



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

TALENT DEVELOPMENT: A REPORT ON THE SECOND YEAR OF IMPLEMENTATION

A Report Prepared by Research for Action for the Philadelphia Education Fund

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October 2001

Introduction and Methodology

The Talent Development comprehensive high school reform model was designed, implemented and evaluated initially by the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk (CRESPAR) at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. The model is aimed at improving large high schools that face serious problems with student attendance, discipline, achievement scores, and dropout rates. It consists of a number of specific changes in school organization and management, curriculum and instruction, parent and community involvement and professional development. Talent Development has completed its third year in selected neighborhood Philadelphia high schools. The Philadelphia neighborhood schools that participated in our research faced the problems that the reform model aims to address. The overall goal of the Ninth Grade Success Academy (NGA) is to provide a more personal and attentive beginning for students that will enable them to achieve in secondary school and beyond. It is designed to better prepare them academically and socially for the demands and realities of high school and to give them a confident and supportive first step towards a successful high school career. This report focuses on Ninth Grade Academies at two schools.

Key Components of Talent Development and the Ninth Grade Academy

- The Ninth Grade Success Academy is organized and administered as a separate, self-contained program within the rest of the high school. It has its own principal (an Academy principal) whose office is on the premises.
- The Ninth Grade Academy is organized around *teams* that enable teachers and students to better know one another and meet the needs of students by having a smaller overall population, thereby providing more attention to all. Teams of teachers share a common daily prep period and the same 180 students and a team leader.
- The Talent Development curriculum for the ninth grade is divided into two parts. The first part focuses on basic skills necessary for successful entry into high school--strategic reading, transitional math, and a 'freshman seminar'. The second part is a concentrated series of standard 9th grade academic disciplines--Algebra, English Literature, World History, Science.
- Class time is structured into block periods of 86 minutes. Blocks are designed to provide greater depth of subject area and to invite more teacher creativity and student interaction. The belief is that, with fewer classes to attend, students will spend more time on each subject and retain more knowledge as a result. Additionally, blocks contribute to maintaining a more orderly daily environment by reducing the number of passing periods. Blocks also offer the potential for earning eight credits in the ninth grade (five are required for promotion).
- A "Twilight Program" is employed to separate, enroll and assist students with more serious behavioral problems, students who have returned to school after incarceration and students considerably older than standard ninth graders. 'Twilight' meets after regular school hours and was designed to help create a safe and comfortable environment for ninth grade students and teachers.

- Ongoing planning and professional development is available to help implement and sustain the core components of the Talent Development model. Teachers on ‘special assignment’ serve as in-house curriculum coaches. Summer training institutes provide orientation to the specifics of the curricula and instructional methodologies, and opportunities for additional professional development continue throughout the school year.

Methodology

Data was collected for the second year in the Ninth Grade Academies at two participating schools. One school was largely African-American, the other largely Latino. We also conducted one focus group with teachers in an additional school just beginning its implementation of the model. At the two third-year schools, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 34 people, 13 NGA teachers from one school and 17 from the other. Included in our sample were several teacher team leaders. Additionally, we interviewed two Talent Development curriculum coaches and both Academy principals. All interviews took place during the spring of 2001.

Because we wanted to compare last year’s experience with the current year, our initial goal was to interview only second year teachers. However, the realities of public school professional lives did not make that entirely possible. Some teachers from the previous year had left the school, the district and even the profession, and in one school two of last year’s teachers had died. Therefore our sample included some teachers, both veteran and inexperienced, who had only joined their Talent Development schools this year.

All interviews were conducted in person and ranged in length from 15 to 75 minutes. Wherever possible the interviews were tape recorded. Field notes were taken alongside the interviews to gather more descriptive data on the school climate and settings. Although we occasionally witnessed teacher-student interactions, no time was spent inside classrooms during instructional time. All interviews were transcribed and then read and re-read by the research team. Content and inductive analyses were performed and from these themes, typologies and summary findings were identified. Each researcher’s work was reviewed and re-analyzed by other members of the team and the findings discussed to check for clarity and to ensure internal reliability and thematic consistency before any assertions were made or conclusions drawn from the data.

Research Questions

Because the program was entering into its second year of implementation, our research included what teachers had learned in their previous year of work and how they may have built upon it. Our research questions centered around three core areas (team formation and experience, curriculum and instruction, and professional development) and addressed the following overarching topics:

- How did teachers characterize their team experiences?
- What was their perception of the value of being on a team?
- How and in what ways did teachers use the curriculum to meet the needs of their students?
- How and in what ways did teachers take advantage of the resources associated with Talent Development to further their growth as professionals?

FINDINGS

Teams

- In general teachers liked being on a team, and many thought that it was the single best feature of the Talent Development model. The teams with the most stable memberships were also the teams that exuded the most confidence and conviviality.
- Teachers felt that structuring the Academy into teams helped them to know their students better. The team environment allowed them to draw upon their colleagues for additional knowledge about ways to help their students. Teachers agreed that being in teams was a good thing for them and for their students.
- Team leaders played important roles in the growth and development of their teams. However, our data also indicated that successful teams drew upon and utilized the combination of their teachers' experiences and expertise and did not rely solely upon a designated 'leader' to guide their activities.
- NGA teams met on average weekly and shared their experience and knowledge of their students with one another. They spent considerably more time than other Small Learning Communities (SLC) do. However, there is not a mechanism to disseminate team knowledge throughout the Academy. As a result, the 'best practices' of teams remain known only to them.
- Teams did not use their meeting time to help one another with instructional and curricular matters. When teams met they talked mostly about their students and the extracurricular activities they had planned. Teachers report that little or no time was spent discussing how the curriculum worked in their classrooms.

- The absence of a well-developed ‘Twilight’ program put enormous strain on all the teams at Jefferson.

Curriculum and Instruction

- Teachers were comfortable with the overall curriculum, thought that it was appropriate for 9th graders and that it did a reasonably good job of preparing them for high school. Teachers also felt that the curriculum was flexible enough for them to adjust it to fit their own personal styles as well as the needs of their own students.
- With the exception of the one Special Education teacher who thought it didn’t fit with her kids’ needs, teachers in both schools were enthusiastic about block scheduling. They thought it contributed to rather than detracted from their work. Block periods limited the number of classes students had, which helped teachers come to know them better. Blocks also reduced the amount of unstructured time between classes, and that contributed to a more orderly and classroom-centered school environment.
- According to teachers, 86 minute block periods did not really double the amount of material coverage or the amount of knowledge students obtained. Teachers reported that block scheduling allowed them to cover the same amount (perhaps a little more) but with a bit more depth to it.
- Limited conversation occurred between teachers in the same content areas. Most teachers understood and used the curriculum from an individual vantage point, what worked in their classroom and with their kids. Only the math teachers in one school talked enough with one another to arrive at some sort of consensus concerning the larger value of the (math) curriculum. They determined that Algebra needed to occur earlier in the term in order to better prepare students for Geometry in the 10th grade.

Professional Development

- The professional development component of the program did not function as expected. Most teachers had little or nothing to say about professional development and how it affected their classroom instruction and their students’ achievement.
- Coaching was not well implemented in either school. Coaches did not have a clearly identified role to play in the schools. Coaches had their time divided up with administrative duties including record-keeping, substitute teaching, serving as tour guides and providing additional resources. This made it difficult for them to establish close instructional relationships with teachers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Ninth Grade Academy Experience

- Continued careful assessment of what pre-conditions a school has in place helps ensure that the Talent Development model has a better chance of being more fully executed and realized. For example, the absence of a fully functioning ‘Twilight’ program could seriously handicap a school as it did at Jefferson.
- After three years of planning and implementation, teachers and leaders have a lot to offer others from their work. There should be vehicles that allow Talent Development teachers and leaders to share their knowledge, both within the school district and across the country.
- The overall program will continue to have problems with staff retention, poorly qualified teachers, and team stability if schools cannot recruit, support and retain their own teams.

Team Formation and Experience

- Stable team membership creates strong teams. For teams to fully function, the school and Academy need to establish a stable condition for teachers, both new and veteran, to develop and maintain meaningful working relationships with colleagues. At the same time, in the Philadelphia School District, it may be unrealistic to expect to maintain the same team members over several years. Talent Development and its participating schools should be aware of this challenge and develop a support system for successful team transitions.
- Strong teams had experienced and confident teachers who assumed collective responsibility and leadership for their teams. As the NGA continues to clarify and strengthen the team leader role, it also needs to recognize and utilize the resources and leadership skills that all 9th grade teachers bring to their teams.
- The Academy must preserve the time it takes for team leaders to do their work well. Many team leaders continue to face an overwhelming work-load in managing day-to-day functions of their team and the program. In order to become instructional leaders, team leaders need the time for observation, reflection, and professional development opportunities. This dimension of their job needs to reflect the value placed upon it in terms of available time and support.

Curriculum and Instruction

- Overall, providing opportunities for reflective thinking and talking about curricula and instructional matters by teachers would help the program. The scheduling of these opportunities is an important variable in how they get used and valued.
- With the exception of one group of math teachers, little or no substantive discussion occurred around curriculum decisions. Teachers should talk about what modifications they are making and why and how they arrive at those conclusions.

- The Ninth Grade Academy curriculum could be strengthened by facilitated dialogues with 10th grade teachers. This might also have the impact of contributing to the creation of a reform-minded high school.

Professional Development and Coaching

- The work of coaches remained unclear. They played multiple roles depending on the support needed from different constituencies in the program. At times they were a liaison between teachers and the Talent Development office to secure timely instructional materials. Other times they were called upon to act as substitute teachers, administrative aides in record-keeping, mentors to new teachers, and tour guides to outside visitors. Their roles need considerably more clarity and definition. If indeed they are supposed to be curriculum coaches then the program and the administrators must preserve and respect their time and talents to do that.
- In our view, Talent Development coaches should facilitate discussions about and inquiry into curriculum and instructional matters. Without the departmental heads for teachers to go to for subject area concerns, coaches could fill some of this void and help strengthen the relationships within subject areas and across teams.

The Future of Talent Development

- If Talent Development continues to operate on Title I money that is earmarked for whole school reform, at some point the Talent Development model should begin to document how it works as a whole school reform. After three years in two NGAs and expansion into other schools, it seems reasonable to expect that Talent Development begin to show, even if examples are modest in nature, how it can reform the overall high schools in which it operates.

Ideas and Questions for Future Research

- Although teams are central to the Talent Development model, it is not clear whether team relationships are central or peripheral to individual teacher's success and satisfaction with their students and their commitment to teaching as a career. Closer research into the connection between collegiality and its impact on student achievement and individual teacher's commitment to the profession is one area we are interested in investigating further.
- How and for what reasons are teachers modifying the Talent Development curriculum? What criteria are they using and how are decisions to adjust and re-shape content and instruction being made? How effective is the curriculum in terms of student learning and engagement with the materials?
- If coaches are to continue to be an integral component of Talent Development, it is important to understand how their role is defined and how their work is both delivered and received. The potential exists for coaches to serve as in-house professional development

specialist, especially around instruction and curriculum. It would be worth investigating how teachers define their professional development needs and how coaches are used to meet them.

- An interesting and important set of questions has to do with a more careful examination of who owns the reform. By that we mean, what are the mechanisms by which policies and implementations are made and revisited? How do adaptations and adjustments get made and by whom? What criteria are used to adopt and disseminate changes within the classrooms, the teams, the content areas and the program? What is the nature and structure of ownership that participating schools and their staff have in the reform strategies?