after graduation.

Reaching at Attitudes about the Core Belief of Children Achieving

At a tenth grade science class in a “vocational” SLC, the community feeling was less noticeable, although the teacher, Mr. O, knew his students’ personalities well. In his lesson on DNA, the first 10 minutes were used to review the last class, followed by a 40-minute lecture by the teacher.

The researcher's field notes stated:

I observed Mr. C's class because the principal recommended seeing him. Although he was very articulate in the interview, the class was rather traditional. Students received handouts created by the teacher, and Mr. O gave a lecture on DNA replication by using an overhead projector. He spoke most of the time.

The material the teacher prepared was at a high school level, but the lecture merely provided factual information. In the last half hour, Mr. O tried to relate this topic to the real world by addressing the controversy of cloning, but the majority of students remained unengaged.

After the lesson, Mr. O admitted that the class observed had been "dry." He pointed out that it was necessary to disseminate the facts, even if his approach looked uncreative. He said:

The beginning of the lesson was dry, too factual. I didn't have many of the students engaged...But that's part of what I try to do early in the classroom. To get that type of stuff [factual information] out of the way. With this particular lesson, there was certain factual information that I have to teach.

Later in the interview, Mr. O said that he tried to maintain a balance between lecture/memorization and activities. For example, the class will go out to the school pond for an ecological science project once a week, and the class is making a paper model of DNA.

Mr. O is familiar with the *Children Achieving* agendas and he is active in learning new strategies through the Urban Systemic Initiative and other

professional networks, such as the Center for Environmental Education. He implemented an environmental science research project with one select group of students. But he is still figuring out how to fully implement a research project with students from "non-academic" SLCs.

Mr. O explained that he aspires to have students apply what they learn in the classroom to real-world issues, but he is content to have students find practical applications for knowledge, rather than use it to further more intellectual pursuits. He said:

Basically what the benchmarks emphasize is the need to address higher level thinking, and address problem-solving, to embrace five or six main premises of biology and make sure kids understand how they all weave together. If they walk out of my room with an appreciation that biology can help them to figure out what their doctor is saying to them, what's going on when someone they know gets cancer, if they can embrace biology that way as an information-gathering tool, that would be good. Because, to be honest, most of my students are not college bound.

Walker has qualified and experienced teachers with excellent classroom management skills. Because of the Small Learning Community, they know more about their students and many have established trusting relationships with students. Block scheduling created an orderly school climate and time structure in which they could implement more academically challenging curricula. The school also provided various professional development opportunities for teachers to learn new curricula and teaching strategies. Given all the

conditions in place to "reform" curriculum and instruction, Walker's challenge remains changing teachers' assumptions about students' abilities and their future, which stems, in part, from school's long history of producing industrial workers. Classroom observations have shown that the low expectations teachers have for students hinders many of them from going beyond lectures and fill-in-the-blank exercises. Reinforcing the core belief of *Children Achieving*, that all children can achieve at higher levels, is a key to bringing about instructional change and raising student achievement.

Conclusion

Walker High School has a committed principal, experienced faculty and an external partner for reform. A major structural transition was made during *Children Achieving* to use block scheduling and establish a Ninth Grade Academy. Although there was some evidence of a collaborative culture between school leaders and teachers, the school must overcome barriers to change that arise from its vast size, its lack of resources, and a history of low academic expectations. Whether the school can sustain some of the promising improvements it has achieved with its adoption of a whole school reform model and extend them to the next generation of students remains to be seen.