
Answering the Call: Lessons Learned from Montgomery County Middle School Magnet Consortium

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Answering the Call: Lessons Learned from the MSMC

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the fall of 2005, Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) opened three magnet middle schools in a portion of the school district with a high minority population and percentage of students receiving free and reduced meals. Funding for the schools was provided through a United States Department of Education Magnet School Assistance Program grant with the goals of improving student achievement and reducing socioeconomic isolation.

The district grouped the schools, Argyle Magnet School for Information Technology, A. Mario Loiederman Magnet School for the Creative and Performing Arts, and Parkland Magnet School for Aerospace Technology, into the Middle School Magnet Consortium (MSMC). MCPS used their current strategic plan, *Our Call to Action: Pursuit of Excellence*, completed in 2004, to develop the blueprint for implementation at the schools. The consortium schools all share common characteristics including an accelerated core curriculum; unique courses and extended learning opportunities; highly effective instructional programs; collaboration among schools, parents, and the community; and similar structure and staffing.

A Peabody College team was asked to look at the planning and 1st year of implementation of the consortium. The team interviewed district office staff, and each team member spent three or four days in one of the three schools. In order to observe, document, and report on the progress of the consortium schools, the team asked the following guiding questions:

1. How does the MCPS MSMC fit within the strategic plan, *Our Call to Action: Pursuit of Excellence*?

2. In what ways does the MSMC demonstrate research-based best practices of middle school reform?
3. What lessons have been learned in the first year of implementation?

In order to better understand the planning and implementation of the consortium, several different information sources were used including interviews with district administrators, building administrators, and teachers, along with document reviews and school observations. Research from *Turning Points 2000* and *Breaking Ranks in the Middle* was used to determine best practices. These practices then were applied to the common elements of the consortium schools in answering the guiding questions.

The study determined that early trend data for achievement, demographic shifts, and school climate is positive in meeting the goals of the MSAP grant and the district strategic plan. It appears that students at the three schools are accessing the accelerated core curriculum at higher levels. Significant evidence demonstrates that students are engaged in the unique courses established by the individual magnet foci, while maintaining opportunities for extended learning when needed. Teachers and administrators articulate and implement elements of a highly effective instructional program. Evidence of collaboration with parents and the community is found in each school, and the district facilitates collaboration among the three consortium schools. While specific schedules differ slightly, the schools have similar staffing arrangements and organization, developed with agreement from the collective bargaining agency for teachers.

Common themes discovered through the case study include:

- High levels of teacher and administrator professionalism
- Quality leadership
- An emerging model for professional development
- Strong academic content
- Concerns about physical plant and appropriate equipment

The study makes several recommendations. Recommendations directed at the MSMC include:

- Planning for magnet school student transition to high school
- Developing plans for the end of the magnet grant
- Further study for evaluation
 - MSA data review

- NWEA MAP expected growth comparisons
- Qualitative review benchmarked by this report

Recommendations for all MCPS middle schools include:

- Developing principal cohorts among all schools
- Embedded professional development focused on learning and instruction
- Ensuring resource availability prior to change implementation
- Exploring heterogeneous grouping in all classes

After a year of implementation, it appears that MSMC schools have been successful in attracting students to unique programs reflecting best practice and achieving the goals of the MSAP grant and the MCPS strategic plan. With continued care and monitoring from administrators and teachers, the probability of long-term success is high.

Chapter 1

MONTGOMERY COUNTY MIDDLE SCHOOL MAGNET CONSORTIUM



“Education, then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of man, - the balance-wheel of the social machinery.” -Horace Mann

Education reform has taken many different shapes as states across the nation respond to an increased urgency for school improvement. In Montgomery County, Maryland, reform efforts to address these needs began in 1999, led by Superintendent Jerry Weast. The Montgomery County Middle School Magnet Consortium was developed in 2004 as a reform initiative to reduce socioeconomic isolation and raise student achievement.

After a year of implementation, a research team from Vanderbilt University began a seven month study to document and report on the progress of the magnet school initiative. The Peabody Team interviewed teachers, building administrators, and central office staff; observed building practices; and reviewed school data and program documentation to prepare this report.

Timeline of reform initiative

Strategic plan

Dr. Weast was faced with a great challenge when he became superintendent of Montgomery County: increasing achievement for all students, while also narrowing the achievement gap in a county with changing demographics. His vision and the strategic plan, outlined in the report *Our Call to Action: Raising the Bar and Closing the Gap*, provided the framework for a comprehensive reform movement that continues to drive change efforts today. A second edition of the strategic plan, *Our Call to Action: Pursuit of Excellence* was completed for implementation beginning in 2004.

The system goals of *Our Call to Action* are:

- ◆ Ensure success for every student
- ◆ Provide an effective instructional program
- ◆ Strengthen productive partnerships for education
- ◆ Create a positive work environment in a self-renewing organization

The Montgomery County Public School District (MCPS) adopted the Baldrige Education Criteria for Performance Excellence, one of three acceptable strategic planning models for *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB). Using this framework, the district developed a strategic plan that clearly outlines a direction for the future. *Our Call to Action: Pursuit of Excellence* is aligned with Maryland's *Bridge to Excellence in Public Schools Act* as well as NCLB. It is the blueprint for the district in achieving its mission: "to provide a high-quality, world-class education that ensures success for every student through excellence in teaching and learning."¹ The following graphic outlines the steps taken during the planning and implementation of the MSMC.

¹ MCPS Strategic Plan (2004), p. iii

Timeline of MSMC

2004-05

- ❖ Grant proposal submitted
- ❖ Notification of acceptance of grant allowed for a year of planning

2004-05 Planning Year

- ❖ Principals for Loiederman and Argyle are chosen
- ❖ Principals and central office leadership planned goals for the program

2005-06 – Year 1 of Implementation

- ❖ Summer of 2005- Principal chosen for Parkland
- ❖ Teachers remaining at Loiederman, Argyle and Parkland and new teachers to the schools signed a 3-year commitment contract to the school
- ❖ Summer professional development given to staff
- ❖ Teachers for 6th grade met to develop lessons and milestone projects
- ❖ Leadership team – principals, assistant principals, staff developer, and magnet coordinators spend time planning for school year
- ❖ Fall 2005 –Schools opened as whole-school magnets
- ❖ Principals continued meeting throughout school year with central office leadership on a monthly basis

2006-07 – Year 2 of Implementation

- ❖ Summer – 7th grade teachers developed lessons and milestone projects
- ❖ Summer professional development given to staff
- ❖ Revision of staff development period
- ❖ Revision of milestone projects
- ❖ Principals continued their monthly meetings throughout the school year with central office
- ❖ Leadership teams continued meeting and planning for 8th grade to be added in Year 3 of implementation

Elementary and high school reform

The Montgomery County Public Schools district office answered the 1999 strategic plan with immediate reforms aimed at raising both academic expectations for all students and providing support for students who needed it. The district plan determined an aggressive profile of achievement for all graduates and developed a trajectory for accelerating the curriculum in order to accomplish this goal. In the elementary level, schools serving at risk students were targeted with lower class sizes and additional programs to support student learning and family involvement. All elementary schools were provided with rigorous curriculum, teacher training, and district support. The high schools also structured their curricula to encourage student access to strong academic opportunities, including International Baccalaureate, Advanced Placement, and college credit programs. Schools serving populations of students at risk established additional supports to close the achievement gap and support students who attempted the more rigorous curriculum. With success and experience, the district turned its attention to reform in the middle schools.

Middle school reform

With a base of success in these efforts, the middle school reform program began with a middle school audit in 2004, followed by a community-wide study of middle schools. Recommendations were made for the 38 middle schools and the final plan was presented to the school board in early 2007. The plan utilizes the latest available research in effective middle school practice, including, *Turning Points 2000: Educating Adolescents in the 21st Century*, and *Breaking Ranks in the Middle: Strategies for Leading Middle Level Reform*.

Turning Points 2000, authored by Anthony Jackson and Gayle Davis, is the update for the 1989 *Turning Points* report from the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development. This edition updates the data regarding middle school reform, refines the recommendations of the original report, and gives new insights into how school leaders can effectively implement them. The National Association of Secondary School Principals issued the *Breaking Ranks in the Middle* report in 2006, which emphasizes that organizational changes will have little effect without accompanying changes to school climate, curriculum, instruction, staffing, and community connections.

Middle school is a critical time of transition for students; they are transitioning from self-contained elementary classrooms to more content-driven environments of larger secondary schools. Additionally, young adolescents make a cognitive shift from concrete to more abstract thinking, and they experience physical and chemical changes in their bodies. The changes result in a period of development more intense and personalized than at any other time in their lives.² The unique challenges students face in this phase of their education must be met with thoughtful planning and courageous implementation.

MSAP grant

As the MCPS middle school reform initiative was unfolding, two of the Montgomery County middle schools were struggling and needed immediate attention. Weast's reform initiative emphasizes using a differentiated approach to provide support and resources where needed most. These two schools, Parkland and Argyle, were both located in "down-county," also known as the "red zone" and are highly impacted by poverty. In order to address the challenges of these two schools, MCPS applied for and received a three-year United States Department of Education magnet school development grant that provided funding to create three magnet middle schools in the disadvantaged zone of the school district. The grant provided for a planning year with implementation during the following two years. It was also determined that the consortium would include a third, new school, Loiederman Middle School.

The planning year allowed time to prepare for significant changes in staffing, curriculum, and programming at the three schools. During this time, principals focused on program development, hiring of faculty, and raising awareness of the programs in the community, while the district and the school leadership worked to equip the staffs at each school for the challenges of their jobs as magnet school teachers. Reflecting MCPS's core value of fair treatment for employees, the district office worked extensively with the union to ensure that teachers were not displaced against their will.

Before opening as magnet schools, the district requested the teachers at each site make a three-year commitment to stay at the school. While some teachers chose to leave their school, the district felt it was

² See [This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents](#), 2003. National Middle School Association.

important to make sure teachers understood the expectations for working at a MSMC school. Working at the new magnet schools meant embracing the vision of the school and preparing for additional accountability and visibility, as well as making a commitment to the professional development program.

The MSMC was formed during the 2005 – 2006 school year, transforming Argyle Middle School into Argyle Magnet School for Information Technology and reorganizing Parkland Middle School into Parkland Magnet School for Aerospace Technology. A. Mario Loiederman Magnet School for Creative and Performing Arts opened its doors for the first time. The stated goals of the MSMC were to reduce socio-economic isolation and improve student achievement.

Purpose of the study

This study examines the planning and implementation of the MSMC to determine if this element of the larger reform effort is “answering the call” as directed in the strategic plan to “raise the bar and close the gap.” The report aims to answer several questions:

1. How does the MCPS MSMC fit within the strategic plan, *Our Call to Action*?
2. In what ways does the MSMC demonstrate research-based best practices of middle school reform?
3. What lessons have been learned in the first year of implementation?

The study reviews the planning and implementation of the MSMC to see how it fits within the context of the Montgomery County strategic plan, and examine the progress the schools have made towards meeting the consortium goals. “The primary goals of the Middle School Magnet Consortium are to improve student performance and reduce socioeconomic isolation.”³ The reform model has four components, which include:

- Accelerated core curriculum
- Unique courses and extended learning opportunities
- Highly effective instructional programs
- Collaborative partnerships among school, parents, and the community

³ MCPS United States Department of Education MSAP Grant

The structure and staffing component of the MSMC will also be examined, because this component reflects best practices research.

MSMC common components

The MSMC Program Booklet⁴ identifies the common components among all schools in the consortium. These components, along with the implemented structure and staffing changes, were the strategies employed by MCPS to accomplish the goals of the strategic plan and the MSAP grant.

Accelerated core curriculum

The academically rigorous Accelerated Core Curriculum promotes high school and college preparation for all students. MCPS has developed a program of studies that provides students earlier access to challenging courses.

MSMC Program Booklet, p. 6

The Accelerated Core Curriculum promotes an academically rigorous program that provides equal access to challenging learning opportunities to all. Students are encouraged to take three years of foreign language for high school credit with the option of a second foreign language in high school. High school credit is offered for students who complete the highest level of English in eighth grade and algebra and geometry in any of the three grades. All students also take physical education/health each of their three years.

Specialized courses and extended learning opportunities

The distinct instructional focus of each magnet school...provides a content-based structure for the curriculum at each school. Interdisciplinary connections are formed around the concepts, content, and thought processes of the school's instructional focus...Each school offers summer and after-school learning opportunities such as academic coaching and support in the core curriculum.

MSMC Program Booklet, p. 6

⁴ Available from <http://www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/schools/msmagnet/media/booklet.pdf>

Magnet programs offer unique opportunities in order to attract students. In each of the three schools, students have classes not found anywhere else in Montgomery County. An additional incentive for students is the ability to take special area classes for high school credit. Students who complete three years in the magnet program will be able to enter high school with as many as nine high school credits. Extended learning provides support systems and additional learning opportunities for students who struggle with content and skills. Typically these are after-school, weekend, or summer programs. MCPS has offered these kinds of opportunities for many years. Each school has programs to assist struggling students in accelerating their achievement.

Highly effective instructional program

MSMC schools provide professional development for teachers and extended learning opportunities for students to create a rigorous instructional program at each Consortium school.

MSMC Program Booklet, p. 8

The program for the MSMC includes a 90-minute professional development period every other day, one and a half staff development teacher at each school, as well as an additional district program, called Skillful Teacher, which is a course offered by the Center for Skillful Teaching and Learning. The professional development instruction follows a research-based pattern: explicit instruction, collaborative planning, classroom application, followed by sharing and analyzing the results.

Highly effective instruction also means the use of best practices in facilitating learning in the classroom. Professional development introduces and reinforces instructional strategies and tools; however, effective instruction must be translated into actual practice.

Collaborative partnerships

MSMC schools have established partnerships with business and community organizations to support the instructional focus of the school...In addition, each school works closely with parents to strengthen school-home partnerships.

MSMC Program Booklet, p. 8

Collaborative partnerships include partnerships with business and community organizations, as well as school and home. Involvement in the community increases available resources for students and influences broader community support for the individual school along with the larger school district. The school must also contribute back to the community in some way. When community collaboration is working at its best, individuals who might not otherwise care about the school's success become allies.

Involvement with parents is extremely important in a magnet school. Because families have chosen to associate with the school, they need to be nurtured, so they feel invested and want to remain.

Structures and staffing

In order to increase the probability of success, the MSMC created a structure that enabled additional professional development, empowered collaboration among administrators and among teachers, and provided additional learning opportunities for students.

All three schools share an eight period schedule known as the A/B Block. Students take four double period classes each day, with each specific class meeting every other day. This provides for eight classes for MSMC students instead of the seven classes offered at out of consortium middle schools. Besides providing an additional elective for students, this gives extended time for teacher collaboration during team planning and professional development cohorts.

Instead of assigning an additional class for the eighth period, MSMC schools schedule Professional Development Cohorts (PDCs) to provide for teacher learning and development.

Organization of report

The format of this report is as follows: the demographic portrait and district overview places the magnet consortium within a contextual climate. The next chapter looks at the components of the federal grant and the data collected thus far. This chapter will examine the implementation strategies used when creating the consortium and look at the success in reaching the grant goals thus far. Individual case studies make up the next three chapters, examining the schools individually as they began this challenging endeavor, and now reflect back on their progress. The

final chapter presents recommendations for the magnet consortium as it moves into year three, as well as considerations for the district-wide middle school reform initiative.

It is also important to place the MSMC within the greater context of magnet schools and middle school reform. MCPS has chosen to use a consortium of whole-school magnet schools as the first phase of middle school reform; however, reform will continue across the remaining thirty-five schools with additional initiatives beginning in the fall of 2007. This report will look at the current practices in the MSMC and compare these efforts with the best practices of middle school reform research and magnet school research. The strategies used to impact curriculum, professional development, and leadership in the MSMC will inform Montgomery County as it continues reform efforts, as well as inform other districts interested in middle school reform.

Finally, by examining the lessons learned in the first year of implementation, this report will assist district and school leadership in strengthening the reform process, making necessary course corrections, and successfully taking to scale elements of the MSMC that may positively impact MCPS middle school reform.

The case studies each emphasize an area of focus. At Loiederman, the focus was on high quality instruction. Leadership and professional development were explored in-depth at Argyle. The Parkland case study examined a rigorous, standards-based curriculum. While each school uses the same template for presenting the findings, there will be differences in emphasis because of the unique questions used in data collection.

Chapter 2

DEMOGRAPHIC PORTRAIT OF DISTRICT AND CONSORTIUM

Montgomery County Public Schools covers 497 square miles of the Washington, DC metropolitan area. With 137,798 students, MCPS is the 17th largest district in the United States. Over the years, some patterns of housing and population movement have defined some concentrations of socioeconomic groups. Of particular interest is the cluster of high poverty schools in the center of the school district. The inner area of the district, sometimes known as the *red zone*, has been identified to address academic achievement issues for students who attend neighborhood schools. Schools in the surrounding area are in the *green zone*. The three schools in the Middle School Magnet consortium, Loiederman, Argyle, and Parkland, are located in the red zone. District and individual school demographics are listed in Table 1.

	Loiederman	Argyle	Parkland	District
African-American	27.7%	45.2%	27.8%	22.9%
Asian	8.6%	15%	12.4%	14.8%
Caucasian	21.0%	11.5%	13.5%	41.2%
Hispanic	42.3%	28.1%	46.2%	20.7%
ESOL	7.1%	6.8%	12.8%	10.7%
FARMS	50.1%	43.5%	53%	25.8%
Males	40.6%	45.7%	62.4%	48.5%
Females	59.4%	54.3%	37.6%	51.5%

Table 1: 2006-2007 Demographic comparisons among MSMC

With 822 students, Loiederman is the largest of the three whole-school magnet schools. Argyle has 733 students, and Parkland is currently the smallest of the three schools with 679.

Testing data

Montgomery County Public Schools has had many successes with students performing well on the Maryland School Assessment (MSA) from the state. As a whole, middle schools in MCPS typically have 30-40% of students meet the advanced levels of proficiency on the reading and math assessments for 6th, 7th, and 8th grades.

Reading

As seen in Tables 2 - 4, reading scores in 6th and 7th grades show fluctuations in the amount of students scoring advanced, proficient and basic, while 8th grade reading results have stayed consistent. In interpreting the results, it is helpful to look at cohorts. In 2004, 22.8% of the students were basic in 6th grade. As 7th graders, the number went up slightly to 23.2% in 2005. Again, in 2006, as 8th graders, the number of basic students went up to 26.2%, which is an increase. This trend is not the direction the district would desire. Students who began 6th grade in 2005 decreased the percentage of basic students by 1% when tested in the 7th grade; however students who were 7th graders in 2005, increased the percentage of basic by 3% as 8th graders. In addition, the percent of students reaching advanced levels decreased over the three year period from 44.6% in 6th grade, to 40.3% in 7th grade and down to 32.6% in 8th grade.

Year	Advanced	Proficient	Basic
2004	44.6%	32.6%	22.8%
2005	38.5%	37.4%	24.2%
2006	46.4%	33.1%	20.5%

Year	Advanced	Proficient	Basic
2004	38.4%	37.6%	24.0%
2005	40.3%	36.6%	23.2%
2006	33.3%	43.5%	23.2%

Year	Advanced	Proficient	Basic
2004	31.4%	41.0%	27.6%
2005	32.3%	41.6%	26.1%
2006	32.6%	41.2%	26.2%

Mathematics

Scores for mathematics, as shown in tables 5 – 7, are inconclusive, perhaps demonstrating differences in tests and standards at each grade level. In 2004, 37.6% of 6th grade students were identified as basic. As 7th graders, the percentage of basic students decreased to 32.2% in 2005, but the same group, as 8th graders in 2006, slightly increased to 33.4% of basic. On the other hand, the percent of students in this same cohort reaching advanced levels of proficiency increased over the three years from 20.2% in grade 6, 23.2% in grade 7, and 34.5% in grade 8.

While the district results as a whole show the general trends of the district, the results from Argyle and Parkland 6th grade students have shown an increased from the previous years of students. Prior to the first year of the grant, almost half the students at Parkland were only achieving basic levels of proficiency in math and reading. Argyle also faced half of their students in math and a third of their students in reading meeting only the basic levels of proficiency. As a new school, Loiederman did not have data from the previous year, although many of the students originally attended Parkland and would have similar proficiency rates.

Although the three schools are not yet as successful as the whole district, the data from the three schools for the first year of the MSMC shows the schools are moving in the right direction. Although Argyle met Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), Loiederman and Parkland had mixed

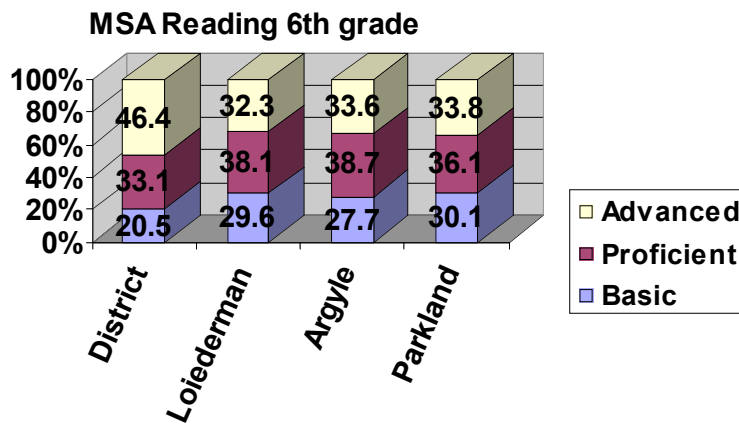
Year	Advanced	Proficient	Basic
2004	20.2%	42.2%	37.6%
2005	22.7%	45.0%	32.3%
2006	29.2%	47.1%	23.8%

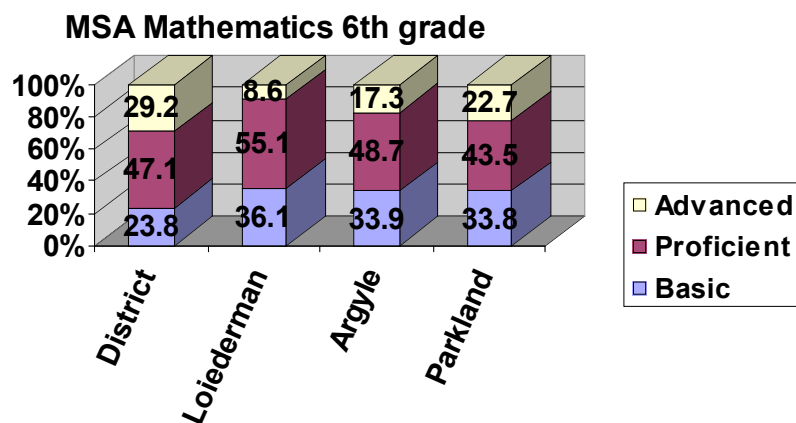
Year	Advanced	Proficient	Basic
2004	19.0%	44.8%	36.1%
2005	23.2%	44.5%	32.2%
2006	24.3%	36.6%	29.2%

Year	Advanced	Proficient	Basic
2004	27.2%	31.6%	41.2%
2005	29.6%	35.1%	35.4%
2006	34.5%	32.1%	33.4%

results in the first year. Loiederman struggled with proficiency rates among Hispanic, special education, free and reduced meals, and limited English proficient students in reading. Parkland also had difficulty in the percent proficient in reading among Hispanics, free and reduced meals, and limited English proficient but also had special education students and limited English proficient students struggling in math. In spite of these areas of difficulty, all three schools had around a third of their 6th grade students reaching advanced levels of proficiency in reading for the first year of implementation.

Math continued to be a challenge for the three schools with only around a third of the students remained in the basic levels of proficiency which was a great improvement from previous years at Argyle and Parkland. In addition, Parkland had 22.7% of 6th grade students reach the advanced level of proficiency. Although still not up to the 29.2% of students reaching advanced levels of proficiency from the district, it was a major accomplishment of the school and the highest among the three whole-school magnets.





Mobility rate

One of the challenges facing schools in the red zone is the mobility of the students. When students do not remain at a school for the duration of the school year, they are at a disadvantage because they do not receive the curriculum as it was intended. Although families leave Parkland, Argyle, and Loiederman for a variety of reasons, the high cost of living in the DC metropolitan area is a common problem. Many of these families move to more remote areas in order to find affordable housing. On the other hand, the the nation’s capital draws many people of all walks of life to the area. As a result, schools serving a lower SES, find their populations in constant flux. To determine the extent to which the student population changes in a given year, the mobility rate is calculated for each school. This rate is determined by dividing the sum of the entrants and withdrawals during the school year by the average daily membership.⁵ This rate is independent of the reasons why students enter and withdraw from school. Overall, MCPS middle schools had a mobility rate of 14.2% in 2006. For this same year, Loiederman had a mobility rate of 17.2%, Argyle 15.2% and Parkland 21.7%. This information is compiled in the aggregate and does not track students who have entered the special programs of the MSMC. Also, it is not possible to know if these figures represent the same students entering and leaving the school in a given school year; therefore, the stability of the population at each site can not be fully determined at this time.

⁵

<http://www.mcps.k12.md.us/departments/regulatoryaccountability/SpEdGlance/currentyear/definitions.shtm>

Staffing

Placing highly qualified teachers in appropriate classes has been a focus of MCPS resulting in the percentage of classes with highly qualified teachers increasing from 80.3% in 2005 to 85.5% in 2006. Parkland had a substantial increase in this area from 59.8% in 2005 to 84.1% in 2006. Argyle has been more successful in the percentage of highly qualified teachers in classes, with an increase from 71.5% in 2005 to 95.9% in 2006. Since Loiederman is a new school, there is no comparison data from previous years but for 2006 the school had 82.1% of its teachers identified as highly qualified.

Overall MCPS have an average student to teacher ration of 10.5 to 1. Argyle had 11.6:1 student to instructor ratio with an average class size for English sources of 23.1 students. Of the 53.5 teachers, only 14.5% teachers had less than 5 years experience with 48.4% having 5-15 years and 37.1% having more than 15 years. Loiederman had 60 teachers with 24.6% teaching for less than 5 year, 55.1% having 5-15 years experience, and 20.3% with more than 15 years experience. The average student to instructional staff ratio is 11.4:1 and an average class size of 22.1 students for English classes. With 56.4 teachers, Parkland had the largest percent of teachers with less than 5 years experience (30.8%) but did have 35.4% with 5-15 years of experience and 33.8% with more than 15 years experience. The average class size for English courses was 24, but the student to instructional staff ratio was the lowest of all three MSCM schools at 9.8:1.

School climate survey

The Department of Shared Accountability recently released their summary of the 2005-06 surveys of school environment data⁶. These data are used by the school district to monitor the continuous improvement of schools based on the surveys from parents, students, and staff. The survey asked some general information about the perceptions of academics, communication from teachers and administrations, the safety of the schools, achievement expectations, and safety of the school. In the case of Argyle and Parkland, comparisons of the responses can be

⁶ <http://sharedaccountability.mcpsprimetime.org/SurveyResults/>

compared between the two most recent years with “noteworthy” changes highlighted. The most recent report came out this February.

The survey measuring school climate, physical setting and satisfaction yielded positive results at Argyle. Although there was no previous data available for the response to the statement “My teachers have high expectation for me to do well in school.” 90.8% of the students responded that they agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. In addition, 87.5% of parents that responded that they agreed with the statement, “I am satisfied with the overall instruction my child receives at this school.”

Although Loiederman had no data from previous years, the three statements that received the highest marks from students were: “My homework relates to what I am taught in class” (88.0%), “My teachers have high expectations for me to do well in school” (84.4%), and “I am getting a good education at this school” (87.1%). The highest marks from parents (93.3%) was the statement, “My child’s teachers expect my child to do well in class.”

Parkland showed noteworthy improvement in several areas according to the student surveys: more challenging work was given, students help one another more, students feel safer, and all three areas of “Satisfaction” showed improvement. The top three statements for Parkland were “My homework relates to what I am taught in class” at 91.4%, “My teachers have high expectation for me to do well in school at 87.7%, and “students have the opportunity to take part in school activities” at 84.1%. The only area of noteworthy decrease was in response to “My teachers help me when I don’t understand which decreased from 84.9% to 79.1%. Parents responded very positively to the survey with 96.5% of them agreeing with the statement, “The principal is responsive to the concerns of parents and the community.” In addition, all selections in the categories “Expectations for student learning”, “School atmosphere and communication” and “Principal-parent relationship” had over 90% agreement in every statement and the “Teacher-Parent communication” and “Overall Perceptions” had over 80% agreement for every statement.

Chapter 3

MSAP GRANT- GOALS AND STRATEGIES

The strategic plan is the guiding force that impacts all areas of the reform effort, including the application and award of a 7.2 million dollar federal grant from the Magnet Schools Assistance Program. While the strategic plan is the guiding document for decision-making in MCPS, the specific goals of the magnet grant must also be addressed. MCPS must give the US Department of Education a yearly grant performance report, which includes project objectives and performance measures.

Magnet Grant Goals

Goal 1: Reducing Socioeconomic Isolation

Goal 2: Increasing Student Achievement

Goal 3: Increasing School Choice

Reducing Socioeconomic Isolation

The three magnet schools have had varying success with increasing diversity. One method for measuring movement in this area is to look at the applications of non-minority students. Table 1 shows the differences between the applicant pools from the first year and applicant pools for the current school year. Note that there is significant growth in non-minority applications at Loiederman and Parkland. Growth is relatively small at Argyle.

It is also interesting to note the actual minority enrollments for each of the three schools. Table 2 gives the actual minority enrollments during the two years along with the targets from the grant

School	2004-2005	2005-2006
Argyle	13.7	16.6
Loiederman	14.4	32.0
Parkland	14.4	23.8

Table 1: Non-minority applicants (percentage)
Information from US Department of Education Grant Performance Report

	2004-2005	2005-2006	
School		Actual	Target
Argyle	86.3	87.8	78.3
Loiederman	84.9	74.1	70.0
Parkland	85.6	79.3	84.7

Table 2: Grade 6 minority enrollments during the two years of the MSMC (percentage)
Information from US Department of Education Grant Performance Report

Argyle actually had a higher minority representation in the sixth grade. Loiederman had the largest reduction of the minority population in sixth grade, but did not meet its goal. Parkland reduced the minority population less than Loiederman, but did reach its target.

Of important interest to MCPS officials and the third performance measure for reducing isolation is reduction in the percentage of families with low socioeconomic status as measured by free and reduced meals. Table 3 shows the differences between the year prior to implementation and the first year of the program.

School	2004-2005	2005-2006
Argyle	63.9	61.9
Loiederman	NA	61.9
Parkland	85.2	54.4

Table 3. Grade 6 enrollments of students on free and reduced mean plans (percentage).
Information from US Department of Education Grant Performance Report

Most teachers at Argyle do not notice a big change in student population since the introduction of the magnet, although one teacher commented there were now two or three white students in her class as opposed to one. Teachers report that the out-of-consortium students come from strong family backgrounds and cultures where education is a priority. Students integrate well with one another and teachers and administrators alike say that it is impossible to know if students are in-consortium or out-of-consortium. An Argyle teacher shared:

“There are people who are bringing their children from quite a long distance, carpooling, and who are actively helping their kids participate in the after school life and the things that are going on. Yes there is a broader diversity, but this school happens to sit on an economic neighborhood of high end middle class, medium middle class, working class poor, unemployed poor- and they are all right here in this little cosmopolitan area.”

The out of consortium students who have elected to be in the program have changed the socioeconomic status and ethnic diversity slightly. Teachers and administrators note that they do not see big differences in in-consortium and out-of-consortium students. For the most part students have integrated well. Several teachers note that there is more diversity than they experienced prior to the implementation of the MSMC.

Although Parkland teachers did not notice a difference in attitude between the in-consortium and out-of-consortium students, they did observe a shift in the demographics of the school and a general increase in academic focus overall. As a result of the magnet, more non-minority students applied for Parkland helping to increase the diversity of the campus. Teachers also reported an increase of parental involvement at the school but observed it was mostly due to the participation of out-of-consortium families.

For the time being, it appears that diversity has increased at the MSMC schools. It will be important to continue high levels of recruitment and attention to retaining students from outside the consortium attendance area.

Increasing student achievement

It is difficult to isolate the achievement at any of the schools. Since the magnet school was implemented by grade, only the sixth grade data can be used when examining the potential gains. There are a number of factors that impact the change for sixth graders in the three schools. First, students who are in the sixth grade have had the full impact of reforms begun in 1999. These students, known as “Jerry’s Kids,” have had increased support and challenge from their first days in MCPS.

Another issue that makes comparison difficult is the fact that eighty students from less-impacted populations entered each school. This means that there is a significant shift in the demographics, and the populations are not the same. Therefore, it is too early in the MSMC implementation to truly evaluate student achievement. With that said, there is encouraging data that leads to optimism. The following figures show progress on the Maryland School Assessment for reading and mathematics at Argyle and Parkland Middle Schools by ethnic group.⁷

Figure 3. Argyle Middle School Grade 6 percentage proficient on MSA reading.

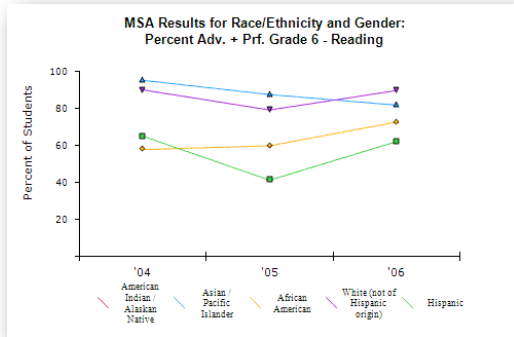


Figure 5. Argyle Middle School Grade 6 percentage proficient on MSA mathematics.

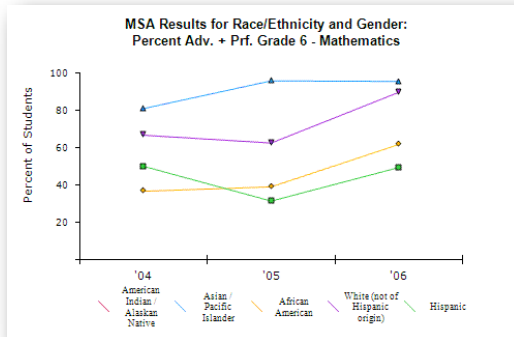


Figure 4. Parkland Middle School Grade 6 percentage proficient on MSA reading.

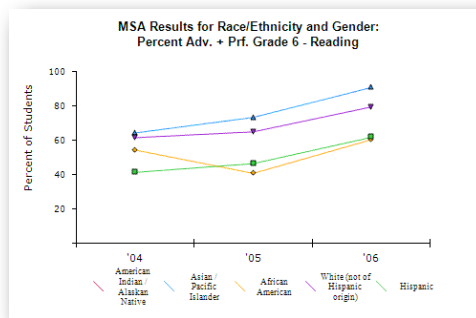
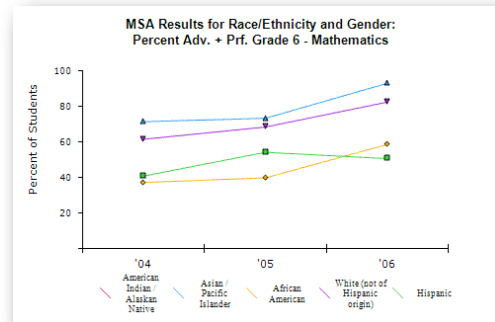


Figure 6. Parkland Middle School Grade 6 percentage proficient on MSA mathematics.



⁷ Data is from 2005-06; Maryland Department of Education website <http://mdreportcard.org/Introduction>

Because this is the first year for Loiederman Middle School, trend data is not available. However, in this first year of implementation, there are general trends upward in the middle schools. As the MSMC strives for excellence in high quality programs, achievement gains are expected. It is crucial to measure this specific data regularly and modify programs appropriately to continue the upward trends.

Whole school magnet

The MSMC consists of whole-school programs that integrate the magnet focus into the academic content of each middle school. Prior to the 2005 – 2006 school year, middle school choice opportunities were limited to magnet programs located in eleven district middle schools. These were isolated programs located in the context of larger schools. Students in these programs may have been integrated for special area classes, physical education classes, and lunch, but the magnet foci were separate from the regular school programs.

When determining which schools should be in the magnet school consortium, the district office considered the best way to impact the greatest number of children, and provide the best opportunities for success. Demographic location of the magnet schools was important. A district office staff member explained:

“These three schools sit right in the heart of the greatest poverty, greatest diversity and greatest second language learners that we have in our district. So offering those programs with ease of access just amongst our most impoverished and challenged population goes at the heart of what we’re trying to do. We’re making it easier for our most challenging population to access our most rigorous programs than perhaps we are in areas where the challenges aren’t as great.”

After the schools were chosen, determining if the whole school would be a magnet was another important decision. Keeping with the value that all children can learn and succeed, the choice was made to have all three schools be whole school magnets. District personnel are proud of this decision:

“Every kid in the building is going to benefit from having these programs in the building, I think was a bold step, and it’s a step I think that has proven to work fairly well. I think it was the right move.”

Increasing school choice

Students who reside within the regular attendance areas of the three schools are given choices between any of the three depending on magnet emphasis. In addition, eighty slots in each school, per grade level, are set aside for students outside the schools’ attendance areas. These are available to all students in the district. In order to effectively and fairly promote school choice, some magnet grant funds are spent on in-school magnet coordinators who actively recruit both in and out of consortium students. Limited transportation is provided for out of consortium students; however, magnet coordinators work with parents to facilitate car pools and other shared transportation arrangements. Full transportation is provided for in consortium students.

Chapter 4

A. MARIO LOIEDERMAN MAGNET SCHOOL FOR CREATIVE AND PERFORMING ARTS



Loiederman students perform in the fall play.

Loiederman at a glance

In the fall of 2005, A. Mario Loiederman School for the Performing and Creative Arts was opened in a remodeled former junior high school. Sixth grade students were recruited from within the consortium's boundaries. Additionally, 80 sixth grade students were recruited from schools located outside the traditional attendance areas. In the fall of 2006, the program included both sixth and seventh grades, and all grades will be included beginning in the fall of 2007.

Initially, students in the seventh and eighth grades were assigned to the building from Parkland Middle School as that middle school was downsized. When the

Loiederman Facts 2006-07
822 Students
42% Hispanic
28% African-American
8.6% Asian
13% Caucasian
7.1% ESOL
50% FARMS

MSMC was formed, these students were separated from friends and peers at Parkland and placed in a school with a magnet focus at sixth grade only. This created significant climate challenges in the first year, particularly with eighth grade students. Many of these students were angry for the involuntary transfer to Loiederman and were upset that the focus of the school was placed on sixth grade only.

In the second year of the program, this issue has abated some. The current eighth graders have fewer concerns with being identified with Loiederman, but they are not integrated into the school. An eighth grade teacher noted:

“It’s hard trying to explain why they have to come to this school. I just work as hard as I can trying to help them all understand algebra, and I wait for next year, when all of our students will be part of the program.”

One school administrator said,

We had a hard time that first year. Students in seventh and eighth grades were upset. All the attention was on the sixth grade and their programs. It is better this year, but the eighth graders are still not connected to our school.

Over the three days of visits to Loiederman, students exhibited respect toward each other and to the staff. Most students smiled as they walked the hallways, some releasing energy with running and skipping. When energetic students were respectfully reminded to walk for everyone’s safety, they often smiled, slowed down and continued down the hall. In sixth and seventh grade classrooms, most students were engaged and actively attentive. This was observed less frequently in eighth grade classrooms where the magnet program has not yet been implemented.

There is an optimism that is pervasive among teachers and administrators. Every administrator and teacher interviewed shared his or her excitement about being at Loiederman. They expressed joy at learning new things, giving students new experiences with the arts, the opportunity to work with committed and caring staff, and attempting to reinvent

themselves as educators. It must also be considered that this is a new school in which the principal was allowed to hand pick the teaching staff. Hiring qualified candidates, in combination with the commitment of teachers who chose to affiliate with the program, should result in a high level of energy and expectation from staff. The fact that this continues a year and a half into the implementation is noteworthy.

In order to understand the implementation of the program at Loiederman Middle School, this case study examines the MSMC components of the accelerated core curriculum; unique courses and extended learning opportunities; highly effective instructional programs; collaborative partnerships among schools, parents, and the community; and structure and staffing.

Accelerated core curriculum

All students have access to the district accelerated core curriculum described earlier in this report. The additional opportunities at Loiederman allow each student to choose an arts strand for focus that could lead to high school credits not available to other students in the district.

High expectations and challenge are important pieces of the strategic plan for MCPS. As stated earlier in this report, it is the goal of the school district to develop each student to his or her highest potential. The magnet coordinator stated it this way,

You have to have the curriculum itself be rigorous, and then when you look at the curriculum, if there are choices to be made within that curriculum, you have to take the highest route or the most rigorous pathway

Teachers were united in their desire to move students into the most challenging situations at which students could achieve success. All of the English teachers interviewed stated that they move students into the GT level classes whenever they possibly can. In other classes, teachers are encouraged to discuss more challenging work with students who are ready. One administrator said,

“My thought was that if John came into the class and he was considered an on-level social studies 7th student, and was working with significant success, at some point John or the teacher would speak up and say, ‘John, let’s shift your status.’ It doesn’t change John’s schedule at all, but what it means is John now needs to attempt the top two tiers of the assignments when there is tiering.”

Another administrator said,

“I see teachers asking comprehensive questions to kids. I see them sticking with students and following up with further questions to understand their thinking.”

The principal of the school discussed one circumstance that showed the commitment of the staff to challenging work for students. She said,

“In the sequence classes, particularly math, I knew that we had percentage-wise decreased the number of kids in algebra from last year to this year...so we created an algebra class the second week of September. The algebra teacher just brought me the results (and we have been following it up since that class was formed), and they are outpacing one of her other two classes. She said to me, ‘How could we have kept algebra from them?’”

Unique courses and extended learning

Unique courses

Loiederman Middle School is the only whole school arts magnet in Montgomery County and offers opportunities for students in visual arts, dance, instrumental music, vocal music, and theatre not available in any other program. The principal stated,

“I would say the goal was to create something that was appealing to out of neighborhood kids but also served in neighborhood kids, that was unique enough to keep kids in the neighborhood schools and then attract others in.”

Additionally, sixth grade students receive exposure to all of the arts through a unique course called Perspectives in the Arts. This arts integration course uses specific standards from each of the arts disciplines, as well as reading and writing standards, to explore curricular themes. Students explore all of the arts strands offered at Loiederman in the context of a shared theme, not only preparing them for further integrative experiences, but also providing opportunities for making informed arts focus choices in seventh and eighth grades.

Because this is an arts magnet school, the arts create access points for making connections. Arts integration should also tap into student interest since students have elected the magnet focus. The special arts opportunities offered to students create shared experiences teachers can use to connect the curriculum. Administrators have noticed that teachers work hard to make connections. One administrator noted,

“They had a sense and a willingness to attempt to find connections between the arts and the disciplines that they are teaching.”

Another administrator shared:

“You really get a lot of bang for your buck when you take something that kids are coming to study that they are turned on about and then you sneak attack them with all the academics through it.”

One teacher said,

“I just think the arts add so much to the interest level – to the ‘funness’ of school – that all of school doesn’t have to be boring, and it doesn’t have to be facts and figures all the time. It can be fun too.”

In order to facilitate integration of the arts, each student completes a milestone project each quarter. A milestone project is one that requires the collaboration of all of a student’s teachers in creating a project that integrates the academic core curriculum with the student’s arts choice. Teachers and administrators articulate the importance of these projects,

but also acknowledge the difficulty in keeping them rigorous and meaningful. In the words of one teacher:

“We also do these things called milestone projects, which are very painful initially. The 6th grade has gotten them down pretty well. What a milestone is, it is a major project that hits on multiple classes so like right now they are doing a milestone that involves Greek mythology which they learned about in reading. They have to write about it in their English classes. It is impacting two classes, so all of us are working on it together and the best of all worlds is when it impacts three classes.”

Another teacher said,

“We do these milestone projects which are interdisciplinary projects, and one of the things that we have noticed as we have been implementing them in 7th grade this year is that it is a heck of a lot easier to do it in 6th grade, because every student in 6th grade takes the Perspectives in the Arts class – it is a base class. In 7th and 8th grades, you know, there is no one art class that sort of ties everybody together, so they have had more difficulty with it than we have with our perspective class in 6th grade.”

Not only do students experience and engage in the art forms, but they also learn extensive vocabularies and do significant writing in formative and summative assessment. One arts teacher said,

“I see kids with these huge vocabularies. They have learned it by teachers developing vocabulary by sharing it, but most of all, they have to use it in their classes. They know what all the words mean, so we can have meaningful conversations. It is so much easier to get deep into the content when you don’t have to explain every little thing.”

The arts connection appears to have also developed some opportunities for higher-level thinking as well. A teacher said,

“I think, in our class, we have a lot more higher level students from outside. I think these open-ended questions critiquing art,

working together, having to answer questions that don't necessarily give black and white answers, challenge our kids. I think there are a lot of different possible answers where there is justification, using prior knowledge, those sorts of thinking skills can help kids to grow in different ways."

One of the techniques all teachers are required to employ is the use of brief constructed responses (BCR's) regularly. BCR's are questions that require students to write complete and thoughtful responses to assess deeper understanding of concepts.

Making the arts connection is critical to the success of Loiederman Middle School. Administrators were all very pointed in stating that there has to be a reason for a student to come to this school. The arts program has to be that reason. The added benefit is engagement. One administrator said,

"I do think choice is a very strong instrument, and at the middle school level, finding the engagement hook is very important because, I think, from that angle it is on the right track of what it is that keeps kids rejuvenated every day. Because they are 12, their attention span is 90 seconds, so how do you get it back and keep it there?"

A teacher added,

"I guess it is not a Montgomery County problem only, but a nationwide problem that these groups – the special ed. students, the English language learners, low income students who aren't being served properly by public schools – and we have to find ways to do that. It is a moral issue. The arts, I think, for a lot of kids is that connection, and it is what can bring that kid into the learning. In a lot of kids we expect the kids to learn in a way we are comfortable teaching and the arts are a way to teach in a way that they are comfortable learning."

Extended learning

Extended learning provides support systems and additional learning opportunities for students who struggle with content and skills. Typically

these are after-school, weekend, or summer programs. MCPS has offered these kinds of opportunities for many years. At Loiederman Middle School, however, there is evidence that much of the support and structure for extending learning is embedded in the school day.

To begin with, student achievement is transparent. Reading levels are monitored through the NWEA Measure of Academic Progress test. The scores are shared with content area teachers, who are expected to differentiate instruction accordingly. Students also know their own levels and the expected growth they should achieve during the school year. One teacher described how this is helpful:

“We use it to help teachers mostly understand the reading ability of their students...You can go in and find out what a child’s strengths are, like if they are strong with narrative text or if they are weak with narrative text. It helps you with that sort of stuff.”

Another teacher said,

“And every kid knows their level. It is in their agenda book. We made labels for everybody. In the next couple of weeks, every child is going to get this graph which is personalized to them. It will show the national norm and then the individual student’s achievement too, and they are going to be looking at these before they take the MAP-R exam again.”

Teachers talked about the need to show students where their achievement was in relation to others. The hope is that students will “own” their scores and want to improve.

When observing classrooms, this community emphasis on achievement was obvious. Students wanted their teachers and other students to know what they had accomplished. During a social studies class, a student who had been asked to read out loud earlier in the period approached the teacher and asked him if the teacher thought his reading had improved. Both teacher and student smiled widely when the teacher responded that he was proud of the student’s accomplishment.

The results of the Maryland State Assessment indicate that student achievement is on track except in the area of reading. In this area, several subgroups, Hispanic, special education, free and reduced meals, and

limited English proficiency students, are not making adequate yearly progress. Administration has articulated this need to focus on reading. One administrator talked at length about this epiphany:

“My background is secondary education, and just as I was leaving the classroom, I was finally having a revelation of how important it was to be building those [literacy] skills for kids...I still am not convinced that people understand that every time vocabulary is introduced, or every time kids are asked to tackle a passage, or every time kids are asked to produce something in writing that we have to model what they are learning in their classes that are totally focused on that...I think that the urgency of kids reading and writing and speaking proficiently has to be our whole focus.”

Whenever administrators review lesson plans, they also hold teachers accountable for showing how the lesson will address literacy skills.

Turning Points 2000 makes the following recommendations regarding reading instruction:

- Teach reading across the curriculum
- Provide targeted training and ongoing support for all teachers
- Provide intensive supports for students who do not have basic skills
- Daily recreational reading opportunities for all students

Teachers in all subjects are expected to teach reading. One art teacher stated,

“We have word walls. We have vocabularies on our board. We have reading quizzes...The consistency of all that and how to evaluate your work, and talk about it, and write about it. We have warm-ups.”

All but one pair of teachers brought up reading as an essential element to all instruction. Teachers shared how the introduction of the BCR assessment strategy had helped to bring literacy to the forefront. One teacher’s response was,

“I think that it is effective [the use of BCR’s] in the sense it sends a message to kids that this is something that is so important that

the whole school is trying to take a piece in every class and work on it. It is not isolated to reading and English, but we answer BCR's in all of our content areas really, so I think it helps in the aspect that they get it from different teachers."

Observations conducted during both visits verify that teachers use extensive vocabulary displays and apply reading comprehension strategies. In many classes, teachers continually referred back to learned vocabulary and used discussions as techniques to find out what additional vocabulary may need to be added. One administrator shared,

"I keep going back to this, teach children to master vocabulary, no matter what subject, you are always learning a vocabulary, so can we bring in a dancer to teach people how to use movement to help kids master vocabulary; global universal concept."

One social studies teacher was particularly effective in using questioning during a reading exercise to model how students should mentally interact with text. In an algebra class, the teacher worked with students to describe the processes used and their applications verbally and in written form. However, active modeling was not observed in all classrooms.

Loiederman students who have significant reading difficulties are assigned to an intensive reading class taught by a reading specialist. The specialist is trained in the Wilson reading program, an effective one-on-one instructional program for decoding, and she uses the SRA Corrective Reading program in her classes. Another support class uses the Read 180 program offered through Scholastic. Additionally, those students who have been identified with reading difficulties that impact the content areas are assigned to double reading classes.

Daily recreational reading is available to students who do not need additional help or time during the "Ask" period. "Ask" is a daily twenty-five minute period during which students may make appointments to see teachers, work on missing or late work, or read silently. In observation, most students who were not working with a teacher were engaged in reading a variety of materials. These included books, magazines, and newspapers. Students brought some of their own reading materials, but many were provided in the classroom.

Of the *Turning Points 2000* recommendations regarding reading instruction, the school appears to be addressing three. Professional development in reading instruction was not observed during either visit; however, the interviews did uncover teacher perceptions that will be discussed later in this case.

Highly effective instructional programs

“There is a high level of student engagement when you think of high quality instruction. Appropriate challenge to the point of frustration, I guess, and there is a degree of flexibility, some humanness and sense of humor, and we make it meaningful for students.” (administrator)

High quality instruction is difficult to describe discretely. Many elements can be observed and, to some degree measured, but in the end, defining quality instruction is inexact, relying on the interplay of teacher skill, strategies employed, readiness of students, climate, and the curriculum. However, the synthesis of best practices research can give us several characteristics that can be observed. Evidence of the following characteristics were observed at Loiederman Middle School:

- Meet students where they are
- Focus on student needs
- Rich learning environments
- Organize content around concepts
- Connect the classroom to student experience
- Higher order thinking skills
- Authentic assessment

Meet students where they are

One of the criticisms of *No Child Left Behind* is that it sets arbitrary achievement goals based on aggregate data, yet disaggregates for accountability. This is the global example of classroom instruction that ig-

nores what the individual student already knows or does not know. Specifically, teachers are to assess the knowledge and skills students already possess and build instruction from that point toward the curricular goal.

One way this is done at Loiederman is through the NWEA Measure of Academic Progress test administered to students at the beginning of the school year. The test gives specific information to students and teachers regarding what is already known, what is appropriate for current instruction, and what should be considered for exposure, but not mastery. Included in the nationally normed test results is an expected growth score to give teachers additional information about how to tailor instruction. Information about the kinds of concepts appropriate to the student's achievement are also provided by the test.

Several teachers discussed the need to use pretests as a means to discover student knowledge and skill. This is often used to create flexible groupings that address specific student needs; however, it is not the only way to determine what students know. In one social studies classroom observation, a teacher used questioning of student knowledge of how democracy developed in the ancient world to assign parts in a dramatic presentation. While students who were assigned roles worked on their skit, the teacher went over basic concepts and knowledge so that the performance would make sense. One teacher said,

“If I really know what each student understands, then I can be certain of the foundation on which I am building the new concepts they are learning.”

It can be difficult to meet the needs of students when there is significant diversity in student knowledge and skills. Differentiated instruction is one way to account for these differences. Almost all teachers discussed the need for differentiation and felt they were improving in this area. Some expressed concern that they may be constrained because of district expectations for the curriculum. They worried that the kinds of activities that provide access to lower-performing students may not prepare those students adequately for the MSA. Only one teacher was negative about differentiation:

“First I'm supposed to have good scores on the district test. Then, I have to meet AYP. Then, I'm supposed to keep these kids managed.”

Tell me, how do I do that and provide four or five different things in each class period?”

Several teachers are implementing tiered activities in the classroom, confirmed by administrative staff and through observation. Teachers develop different activities for students determined by their abilities. All activities are designed to meet the same curricular objectives, but the depth of understanding and skill level for completion are differentiated. One administrator said,

“I see differentiation like with tiered assignments and classes. Particularly, when I observe classes, it has been interesting for me to watch a department that teaches everyone in the same classroom and try to meet the needs of both ends of the spectrum, and I think we have put a lot of emphasis on differentiating assignments.”

Good instruction is dependent on creating an appropriate instructional arc from what is already mastered to the curricular standard.

Focus on student needs

Several teachers indicated that a significant part of instruction was finding a way to give students investment in the content. A social studies teacher suggested that,

“It really is much easier to follow the textbook and the state curriculum standards and teach it the way I was taught. I mean, I liked it, so why wouldn’t they?”

But the same teacher also said that when using the arts hook, learning takes place at a level he doesn’t experience otherwise. He went on,

“I think what a lot of it comes down to is interest. It is where I really notice the influence in the classroom is to draw the kids in and especially things like acting things out or drama-based activities.”

Most of the teachers talked about previous schools where many of their colleagues closed the door and coasted, because it was easier than finding and meeting student needs. Because of evaluative leadership from administrators and the accountability among the teaching staff, most teachers believed that a teacher at Loiederman would not be able to ignore student needs. A reading teacher said,

“I think that the expectations are very high for all students, and I think that because the expectations are held high for them that eventually we will see higher test scores, and we work hard to make them perform. If they don’t have the grades, we have all kinds of reteaching, reassessing in order to make sure they do get all the concepts.”

Every classroom at Loiederman has specific goals for the day written on the boards. One administrator stated,

“When I go in a classroom, I see an objective on the board and the teacher at some point in the lesson focuses the students on that objective – just doesn’t write it on the board.”

Each teacher in observed classes took time at the beginning of the class to make these goals explicit, and most teachers reiterated goals during class in order to further explain the purposes in specific activities and assignments. In many cases, students were given choices about how to work toward stated objectives.

In several observations, students were given choices in instructional activities, assessment, or both. Teachers did indicate, however, that they found the end-of-course assessments and preparation for the Maryland School Assessment limiting in allowing for frequent student choice. One teacher said,

“The challenge is that the scope of our class is so broad that it actually creates a conflict between having time to do the hands-on experiential things and having time to practice the written skills that they will have to show on their assessments, and so it is a constant struggle.”

Rich learning environments

As students have exposure to a wide variety of materials and viewpoints, they are able to organize the learning in ways that make sense to them. A rich learning environment includes all of the tools for students to construct deep understanding. One administrator stated that her observations indicate,

“Instruction is reflected with deep content knowledge that is differentiated and layered with a wide variety of options for learning.”

She shared that she had also participated in many conversations with teachers about how exciting it was to see students finding paths for learning and expressing new knowledge.

Tomlinson and McTighe (2006) warn about a common pitfall with too much concentration on activities and strategies. They suggest that, without backward design, it is easy to make the focus of the class the activity instead of the learning. Activities are engaging and can stimulate thinking and learning, but if teachers are not careful, they can miss the critical concepts necessary for students to master the curriculum.

One activity observed seemed to fall into this trap. Students were excited and involved throughout the lesson. All of the materials were prepared and shared easily. The process was defined and managed. However, students followed the activity without demonstrating evidence of learning. On the other hand, in another classroom, students were also involved in very chaotic activity, but the reflective questioning of the teacher continually brought focus back to the learning and made the teacher aware that the objectives were being met.

Three recommendations developed by Tomlinson and McTighe (2006) are: 1) identify desired results; 2) determine acceptable evidence; and, 3) plan learning experiences and instruction. Several administrators made reference to the school’s standard lesson plan that includes this kind of design. While not all teachers are required to turn in lesson plans regularly, they are required to submit them prior to an administrative observation. The principal stated that all teachers are familiar with and use the design concept of the lesson plan, and teachers who need additional support are required to use the plan daily.

A rich environment includes a variety of strategies and techniques that engage students, pique interest, and provide avenues that may

channel learning. Teachers must also account for learning through consistent formative assessment. In addressing the issue of equity, it is important that instruction includes viable techniques that ensure access to learning by every student.

Organize content around concepts

In every interview, teachers and administrators acknowledged the vital importance of arts integration, pointing out that students have chosen the arts as an area of interest, so using arts as a vehicle for communicating content should increase student success. There were, however, varying levels of comfort and application indicated.

One administrator discussed the effect of the first team to be trained:

“We have gone back and forth about integration versus focus versus connection. When we originally set out, the idea was that teachers would become skilled at evaluating the kids in social studies and also evaluating the kids on their art skills...and we were very fired up about this opportunity. Then reality struck, and we were still dealing with other expectations of the curriculum, so we backed off of that a little bit.”

One of the teachers raised the concern:

“I am not sure to what extent teachers are integrating the arts. Whether they are just doing it as activities or actually integrating arts objectives.”

Loiederman educators recognize the importance of organizing instruction around arts concepts, so that students can get clearer images of the content they are learning; however, this awareness has resulted in varying levels of practice for everyone. An English teacher described one of her integration attempts during the interview. In giving students an opportunity to understand the 1960's setting of a novel, she set up listening stations in the room with various recordings of musical artists who would likely have been popular with the characters of the book. Students listened to each recording sample, then reflected on their own reactions, predicted character reactions, and searched for cultural clues in the lyrics and musical styles. In this way, the

teacher was able to build a common understanding with students leading to richer and more meaningful discussion of the novel's action and themes. Though the teacher was not able to articulate the music standards used, she had, in fact, integrated the music content standards of: 1) listening to analyzing, and describing music and 2) understanding music in relation to history and culture.⁸

It must be noted, however, that arts integration was not observed during the three days of visits in the school. There were several activities that used the arts as vehicles for sharing content and assessing student learning; however, arts integration is much more. An integrated curriculum involves the merging of both academic standards and the standards of the arts. While teaching students the concept of cell division in biology, the teacher could use an active improvisation or play writing and performing exercise. Both the content standards from the science class and the theatre standards used in the lesson must be equally important to derive full value from the learning.⁹ This allows for crossing connections between the hemispheres of the brain.¹⁰ In this case, one theatre standard that would apply is: "Script writing by the creation of improvisations and scripted scenes based on personal experience and heritage, imagination, literature, and history."¹¹

With or without arts integration, teachers recognize the need to tie content into larger concepts to help students organize learning. Several teachers echoed the sentiments of this teacher:

"I'm a big picture kind of guy. I have to see what is really important, so I know I have to give that information to my students. The kids want to know, 'Why are we learning this stuff?' and we need to tell them. If they can't see the big picture, why is it important?"

⁸ The National Association for Music Education National Standards for Music Education

⁹ Tony Jackson, *Learning through Theatre: New Perspectives on Theatre in Education*, (Oxford, UK, Routledge Publishers, 1993).

¹⁰ see John Bransford, Ann Brown, and Rodney Cocking, *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School*, (National Academy Press, Washington, DC, 2000).

¹¹ National Standards for Arts Education theater standards

Connect the classroom to student experience

It is no surprise that each individual, adult and student, has specific experiences and interests that differ from others. High quality instruction attempts to tap into these because learning tied to an individual's experiences make stronger connections in the brain.

One teacher talked at length about creating a shared experience in the classroom, so that in debriefing, students would be able to organize the learning. He said,

“I create an experience that we all can have together and ask students to write and reflect on what happened. Then, a couple of days later, as we are discussing the content, I'll ask them to think back on the other day and I see the light go on in their eyes.”

Several teachers discussed trying to find things that students are already involved with to connect new ideas. One teacher said,

“As painful as it is sometimes, I watch South Park and MTV just to find out what the kids are seeing.”

Another said,

“We try out and adapt things as we are going, try new things over time, and sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. But when it works, it is awesome, and when it doesn't work, it is that adaptability that we use to improve.”

In classroom observations, every teacher observed used connections from student experiences to illustrate knowledge and skills.

Higher order thinking skills

The arts focus has given rise to much experimentation among teachers regarding experiential learning, collaborative learning, and student reflection. During one visit, many short classroom walkthroughs were completed. Each class showed examples of these elements. In a music class, students were composing new music (experiential) and sharing their creations with other students for critical feedback (collaborative). A social studies teacher made one of the students “king” and forced stu-

dents to do the “king’s” bidding by acting as the “sheriff” (experiential). The teacher then asked students to turn to their neighbors and talk about what they felt (collaborative/reflective). In an English class, small groups were asked to discuss the reasons a character had changed in a short story (collaborative) then reflect in writing, their own conclusions related to the discussed question (reflective). Students in a dance class were asked, as a group, to practice a modern dance (experiential/collaborative). An algebra teacher asked students to compare answers to problems they had completed (collaborative/reflective).

During more formal observations a month and a half later, students in a social studies class were asked to play a game representing an economic principle (experiential) and write in a journal (reflective) when the game ended.

In classroom observations, a variety of questioning levels were observed. In the dance class, the teacher challenged students to think about which muscles might need to be used in order to perform a particular movement. She also gave opportunities for students to critique a performance. A social studies teacher asked students to think about how democratic principles could be applied to the school. An English teacher asked students to change the personality of one character in a story and predict the differences readers would find as a result.

Authentic assessment

There is a great deal of evidence of authentic assessment displayed in classrooms and available for school patrons to review. The milestone projects, mentioned earlier in this report, are examples of this. Loiederman teachers are concerned that they are not able to do enough authentic assessment. The belief is that with district assessments and the Maryland School Assessment, there is too much pressure for pencil and paper. According to one teacher,

“For this quarter, for example, we have the four art forums we work on and we have written summaries of assessment we chart for them [central office]. I think, just as we would with the formative assessments in class, if it is appropriate for the assessment to be a non-written assessment, maybe just have a little flexibility, not to replace it entirely. If we could make a case that a different way to

assess in a non-written way or different kind of written way, then to have a green light rather than ‘this must be how it is done.’”

Another teacher said,

“We need more performance-type assessments or non-traditional assessments. I don’t think we are asking to replace written assessments, but just a little more flexibility, because that is kind of what we sell the course on. It is ‘hands-on’ where the kids are working together. They are out and about moving around and doing things, and then when it comes down to assessing them, it is the same kind of assessment that they are getting in a traditional class, and they don’t feel comfortable with the assessment part.”

Teachers recognize why paper and pencil assessments are used, but they are still frustrated that they cannot do more with authentic assessment.

“They may think it is more measurable too, and at this point we don’t have the technology to, if they say, ‘let’s pull your stuff from second quarter.’ It is a lot easier to pull things from a packet and compare than to say ‘alright, one person in this dance group over here’ and me trying to find it.”

Collaborative partnerships among schools, parents, and the community

Loiederman Middle School is one of the three schools in the MSMC. This organization of schools allows for principals, magnet coordinators, and professional development coordinators to work together in resolving common issues.

Involvement with parents is extremely important in a magnet school. Because families have chosen to associate with the school, they need to be nurtured, so they feel invested and want to remain. The principal described her attempts to keep parents involved and aware:

“With parents I have a quarterly principal’s coffee that I offer. It is 8:30 in the morning and 7:00 at night, and my hope in doing that was targeting different groups of families and what their work schedules were. In fact when I opened the school it was my hope

that we would do that for almost everything. If we had an outdoor education meeting for parents at 7:00, we would offer it also in the morning. I realize that I can't really dictate people's time but I can control my own, so I feel that has been good because it is fairly informal. It is conversational. Parents, I think, get empowered by hearing that they have similar questions as other people, and it is a nice networking situation, and I get to hear more frequently than once a year when we administer the climate survey as a County as to what is on parent's minds. [We have] monthly PTSA meetings which are a typical format, but there is an opportunity to connect with parents. I use the connect ad broadcast phone calling system almost ad nauseam. In fact, just before I came over here I recorded a message reminding 6th Grade parents about outdoor education forms being due We placed every one of those phone calls in English and Spanish, and I think that is appreciated by our community. So we do a lot of bilingual, when I say bilingual, only English and Spanish, so I know we are missing some of the other language groups, but the great majority is Spanish-speaking we use that system a lot."

Other administrators applaud the principal's efforts in reaching parents and confirm the work she does. One administrator said,

"In addition to that, some of the things [the principal] does. She does a bilingual weekly phone call to every family on Sunday evenings. Parent coffee – she does one in the morning and one in the evening usually. We have developed certain sub-committees on our PTSA...for example, we have an out of consortium parent liaison on the sub-committee to help navigate very specific needs that community may have."

This administrator also shared that reaching out to parents and the surrounding community goes beyond programs to the structure of the school. He said,

"I think even in terms of hiring practices for our office staff, making sure that there is always someone who is bilingual that is either in this office counseling seat or in the front office, so that

ability to communicate isn't hindered by the fact that we need to call in someone special. The Linkages to Learning Office, which deals with a lot of community and wrap around services, they are located in our building to addressing community and student needs as well."

The principal sees evidence that parent outreach is working. She said,

"I am proud that the PTSA is a mix of the in-neighborhood and out-of-neighborhood families, including the leadership – almost 50/50."

Loiederman has a number of community partnerships that give students significant experiences in the arts. The connections with these organizations provide teachers and students with resources to expand arts experiences, increase student exposure and cultural capital, and work with academic material in new ways. The magnet coordinator described it this way:

"We have business and community partnerships, we have a memo of understanding between Strathmore Music and Art Center, Pyramid Atlantic Art Studio, Roundhouse Theatre, and Montgomery College that those partnerships are geared to do a few things. One is to work with our staff to increase staff capacity to integrate the arts. Two is to provide extension opportunities for our high fliers, like master's classes and such. Three, to give our students greater access to authentic legitimate art forms – real live productions. Strathmore, for example sends artists here."

In discussing the school's contribution to the community, he said,

"In addition to that we also give our community access, we give discount tickets, we give special showings and things of that nature. So that is one way we connect with the business community and the cultural community. I also sit on the Arts & Humanities Council for Montgomery County as a result of this position."

Structure and staffing

8-period block schedule

Loiederman students have additional opportunities as students of a magnet school. The schedule is divided into an 8-block A/B structure, with additional time used daily for students to meet individually with teachers and catch up on missed work. Four classes meet for a double period every other day with the daily twenty-five minute “Ask” period. Non-magnet schools normally have seven periods, so the block provides an additional period for electives. Sixth grade students are allowed one arts elective in visual arts, theatre, dance, instrumental music, or vocal music. In seventh and eighth grades, students take more advanced courses, with the opportunity to earn high school credit in many of them. A student who takes advantage of all available advanced courses with credit attached may enter high school with nine credits. Most teachers praised the schedule for the opportunities it provides for student success:

“It is amazing that our students get to do these things. If it weren’t for the block schedule and the work teachers do to help everyone succeed, these are students who would do nothing but basic academics and remediation all day.”

Not everyone is happy with it, however. One teacher expresses this concern:

“We didn’t have “Ask” [in my previous school], so there was more time as far as planning for teachers. There was more time for students to get work done. I don’t know how, because we didn’t have “Ask.” It just worked out more. For me, my opinion here, I don’t think the block schedule is very effective.”

Another frustration with the block schedule was stated by an English teacher:

“The problem with block schedules is that there is too much time between Thursday and Monday. The students don’t carry over the learning, and you have to go back over it again and again.

In most middle schools, even those that use an eight period block schedule, teachers teach six periods. However, the MSAP grant money has been used to reduce the teaching load to five periods for teachers in the MSMC. Therefore teachers have a personal planning period, an interdisciplinary team planning period, and a professional development period organized by a professional development coordinator. All teachers who are assigned to professional development during a particular period in the schedule are grouped together in, what the MSMC calls, the Professional Development Cohort. Teachers learn together as a professional learning community.

The Professional Development Cohort and the organization of grade level interdisciplinary teams both strongly support collaborative planning among teachers. Interdisciplinary teaming is a structure employed in all of the district's middle schools and the Professional Development Cohort is used in all three schools of the MSMC. Teachers recognize the value of this collaboration. One teacher said,

“It makes you a better teacher when you can plan collaboratively because you think of something and they think of something. Divide and conquer. Come up with the best product to be able to give to the students. The bottom line is we are trying to...deliver the best lessons possible in the time allotted.”

So far, the Professional Development Cohort has addressed differentiation, reflection, authentic assessment, and collaboration in planning. Teachers find the most value, however, in its collaborative process.

Summer professional development

Before the school opened in 2005, teacher leaders were given the opportunity to learn about arts integration in content areas. The professional development of the school has covered curriculum integration in a variety of ways. In the few days prior to the start of the 2006 – 2007 school year, arts teachers taught their disciplines to other teachers, giving them opportunities to work with various media in presenting new information. The Professional Development Coordinator shared,

“The summer before the school opened a group of teachers and some administrators went to the University of Maryland and they

had Maryland Artist's Teacher Institute summer program for a week. You live on campus; you work together, and kind of learn how to infuse arts. So we had a group that went this past summer and then the summer before so there are some people that moved on to MATI II, and then some people are doing MATI I. Then this year we began with a summer, when school began, we had a pre-service where the arts teachers actually introduced and talked about their art form, and what it is that they are teaching students, and some of the language and vocabulary that they use. That was to lay the groundwork for teachers to kind of pick an art form that they had an inclination to use in their content area."

Strengths and challenges

Strengths

Loiederman Middle School educators have committed to the goals of the district strategic plan and the federal magnet grant. The administration's commitment is illustrated in the staff's perceptions of visionary, supportive leadership that maintains the vision through consistent articulation and supports teachers through collaborative evaluation. Teachers demonstrate their commitment through significant time spent in planning and dialogue, while focusing their energies on student success.

The interviews and observations indicate that a climate conducive to risk-taking and constant self- and peer-evaluation nurtures better instruction. Teachers ask each other and their administrators for new ideas constantly. They evaluate each lesson and adapt as necessary. Research is shared and discussed among all professionals in the building. Teachers collaborate to develop shared plans and evaluation. All of these activities encourage innovation and lead to professional growth.

Using the arts focus, teachers have been able to tie into student interests, engaging students in the process. Additionally, the arts connections allow students to create structures for understanding content and skills in ways that are meaningful and important to them.

A common understanding of how instruction is done also contributes to the success of students. A shared, transparent process for lesson planning assists accountability that lessons are designed to cause the desired learning to take place. All lessons are to articulate the standards to be learned, differentiate for student needs, and include literacy goals.

Additionally lessons are to include an arts connection whenever possible. Making these intentional in the planning process for all teachers increases the likelihood that the lesson design will be sound and achieve its intended purpose.

Challenges

Loiederman Middle School has accomplished much in one and a half years; however, there are some areas noted that need additional support. Specifically, attention should be given to frequent informal assessment, arts integration, and reading across the curriculum.

As stated earlier, there are concerns related to assessment. Many teachers feel that they are hampered in their ability to creatively assess students because of the number and seriousness of district and state assessments. Also, there was no evidence, either in interviews or observations, that frequent formative assessment occurs regularly. The *Breaking Ranks in the Middle* report makes the following recommendation: “Teachers will integrate assessment into instruction so that assessment is accomplished using a variety of methods that do not merely measure students but become part of the learning process.”¹² Among the strategies included in this recommendation are: “use assessment as a further opportunity to teach, ...shift perceptions and practices of assessment from judging to supporting and advancing learning, [and] ...create small-scale diagnostic assessments to evaluate student learning and weaknesses, and modify instruction accordingly.”¹³

Recognizing that district and state assessments will continue to be important for students and their academic advancement, it is important that teachers have access to assessment tools that are integrated into the teaching process. Because these assessments can take a variety of forms, teachers can be creative and implement authentic assessment opportunities. This may be one of the objectives for the Professional Development Cohort during the next school year.

There also is work to be done to fully integrate arts. One administrator noted,

¹² NASSP, p. 213, (2006).

¹³ NASSP, p. 213, (2006).

“We have had a tough time finding the right model to fit. It is not as if we can...inservice an entire staff on how to use a smart board, because she is having smart boards installed in all of her classrooms. We can’t teach everybody how to play piano and then expect them to integrate piano into their classroom. It is just not a realistic expectation.”

As arts integration was explored earlier, examples of standards were given for music and theatre. Not only do teachers need to consider standards for these, but they also have visual arts and dance to consider as well. True integration requires attention to the standards of all disciplines being integrated. Therefore, the number of arts disciplines available for integration complicates the process for Loiederman. Teachers need to be trained in the specific standards most conducive to integration with content subjects and given opportunities to plan integrated lessons together.

Administrators are pleased with the level of reading support teachers give in planning and conducting lessons. Observations during this study also suggest a significant level of reading instruction occurs in all classrooms. However, teachers are not confident that they are prepared to support student reading appropriately and worry that they do not provide enough reading instruction. This can be viewed as a positive, in that teachers not only recognize the importance of reading across the curriculum, but they have a great desire to provide this instruction at a high level. This is an opportunity to build on teacher interest and provide additional professional support.

Conclusion

Loiederman Middle School administrators and teachers are excited and enthusiastic about giving students the best possible instruction in academics while providing unique opportunities with the arts. They believe they are on the right track in assisting students who have struggled while challenging more academically talented students, one of the primary goals of the school district. They are working hard at implementing known research regarding high quality instruction. While there is still opportunity for improvement, the staff has accomplished a great deal already. Continued commitment and vigilance should result in improved success for students and a long-term status of excellence.

Loiederman Middle School is working toward a positive learning community in which all players – students and adults – are actively engaged in learning. One teacher summed it up this way.

“I am surprised that anybody would not be very excited about this and not want to teach here, when you consider it all – I mean, what middle school is usually like.”

Chapter 5

ARGYLE MIDDLE SCHOOL- INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY MAGNET



Argyle at a glance

One of the smallest middle schools in Montgomery County, Argyle Magnet School for Information Technology is located in a very diverse section of the county. A banner reading “Striving for Excellence through Diversity” hangs in the front hallway. When the bell rings, the diversity of the student population becomes apparent, as the halls fill with children of many different ethnic backgrounds walking to their next class. Students appear happy, chatting with peers, and moving to their next destination quickly. As the warning bell rings, walks turn to fast walks, and the hallways once again clear. The halls are very clean, and flyers hang on the walls reminding students of an upcoming dance, club meetings, and other important events.

Argyle
Facts 2006-07
733 Students
28% Hispanic
45% African-American
15% Asian
11.5% Caucasian
6.8% ESOL
43.5% FARMS

The classrooms at Argyle each have unique characteristics depending on the subject matter taught and the teacher style of decorating, but there are several things that are consistent throughout the school. Each teacher has a written biography taped on the outside of his or her classroom, either on the door or on the window beside the door. This serves as an introduction and welcome for the students, as well as visitors to the school. Every classroom has a written objective on the board, along with an agenda for the day. Several teachers use their Smart Boards¹⁴ to display these items. All classrooms have a Baldrige data wall, which displays data collected about a variety of things, including pie charts showing grade breakdowns by class, bar charts showing rates of homework completion, and consensus-o-grams displaying student opinions. Evidence of technology can be seen in all classrooms, in the form of Smart Boards, LCD projectors, and computers. Many of the classrooms have the windows to the hallway covered up, so when the door is closed, people in the hallways cannot see inside.

In one classroom, the words, “honesty,” “effort,” “respect,” and “responsibility” are painted on the walls, along with a bulletin board displaying student work. These words reflect the tone of the entire school building. Students look well-groomed and the positive climate apparent in the hallway supports the claim that student discipline is not a significant problem at the school.

Making adequate yearly progress (AYP) for the school year 2005-2006, which was also Argyle’s first year as a magnet school, provided concrete evidence that the hard work of administration and teachers during the previous year made a difference. The principal attributed much of this success to detailed student data analysis, and this process was detailed in a *Principal Leadership* magazine article. The Strategic Monitoring/Intervention Process developed by the Montgomery County’s Office of School Performance “provides a way to consistently monitor student performance data by subgroups, inform the school of what interventions would be effective, and look at the data at the individual.”¹⁵

But rapid change does not come without a price. Argyle experienced many different changes in just a short period of time, and the pace of

¹⁴ A Smart Board is an interactive whiteboard that interfaces with a computer.

¹⁵ Beyond Numbers: Making AYP One Student at a Time

this change and implementation has been daunting. The principal reflects:

It was very challenging. I felt like in my three years I have had two first years. I was a first year principal when I was appointed three years ago. Then last year I felt like a first year principal again because I was trying to blend new staff, new technology, and construction.

School morale was impacted the past two years when the technology magnet opened school without fully functioning computer labs. This year, building construction, which was not completed until after school started, caused illness among faculty, several of whom took leaves of absence. Many teachers feel the pressure of working at Argyle: pressure to raise test scores, pressure to implement professional strategies into instructional practices, and pressure to integrate technology into the classroom. But despite the pressure, teachers seem committed to ride out the change. One teacher comments,

“The pressure’s definitely here. You can complain about it because no one likes it, but you can’t complain about it ...because somewhere inside you had to have wanted it to be in this situation.”

As with Loiederman and Parkland, Argyle has embraced the consortium goals, and incorporated the achievement of these goals into the ethos and mission of the school. By striving to implement an accelerated core curriculum, unique courses and extended learning opportunities, highly effective instructional programs, collaborative partnerships among schools, parents, and the community, and structure and staffing alternatives, Argyle is making choices that support the consortium goals and the strategic plan goals, which in turn impacts the achievement of the grant goals.

Accelerated core curriculum

One common element in the MSMC is the implementation of the Accelerated Core Curriculum, which prepares the middle school students for high school and college by using the SpringBoard assessments as well as providing access to eight high school courses. The issues of student learning and the accelerated curriculum provoke a set of forceful responses from all the teachers at Argyle. While some teachers notice a change in student learning, commenting that some of the students are more motivated, more excited about what they're doing, and more interested in school, other teachers noticed little or no change in student behavior. One teacher commented,

“ I see some of the students that have come in here academically are no more productive that the students we had originally.”

Another said,

“Some of the students are more motivated, more excited about what they're doing, and more interested in school.”

Offering Algebra I to 6th grade students allows capable students access to a challenging course. In fact, the highest score on an Algebra I standardized test was a sixth grade student, supporting this decision. While all teachers feel that students who are ready for an advanced math course should have the opportunity to take one, several teachers and administrators cite developmental reasons for not supporting the initiative whole heartedly. An administrator reflected:

If the whole concept of middle school is to meet the kid where he is and to teach the kid developmentally where he's ready with the adolescent body changing constantly and knowing that the brain has not finished developed until age 18 or 19, why are you going to give a course [designed] for a 16 or 17 year old to an 11 or 12 year old when their brain is not ready for it?"

Another concern is making sure the students are placed appropriately and based on ability. Since there is a pressure to reach certain goals, difficult choices are made. An administrator explained:

“We’re being held accountable for kind of a numbers game, particularly in math. To meet the goals there’s an expectation that we have so many percentage of 6th graders in above grade levels, so many percentage of 7th graders in above grade level. We do what we can, but it’s not always in the best interest of the kid.”

This sentiment is felt by the teachers as well, especially since students who are not ready for a high school courses end up hurting their transcripts by earning low grades and damaging their overall high school grade point averages. A teacher said,

“ I know that there are 6th graders that are ready, and that’s great, and they should do it, but to say that we need 50%, and we had 40%, and we put 10% more kids in there just to have our numbers sound great is not a good thing for the kids or for the program. It frustrates the teachers, frustrates the kids, makes them feel bad.”

Student scheduling complicates this issue because the decisions about what classes are offered each period are affected by many different variables, including professional development cohorts, team and department planning meetings, and teacher course load. Argyle administrators work to balance the complexities that arise when determining what classes are available at what times, and this is possible due to the additional funding from the magnet grant. For example, Argyle was able to offer an Algebra I class to six 6th grade students during the 2005-2006 school year, when a class of this size would not be possible at another school because of budget constraints.

Many teachers are enthusiastic about challenging the students academically. The activities in many of the classrooms indicate that many teachers are diligently teaching a challenging curriculum. During a science class, students presented projects of high school caliber. In a social studies class, students participated in a rigorous debate, using high level

critical thinking and problem solving skills. One technology teacher shared:

“These kids are doing some of the same things that the high school kids are doing. Some of them are getting it, and are blowing my mind, and other kids are struggling with it...I’m finding that more and more are able to do it, especially the 7th graders- their work is absolutely incredible, so professional looking.”

Unique courses and extended learning opportunities

Unique courses

The instructional focus at Argyle is information technology. Argyle’s technology focus requires that the school utilizes the most up to date technology in the district. There are seven computer labs, 26 classrooms with permanent Smart Boards, 16 portable Smart Boards, 3 mobile carts of laptops, 25 digital cameras, and 23 video cameras. Teachers use an electronic grading system called Pinnacle, and an online communication program called Edline to post homework assignments. The technology focus is apparent. One administrator explained,

[Technology] drives our curriculum. I think that it is the commonality, the common thread that binds our school together.

The teachers at Argyle vary in their technology skill levels, and consequently each teacher uses technology differently. The teachers who have Smart Boards love them and utilize the boards to plan lessons, enhance classroom activities, and differentiate learning. All teachers expressed appreciation for the training provided to learn how to use the technology, and everyone interviewed appreciated the magnet coordinator’s assistance with technology implementation. Despite this, some teachers are still uncomfortable with using technology and find that they do not have enough time to practice using it:

“What ends up happening is you get all of this cool equipment, but a lot of people, and I am one of them, are hesitant to really delve into experimenting with it because you’re telling me all this other

stuff I have to do...There are people in this building that the only time they get on their computer is to enter grades, and that's reluctant too.

The staff believe the technology classes are successful, due to the hard work of the magnet coordinator and the technology teachers who collaborated to create a topnotch technology curriculum that is developmentally appropriate for middle school students. From the Multimedia/TV Studio class, where students worked on creating a movie using the Macintosh *Imovie* program, to the web page design class, where sixth grade students were working diligently on creating a web page using HTML programming, it is apparent that the technology electives present challenging material while also maintaining high student interest. A technology teacher explained the process:

"I took the student recommendations [from last year] and their [feedback] chart they created for me at the end of the year and re did both of those curriculums. I know the digital media one is a lot better [than last year]...[we are doing] images, audio, and video.

All staff agree that the technology program would benefit from improved timeliness with necessary equipment. The technology department struggled at the beginning of the past school years, when the computer labs were not ready and computers were not available. Technology teachers, along with the magnet coordinator, scrambled to create appropriate and challenging lesson plans that would further students' knowledge without actually using the equipment. Teachers experienced frustration because routines and procedures were not established early and instructional time with the equipment was lost. A technology teacher shared:

"Everything was agreed upon- how many computers, how many classes, what was going to be taught. We worked on a curriculum, but computers didn't arrive on time, Smart Boards did not arrive on time, textbooks have not arrived on time...That caused front line frustration. So being a magnet middle school has not given us any priority to receive things that we need in some ways."

The cooperation and teamwork between the administration and the technology department during the first of school really made a difference. A teacher said:

“The cameras came in late, the computers came in late, and the downstairs wasn’t set up. We all worked together though, to get it set up. It wasn’t just a one man show. It was really the technology head, the technology magnet coordinator, our technology specialist, and [the teachers]. We all worked together and got it running.”

Extended learning activities

Documents in the front office, on the website, and hanging in the hallway summarize extended learning activities offered at Argyle and through the Montgomery County district office. There are extended learning activities both after school and during the summer at Argyle. Afternoon activities are on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursdays from 2:15-4:15, and include over fifteen options, such as athletic teams, academic assistance study groups, technology-related clubs, and interest groups. Many of the teachers interviewed sponsored clubs that meet in the afternoon. After school, teachers were seen providing students with extra help on a homework assignment, or making up an assignment. The cafeteria was filled with groups of students after the busses dismissed, and students ate snacks and completed homework. Students also worked with club sponsors in the library. The summer program offerings for Argyle students are the same as all other students in Montgomery County, and programs are listed in the Summer Search Catalogue. Several programs related to technology will take place at Argyle during the summer.

Highly effective instructional programs

Leadership and professional development both impact a school’s ability to provide a highly effective instructional program. At Argyle, the leadership team works diligently to promote a collaborative environment focused on student achievement.

Leadership

The leadership team at Argyle is called The Instructional Council and includes the principal, the assistant principals, the magnet coordinator, the staff development teacher, the GT coordinator, content resource teachers, a teacher's union representative, a special education resource teacher, a guidance resource teacher, and grade level team leaders. Each administrator clearly articulated the vision of the school, and all administrators were focused on the goal of increased student achievement. One administrator explained:

“The middle school consortium magnet program is making more academic programs available to the students and with the students begin able to choose their particular interests would make the students more willing to do their best. It increases the rigor in all the programs, but the students are more apt to work harder for instructional practices or academic areas that suit them particularly.”

The principal worked hard to assemble a highly functioning administrative team at Argyle, whose strengths complimented one another:

“Each one of us...has our own strength, and the strengths we have work well together to develop a wonderful leadership team.”

The teachers notice this strength as well, which clearly shows that the administrators support one another and present an united front.

[Our principal] does a great job delegating responsibility and I think that they (each administrator) kind of do what they're good at and they share roles very well. From what I've seen everything is run very smoothly up there and there's no dissension amongst them.”

The administrators are seen as a team by the faculty, but they are also viewed as overburdened and under significant pressure by the district, and are giving their best effort to fulfill the district goals and re-

quirements while also dealing with the day to day management issues that occur in schools. A teacher shared:

“My sense is that the administration is on overload, which means some of the things that would traditionally be done, they just don’t have time to do.”

While a leadership team is a critical component of school reform, the leadership provided by a good principal at the school level cannot be underestimated, especially during a time of reform. Argyle, as explained by a district office personnel, was in need of a strong leader who could raise the level of student achievement at the school.

It is clear that the principal has accepted this challenge wholeheartedly, and believes in the goals of the consortium. This passion can be seen when she walks through the hallways in a friendly and confident manner, as well as when she speaks about the goals of the strategic plan and the magnet school:

“You’re looking at achievement across the board for all groups of children, socioeconomic, race, and ethnicity. You’re looking at a rigorous curriculum. You’re looking at getting more students in advanced placement classes. You’re looking for minority achievement. You’re really looking at success for all students, and you’re looking at it for the advantage of every student that walks into the building, and I think that’s what one advantage of the middle school magnet consortium is because it’s a total school magnet.

So every child that walks in the door has access to our programs.”
The principal is committed to focusing on improving student learning

We have professional development to increase teacher capacity, which should result in learning, because what I preached for three years here is *our focus is teaching and learning*.

to Argyle. In fact, her number one goal has been learning, both for students and for faculty. She shared,

Because improving learning is her number one goal, Argyle's principal wanted a schedule that includes time for department and team meetings, professional development time, and planning. Another way that the principal showed her commitment to the reform initiative was her support of the Professional Development Initiative:

“(She) has a very hands on approach ...The first year she attended almost all of the professional development cohorts...to show the staff that this was important and also to be conversant in it.” -district staff

Professional development

The MSMC aims to provide highly effective instructional programs by increasing the capacity of teachers within the district through professional development. But despite the hard work and planning by the district office, the teachers at Argyle have responded to the professional development program with mixed reviews. Two major themes are apparent.

Inflexible, repetitive content

Experienced teachers felt that they were already implementing many

Personally I find that a lot of it is stuff that I learned in college, like the new topic now is differentiation and I was doing that when I was student teaching and I did it the past five years and I'm doing it this year.

of the strategies presented by the district teachers, and that many of the sessions did not address individual needs and consequently, did not improve their teaching. One Argyle teacher explained:

Teachers were strongly encouraged to attend courses called *Studying Skillful Teaching 1* and *2* taught by in-district trainers, called. One teacher at Argyle wanted to take the classes since they were highly recommended by the school leadership. However, she was disappointed to

find that the material covered in the class was the same as what was covered during the in-school professional development period.

Teachers at Argyle speak confidently about the level of expertise and talent working as teachers and administrators in the school, and find professional development activities that are developed and presented internally more valuable. District presenters, however, are viewed negatively. One teacher explained:

“Here’s a person who hasn’t taught but is supposed to be a top teacher coming into my school where I have taught for x amount of years telling me to do something, which most of the time I already know how to do. The presentation of that situation alone kills half the audience, and they just start watching the clock.”

Many teachers expressed that the first year professional development topics were following district mandates, and there was not flexibility to address important school concerns during the professional development time. The second year, the school administration listened to the teachers concerns and implemented a professional development planning

“If there was one area that it would be nice to have a little more autonomy [it] would be professional development because there are things that the magnet wants us to look at, and things the staff wants to look at, and so to balance what everybody wants is hard.”

meeting once a month where teachers could offer suggestions and ideas, but there is still room to improve. A school administrator identified this:

All teachers interviewed at Argyle expressed the sentiment that the administration listened to their concerns and changes were being made to improve the curriculum. These teachers felt that the sessions in the second year were much more transferable to their classroom.

Accountability

The staff development teachers at each school have a great deal of responsibility to take the vision and materials from the district office, and

make them a workable reality in the school setting. Since the implementation of the 90-minute professional development period every other day, planning and implementing programming for this has become the number one priority for these positions. One administrator explained:

“The overall model is a good model. It needs an accountability piece where you return and say, ‘I accomplished this,’ or ‘I did not accomplish this.’ -Not for punitive revisiting, but for ‘Have we moved along as planned?’ It’s the only component I see that’s missing in what we do for the instructional council and the leadership that we have.”

A teacher agreed,

“There is a lot of telling how to teach, and very little of accountability for teachers teaching...You’ve got to hold them accountable for the results, which is not very popular in this county and in most counties.”

Argyle seems poised to continue to make positive changes that will impact student achievement. By continuing to focus on making highly effective instructional programs available at Argyle, the expectations will continue to rise, and students will benefit from this reform initiative greatly.

Argyle Professional Development Session: A Closer Look

The staff development teacher patiently asks for teachers to settle down to begin the session. An assistant principal sits through the session, leaving once to look for a teacher that was not at the session. It is clear that the teachers are familiar with the process and, although one teacher works on a lesson plan and another grades papers, most teachers are attentive but not very engaged. The professional development teacher modeled best practices for teaching a lesson, using explicit instruction, collaboration, application, and reflection. The session begins with an initial activity to give teachers a chance to think about their own teaching, followed by sharing of responses. The lesson, one of two on tiered instruction, includes a powerpoint presentation and handouts. Teachers break into groups to go over methods to tier instruction in their own classroom. Teachers are required to create a lesson over the next week and bring it back to the next professional development session.

Collaborative partnership among schools, parents, and the community

Argyle Middle School works to maintain relationships between all constituents of the school. As with the other consortium schools, Argyle staff worked diligently to ensure that information about the school reached all members of the school district. From informational sessions held at the school, to comprehensive web sites, and multiple publications in several languages, the district worked hard to ensure that outreach efforts are a critical component of this reform effort.

Argyle does work in partnership with Booz Allen Hamilton, a global strategy and technology consulting firm. Although they don't provide technology for the school, the magnet coordinator reported that the company helped with events and activities.

Because the school now serves students from all parts of the district, the former "neighborhood school" now has a different community that

spans district wide. One challenge teachers face because Argyle serves students from all over the district is an increasing number of feeder schools, which complicates communication between teachers from one grade to the next. A teacher explained:

“These kids are representative of 40 different feeder schools. When we were one school we could articulate better with the lower elementary...How do we get the skills that we need down to the elementary so that we can just pick up the instruction in the middle school. So, that is gone. I miss that control.”

As the demographics change, it will become important to insure that there are structures in place to handle the diversity found in the middle school population. An administrator said,

“I think there needs to be a little bit more emphasis placed on working with the differences that the students have coming from different areas...Students need to learn how to deal with their differences coming from different places.”

Teachers do not report noticing a big difference between the parent involvement at the school before and after the magnet implementation.

Structure and staffing

Structure, scheduling, and professional development cohorts

Another MSMC commonality includes structure and staffing similarities. The 8 period block schedule at Argyle and the other consortium schools allows for professional development, teaming, and collaboration. The schedule was critical for the principal. She explained,

“I wanted the best of both worlds. I wanted a period of the day when the departments were off at the same time, and yet I wanted a period of the day when the teams were off so they could do the team talk, and then the planning period teachers had to have off. We really had to juggle so we could get everything that we felt was important for the middle school student, because we still need at the middle school level the team concept where a group of teachers know those 150 kids really, really well. That’s one thing that I never want to get away from is the team focus.”

This schedule does cause some issues with student placement and course offerings. One teacher expressed concern that the circumstances of cohort planning time caused him to have 32 students one period and 20 students the next period.

The grouping of the teachers in PDC is an important factor to consider. At Argyle, the cohort groupings used in the first year frustrated some teachers, who expressed a difficulty finding commonalities among subject matters. Teachers felt that differentiation should be used when determining cohort groupings to reflect novice versus experienced learners.

Time issues with PDC are a big concern for teachers at Argyle. Teachers want time for implementation, practice of skills, and integration into practice. Teachers express a frustration with the speed at which the professional development program moves. During the first year of the MSMC at Argyle, teachers felt like they were learning one strategy after another, without the time to practice and implement their teaching “toolkit.” A teacher said,

“We’re told as teachers: teach the student something new and [the students] have to practice it, practice it, discuss it, discuss it, you know revisit it. Teachers learning something is the same way. But the problem is they wanted us to learn so many new things and start doing so many new things all at one time that it was unrealistic...it’s like they would tell us one thing one day and then we’re expected to just make that a habit and part of our life and then something new the next day and it’s not realistic. Adults learn the same way that children do.”

This year, however, teachers are given time for professional development planning. This is time to take what has been learned in the professional development period, and create lesson plans or consult with other teachers. A teacher explained:

“Instead of just giving us the strategy and telling us to do it without giving us time, they’re giving us that PDC off [and say] ‘this is when you’re supposed to plan your implementation, take some time, and then next time we will talk about it. They [also have]

PDC planning meetings so if we want to go give suggestions on what we should do in professional development- that is the time that we can give our suggestions.”

Staffing

All of the teachers and administrators supported the decision to have teachers sign a three year contract, which provided stability of faculty through the transition. The administration has also done a good job of hiring new faculty who implement technology in their lessons. One teacher expressed,

“[The principal and the magnet coordinator] have done a fantastic job with hiring new teachers that are experienced with technology and want to use technology.”

Strengths and challenges

Strengths

Argyle Middle School has many strengths. Due to dedicated leaders working to support a hardworking faculty and staff, Argyle was able to make significant changes in several key areas in a short amount of time- and has successfully made it through the first hurdles of reform as a magnet school. Argyle made AYP the first year as a magnet, which felt like a great success. This favorable outcome can be attributed to many different things. One teacher expressed:

“You went from a school that didn’t achieve AYP prior [to becoming a magnet] to crossing all the T’s and dotting all the I’s...I think you change the leadership and the teaching, that it doesn’t matter if we bring 80 kids from out of consortium or not, I think you are going to increase scores.”

The leadership team is clearly on board with the mission of the school, and feels good about providing programs that lead to student success, as well as continuing to improve these programs. Argyle leaders developed innovative scheduling mechanisms to address student needs, as well as allow time for teacher professional growth and planning.

The technology department has embraced the technology focus of the school, and in cooperation with the magnet coordinator, created a technology curriculum that is developmentally appropriate for the middle school child, but is rigorous as well. The technology teachers understand that the curriculum will continue to change as the students learn more and more about technology at an earlier age and feel empowered by the school leadership to be innovative.

Another success is the integration of the out-of-consortium kids. The principal remembered:

I think that the vision of Montgomery County public schools is test scores and I think that all of the administrators are under an extreme amount of pressure to make sure that the test scores are increasing... I would say that the morale is extremely low and I don't think that's necessarily the administration's fault. I think it's the position that the three schools are in and what is expected for the teachers to be doing here and all of the new programs that are being implemented and all of the new expectations" - *Argyle teacher*

"One of the real worries we had was that we would have 66 to 80 students by themselves feeling they had no friends and could not relate. But [you can't tell the difference] so meshing has been really good."

Challenges

Despite the many successes Argyle has experienced over the past two years, the school morale is somewhat low, in part, due to building and health issues. The teachers are also very sensitive to the perceived pressures of administration. Several teachers mentioned that the administration is under pressure from the district level to perform due to the publicity of the magnet.

The teachers also notice when the principal is not in the school building. This happens due to meetings with the other magnet principals or district office staff. The principal recognizes the need for community and shared knowledge and has a plan already in mind for next year to address these and other needs:

“[Next year I want to], work more with the staff, develop the collegiality right away at the beginning, do some in service on what it means, what’s a team meeting, how it’s structured, what it look like, what the outcome should be, what cohort planning looks like, what a good parent conference looks like, those types of things.”

The technology program, although ultimately successful, has experienced several challenges during implementation. Teachers were impacted when the equipment was not delivered to the school site during the summer and teachers did not feel prepared to begin using the technology immediately upon the start of school. Technology still needs to be further integrated into all subject area curricula, and teachers need to continue to learn ways to integrate technology into their lessons. A teacher suggested updating the Argyle website to include a digital library of student work including digital movies, websites, and powerpoint presentations.

The faculty at Argyle believe that students should have the opportunity to take classes that are rigorous and developmentally appropriate. The teachers however, believe that there are other things that impact student course placement, including professional development cohort planning and pressure from the district to make certain numbers. A clear benchmark system for admission into certain courses would ensure student readiness and provide rationales to teachers. It would provide concrete data that would eradicate the belief that students are in classes they are not ready to take.

Another challenge for Argyle has been implementing the professional development model that includes 90 minutes of professional every other day. Feedback from the teachers suggests that certain professional development activities should be differentiated based on several things, including staff development teacher recommendations, level of teacher experience, student test scores, and classroom observations of best practices.

Conclusion

Argyle Middle School is “the place to be.” All of the new teachers who were hired to work at the magnet school were attracted to the school be-

cause of the technology focus and the desire to make a difference. The leadership at the school is committed to work through the challenges and find the right interventions that work for Argyle. The students are engaged with the technology focus and appear to be enjoying school. As Argyle continues to make adjustments as it prepares to become a full magnet next year, the outlook is positive and filled with excitement.

I want Argyle to be one of the highest performing middle schools in the county. When I compare test scores, I don't compare our test scores with other down county test scores...I want to find out what the top schools are doing because I think our kids are just as bright as another other student in Montgomery County. (school administrator)

Chapter 6

PARKLAND MAGNET SCHOOL FOR AEROSPACE TECHNOLOGY



Parkland Middle School student looks through a telescope.

Parkland at a glance

Originally opened in 1963, Parkland Middle School reopened in the fall of 2005 as a whole school magnet as part of the Middle School Magnet Consortium. Named Parkland Magnet School for Aerospace Technology, the school's focus of aerospace and robotics now draws students from the entire school district.

In addition to the school reopening as a magnet, the school also opened on a temporary campus as the original site was renovated and remodeled to better serve the new learning goals. At the same time, Loiederman opened to relieve the overcrowding of Parkland. However, unlike the issues Loiederman faced with students who were upset about the transfer, the Parkland students seemed to adjust quickly to the smaller group of students at the school

**Parkland
Facts 2006-07**

- 560 Students
- 41% Hispanic
- 32% African-American
- 14% Asian
- 13% Caucasian
- 12.5% ESOL
- 46% FARMS

and the new students who arrived for the magnet. The temporary housing of Parkland has been seen by some teachers as playing an important role in helping the adjustment of the old Parkland school to the new magnet focus.

In addition to the temporary building, the movement of some students to Loiederman, and the creation of the Parkland middle school, there was a large turnover in faculty at Parkland. With the large turnover in teachers, and the requirement of signing a three-year contract with the school, some of the teachers felt it helped to create a new dynamic and outlook for the school.

Although only 6th grade students were involved officially in the magnet during the first year and 6th and 7th grade students in the second year, many teachers reported that there was an effort to make sure that all students were benefiting from the magnet and felt a part of the program. Some 8th grade students were reported to question why they didn't have aerospace or robotics courses but overall seemed to accept the situation. The unique organization of the whole school has helped all students to have connections to the theme but it also attracted many teachers to the school as well. One teacher observed:

“To tell you the truth, I really don't think that there is any difference between what the exposure is in 6th, 7th and 8th grade. The difference really at this juncture is in class composition, because we are a whole school magnet, and I think that is also vital. Most schools are magnet only for certain select students, and that was another reason why I came here, I would not have gone to a magnet program for certain select students, a school within a school.”

Parkland Middle School has received a great deal of public attention for its rigorous standards for all students. The school represents the district's commitment to high achievement for all students. As an example of the high quality of education, President George W. Bush visited the site during its first year of operation as a magnet school. At a press conference held at the school, President Bush remarked,

“We have got to educate our children now for the skill sets necessary for tomorrow. There is no better place to talk

about that than right here at Parkland Magnet Middle School for Aerospace Technology.”¹⁶

In order to understand the how Parkland has received this recognition for its rigorous program, it is necessary to take a closer look at how the school addresses the MSMC components. Therefore, this case study will examine Parkland’s implementation of accelerated core curriculum; unique courses and extended learning opportunities; highly effective instructional programs; collaborative partnerships among schools, parents, and the community; and structure and staffing.

Accelerated core curriculum

As part of the goals for Parkland’s magnet program, Parkland also offers an accelerated core curriculum. Considering the aerospace and robotics theme of the magnet program, the accelerated curriculum, beyond the district’s standards in math, English, and foreign language, is focused on science.

Along with the core subject area courses of language arts, social studies, mathematics, and science, students are required to take a course each year related to the theme of robotics and aerospace engineering. Each of these courses is based on the Voluntary State Curriculum (VSC). Maryland’s VSC includes content standards for various subjects. Although considered “voluntary”, the Middle School Assessments (MSA) from the state are aligned with these standards and are required for determining Annual Yearly Progress. By including components of the VSC for science into the robotics and aerospace courses, Parkland has been able to fit the equivalent of three years of middle school science into two years and prepare students for them. As the students begin 8th grade, they will take a high school level physics or physical science courses based on their math level. These courses are currently being developed using the high school curriculum but will also be adapted to meet the developmental needs of middle school students. By using the VSC to guide decisions on coursework, Parkland teachers and administrators, in collaboration with central office, have created a rigorous curriculum that flows between the science and magnet specific courses. By using the standards, Parkland ensures that expectations are the same for all students, including English language learners and

¹⁶ Parkland Middle School website. <http://www.mcps.k12.md.us/schools/parklandms/>

special education students. With the demands of preparing students for high school math and science course before they finish middle school, the question of how the school can accomplish this task while still meeting the requirements of the Maryland Content Standards has been a focus for the professional staff. Almost all of the Parkland teachers have shared that, considering the rigorous goals of their magnet school, meeting the demands of the state standards have not been a concern. In fact, they not only meet and exceed the standards of the state, but also the additional standards of Montgomery County Public Schools. Several teachers reported the additional rigor that has been placed in the curriculum. One teacher remarked,

“I think that the standards Montgomery County uses are accelerated over basically the State. Being an aerospace school our expectations are set higher...we try to cover the standards in detail and actually show how the standards can be applied into the real world situation.”

Although these standards are set by the state and the district, the school has been given some flexibility in determining which sequence would be the best for the students and the magnet theme. As one teacher noted,

“It is non-negotiable that we don’t teach the indicators that are part of the VSC nor should it be, but what is wonderful is that we get a chance to see the progression that we think is best.”

Teachers are expected to cover the standards. Yet because they have been given the ability to decide as a school how those standards fit with the magnet theme and how to arrange them in the classes, teachers felt their opinions were valued as professionals. As a result, there was a great amount of buy-in from the faculty and support for the goals of the program.

Demanding coursework was not isolated to the magnet-related courses but also pervaded the core content areas. Students were challenged to complete standard high school courses in middle school. All students at Parkland are expected to be enrolled Algebra by the 8th grade. With the strict math requirement, students have a stronger background in math and have been better prepared for the rigorous science

courses. In addition, students who met certain guidelines could also take English for high school credit or begin their foreign language requirement for high school while they were at Parkland. Regardless of the subject area, it required all levels of teachers to start preparing their students immediately upon entering Parkland. As one teacher commented,

“When you enroll them and you see how far they can go with the challenge, it just seems like it’s more doable than before, when you didn’t put them in there. More students have accelerated than we originally thought, which is nice.”

Every interviewed teacher reported a positive impact of the challenge of students taking rigorous courses, and they also reported students striving to reach those high expectations.

Unique courses and extended learning opportunities

Parkland’s focus on aerospace and robotics courses offers many unique learning opportunities as well as a need for extended learning opportunities. As with the other two magnet schools, the accelerated curriculum allows students to earn high school credits while still in middle school. With the theme based in science, Parkland has developed programs that allow it to reach all levels of learners and help them excel.

Unique courses

At Parkland, these high school credits can come from foreign language, English, mathematics, and science. Between 6th and 7th grades, students at Parkland take the equivalent of three years of science which is unique among all the Montgomery County Public Schools. This concentration of science is possible due to the additional robotics and aerospace courses required of all Parkland students. As a result, eighth grade students can enroll in high school science courses based on their level of mathematics. Parkland is the only middle school that allows students to complete high school science courses while still enrolled at a middle school. With the strict math requirement, students have a stronger background in math and have been better prepared for the rigorous science and magnet-related courses.

Because no other school offers high school science credit in middle school and that Parkland is the first to require a minimum of Algebra in 8th grade, creating appropriate curriculum has been a challenge. Typically the curriculum comes from the school district or the state. Parkland, however, has courses without predetermined curriculum due to its unique magnet. As a result, teachers at Parkland have written much of the expanded curriculum at the school site. The central office is still involved in ensuring the quality and rigor of the curriculum written by the teachers so Parkland sends the new materials to The Office of Accelerated Enriched Instruction (AEI) for approval. As the school prepares to add 8th grade courses to their program, more courses will need new curriculum. With additional planning and development of course materials expected, some faculty members are concerned and stressed. As one leader noted:

“To be honest in this case, we have still people who still aren’t clear on what the goals are or what the outcomes are for their curriculum because those don’t have a curriculum. There isn’t one that is laid out.”

However, once the goals have been established, teachers feel that the students understand where the course is headed and see how it relates to other subjects.

“The student is aware of what they are going to be encountering and the lessons. They’re aware of our objectives.”(teacher)

Many teachers felt that Parkland, out of any of the magnet schools, truly promoted rigorous coursework for all their students. As some teachers noted,

“I think the fact that we are in a place now that promotes excellence where they can see so many successful students around them, that you have kids who are striving to do better.”

“This school has a really wonderful staff and I think that the three magnet schools do, but this one in particular; I know the teachers really do have high expectations of their students. Even if that was

the only thing that the magnet school stood for was high expectations and achievement, I think that it would be [successful]”

One of the benefits of the magnet program is that different subject areas can reinforce a concept in another subject area. The interdisciplinary nature of the program is translated to the classroom and can be seen by the students.

“I think it gives us the flexibility in this school, since we are an aerospace magnet, to almost make it easier to cross subject curriculum. For example, we have mathematics, robotics and aerospace so that when we are looking at when we design an airplane for flight we are also talking about the geometry at the same time in mathematics.” (teacher)

Some teachers cited the resources that NASA has available as being useful in supporting the interdisciplinary teaching. In addition, the language arts teachers reported that they often bring in short selections that relate to aeronautics as examples for a particular genre. Other teachers reported on the discussion of geometry that helped the flight classes design better models for planes. The magnet coordinator has been very valuable in helping with these interdisciplinary connections, which was one of the original goals of the position. With a strong background in science, the magnet coordinator was able to help create vertical and horizontal flow among the core classes and magnet-related courses. This alignment has helped to extend the collaborations between subject areas and to determine what material the students need to address and master as they progress through the program at Parkland. In order to ensure that these goals are met, Parkland makes use of assessments which the faculty reported gave them valuable feedback on how to keep the program on target for helping their students to be successful.

Extended learning

Due to the challenging curriculum expected of all Parkland students, the school has developed various ways to help each student succeed. In particular, language arts and mathematics have been a focus to ensure that all students are prepared.

The amount of intervention depends on the needs of the students. Some students have been identified as needing double math or double English to help them learn all the necessary skills. Although this might hinder the choice of electives, some teachers explained that it will help the students in the long run to be successful. In some cases students are supported by a program called Read 180. Although this program is staffed out of the general staffing budget, some teachers cited it as a successful support for students and worth a slight increase in class size overall because it will make a difference for the students involved.

In addition to regular additional classes of math and/or reading, students are typically assigned to a Students and Teachers Actively Reading, STAR, period every Wednesday. STAR periods typically have a mini-lesson for the student but then allow time for students to read independently with the idea that increased reading time will improve vocabulary. For some students this period of time serves as extra support for reading or math through Partner Power Period (PPP). This program allows students to work closely with math or language arts teachers to focus on their own particular needs.

These additional courses, a supplemental program, and the weekly PPP provide Parkland students with a variety of content support. As one teacher noted,

“If we put them in double periods or we ask them to come after school...it is because of one of the theories of learning -- if we give students who are a little bit slower more time they can learn the same amount of material that the other students can learn.”

These programs allow students to more fully benefit from the regular core content courses. In turn, teachers are able to create highly effective instructional programs for their students knowing that all students have the support they need to succeed.

Highly effective instructional programs

As with the other MSMC schools, Parkland strives to incorporate best practices throughout its program to ensure that they are highly effective. As with Argyle and Loiederman, Parkland’s teachers strive to meet students where they are, focus on student needs, have a rich learning envi-

ronment, organize content around concepts, connect the classroom to student experiences, and develop higher order thinking skills. By incorporating these best practices into the education program at Parkland, students are able to benefit from the magnet focus of the school and succeed in rigorous coursework.

Meet students where they are

The faculty at Parkland was determined to have all students enroll in Algebra by 8th grade. In order to meet this goal, students who had not previously been challenged in math needed to have the support to succeed in these difficult classes. As previously mentioned, double math periods and the math PPP have been used to help the students get more support in learning math concepts. At the other extreme, the faculty realized that some students might be capable of more challenging work but had not been allowed the opportunity to enroll in more difficult math courses. To help the teachers identify the most challenging mathematics course for the students, each student was given a test to determine their math skill. By having a test, the teachers can best determine which placement the students need in order to reach algebra by 8th grade.

“Some students are moved up, some students are moved down to get a better base and once they get the better base we move them back up again and the students are aware of this.” (teacher)

These placement tests were given for the first time this school year. Although all teachers interviewed felt this was a more productive way to place the students, many did cite the problems of having students changing their class schedule a few weeks into the school year. It is anticipated that the placements will go more smoothly in the upcoming years.

Focus on student needs

In addition to helping students with proper placement, teachers also differentiate their lessons for their students. By finding ways to adjust the lessons for students that need more support or accommodations, teachers focus on the students needs. In addition to the teachers adjusting their lessons, some of the teachers are explaining to individual students how different tools or strategies can help them in all their classes.

For example, ESOL students were explicitly taught what their accommodations were and how to use them. As a result, ESOL students were able to feel more comfortable in their classes and in sharing their needs with their teachers. Several teachers commented that the ESOL students would come to them before or after class and inform them of they would need a dictionary or calculator for class. In some cases, teachers reported that ESOL students were pursuing more challenging courses and being recommended to the Gifted and Talented program after completion of the ESOL program.

Rich learning environments

The focus of the magnet program at Parkland has allowed for a rich learning environment at the school. Student have the opportunity to interact with unique materials related to aerospace and robotics. With solar trackers, a wind tunnel, and robots, Parkland students are able to have many different opportunities that most people never have the chance to experience. These materials are used in the context of rigorous coursework that challenges all student. As one teacher noted,

“They may be getting B’s, C’s or D’s in their classes, but where we will see success is when they leave Parkland and go to another high school and they are all of a sudden like, ‘oh hey I’ve seen that before’ or ‘I’m well prepared.’”

This increased requirement of science and math allows teachers to delve further into scientific concepts and their uses. In particular, the incorporation of real-world applications can be seen in all subject areas but especially in the science and magnet courses. A teacher explained,

“I think that is the biggest thing about the school is the amount of real world examples that we give to students. Seeing that a lot of our teachers are from private industry or come from a background where they have worked in private industry as scientists or researchers.”

With many of the magnet teachers coming from backgrounds other than education, students are given new perspectives on how science is used outside of the classroom.

Organize content around concepts

Parkland teachers strive to not only meet the Maryland Content Standards but also to exceed their goals. With these clear expectations in mind, teachers are very clear about what students should know and be able to do at the end of each learning experience. Several of the teachers commented how they work with their colleagues and discuss how to present material to help students to understand the main concepts. These standards and objectives for students were clearly visible in classroom observations.

“If you are going to have high expectations for students you really have to know what you are going to be doing every day. So one of the ways that fits in is the fact that we can all communicate together, we plan and know what is going to happen next, we don’t fly by the seat of our pants by any means.” (teacher)

In situations where the learning was not as successful as expected, teachers shared that they would use the information from class assessments and discuss ways to improve instruction. As a result, teachers were able to monitor the conceptual understanding of the students and adjust their teaching appropriately. A few teachers shared that they had recently had the opportunity to plan a series of lessons to address a concept that students were consistently struggling with in math. The result was a powerful set of lessons that came from shared information on best practices in math. By following up with other assessments, the teachers hope to see that the students have a deeper understanding of that particular math concept.

Higher order thinking skills

In many classes, teachers reported using news events that related to their content to guide classroom activities. For example, one teacher used actual shuttle launch data to plot the acceleration and velocity of the space craft in one course. Another teacher had her students debate the decision of scientists to demote Pluto’s status as a planet. Many

teachers were quick to give examples of how they are challenging their students to develop higher order thinking skills. A teacher said:

“We are doing some real geometric proofs, higher math, scientific inquiry and I think it is such an enriching thing for students who are in our population.”

Several teachers are hoping to offer evening star gazing activities for the families next year after the construction is completed at Parkland’s home campus. In addition, students were seen to be working with real-world data of shuttle launches, programming robots, and creating different styles of aircraft wings to decide which would work best in the wind tunnel. These activities go beyond regular academic classes. As one teacher observed,

“I teach a heterogeneous class but I teach it at a GT level, so there are a lot of students that are not getting it and they are frustrated. But I think they are learning more than they would be otherwise.”

Another teacher also made note of the higher expectations for Parkland students but was quick to point out that all students are held to high levels of achievement. Although Parkland draws students from more affluent areas, all students are succeeding. The teacher went on to state,

“If you break it down,...[they]aren’t just the magnet students coming in that got ‘advance’, those are students who would have been at Parkland, a lot of them were advanced that hadn’t been previously in advanced.”

Authentic assessment

In order to ensure a highly effective instructional program, the objectives of what students should know and be able to do are decided up front. After those goals are established, assessments can be designed to allow students to demonstrate their knowledge and then the curriculum can be planned to reach those goals. At Parkland,

“Everything is set from planning backwards.” (teacher)

Assessments are created to determine the degree to which learning has occurred. These assessments are prevalent in classroom instruction but are also evident in “milestones” determined by the school.

Parkland has designed specific “milestones” or quarterly assessments to determine the understanding of the larger themes of the magnet. Although the school is in its second year of the magnet, there are still many details that the teachers and administrators are working on in terms of interdisciplinary units and meaningful milestones. Previous examples of the milestones have included solving a problem with set parameters, delivering an on-camera or in-class presentation of a scientific finding or engineering solution, and writing and refining a well-developed multi-paragraph essay. With the wide range of material that relates to the magnet theme of the school, Parkland is hoping to have projects that link more directly to the themes of robotics and aerospace engineering and to have the projects be more interdisciplinary so that the assessments would relate to multiple subject areas. The Parkland faculty has been evaluating the previous year’s success and challenges with the program and making changes appropriately.

This need to create new curriculum and milestones, has added an extra layer of complexity to the challenges faced by the school. The curriculum the school creates is reviewed by central office leaders to ensure it meets all the requirements. Since the curriculum is still being created, it does make it difficult when planning out the year. As one of the administrators notes,

“You have other people who have full curriculum guides developed by the County, they’ve got the resources and the tools and they know where they are going and they know what assessment they are using. So we have lots of variation in terms of where people are.”

In addition to the milestones, Parkland successfully uses a variety of other assessments to determine how their students are progressing. These assessments are crucial in not only providing feedback about what the students have learned but they are also needed to improve teaching.

During classroom observations, an assortment of informal and formal evaluations of student progress were used, including quizzes, group projects, students showing their work on the board, class discussions, and

exit slips. Teachers reported that they have a strict guideline for homework this year in that it only accounts for 10% of the grade. Formative assessments are 40% of the grade and these can be retaken if the students do not perform well the first time. A math teacher reported how these assessments play a role in the curriculum. Earlier in the day, the math teachers had determined that students were still struggling with inequalities. The teachers all worked together to come up with revised lesson plans to ensure the students were prepared for the summative exams. The summative assessments compose the other 50% of a student's grade, and they are not eligible to be retaken. These summative assessments are sometimes countywide, depending on the subject area, and help to correlate how Parkland is doing with the rest of the school district. As one teacher noted,

“We try to let the students know what is expected of them through our planning and through our daily lessons, our engagement pieces, our feedback test scores, and things like that.”

Teachers all strive to help their students succeed, but some felt that having specific targets on certain dates were sometimes limiting the potential learning. A couple of teachers suggested that sometimes students need more time.

“If I was given an extra week or two I would have better numbers, this student may have been stressed or just needed that extra class time, that extra one or two classes where they pick it up...the way that I look at it is, if you sacrifice a week or two, to remember it for the rest of your life, that is worth it.” (teacher)

Whether or not an extra week or two would make a difference in test scores, the teachers were passionate about finding ways to help everyone succeed.

Collaborative partnership among schools, parents, and the community

In addition to the professional development period, the school made use of its various partners to offer workshops related to the magnet theme prior to the start of the school year. The school has several strong partnerships with local organizations, businesses, and institutes of

higher education. Raytheon, NASA Goddard Space Flight Center, James Clark School of Engineering, Montgomery College, Lockheed Martin, John Hopkins University, United States Air Force Auxillary Civil Air Patrol, United States Air Force Arnold Engineering Development Center, and the University of Maryland have all established partnerships with Parkland Middle school.

Many of these partners sent scientists to lead training for all Parkland teachers before the school year began. These trainings gave teachers of all subject areas an opportunity to meet scientists and experience some hands-on science themselves. There appeared to be a discrepancy between how the science teachers and the rest of the teachers perceived these trainings. Many of the science teachers interviewed felt it was not enough information for the other subject area teachers because it did not delve into enough specifics related to the magnet theme. One science teacher commented,

“People are not given the background information that would help them to more meaningfully integrate aerospace technology across all of the subject areas and that has a huge impact on kids. It helps them to see their relationships to transfer information from one setting to another... that is the real beauty of what we can do here at the middle school level by having a common focus.”

On the other hand, non-science teachers reported feeling they had benefited a great deal from the science training. An English teacher noted,

“We had a professional day at the beginning of the year and I think they are planning on having more of those. That was very, very successful where they had about 20 different workshops and we chose workshops to go to, they were all related.”

This small disagreement about whether all non-science teachers needed more science background was discussed by several interviewed teachers. The main reason given by non-science teachers that they did not need addition training was that the overview of the science material was enough to give them a better understanding without intruding on their preparation time for their own subject areas. On the other hand, science teachers felt that the magnet theme would be better reinforced in all classes if more teachers had a deeper understanding of science. Al-

though this issue of whether or not more science training was needed by teachers came up several times, no one felt it was a major concern of the school. It appeared that each teacher's passion for their particular subject area is what gave rise to their opinion about the degree of science training they felt was necessary.

With the diversity of the student body, the school has a challenge of communicating with the parents and community. There are several strategies Parkland has implemented to help with this effort. EdLines is an internet site that allows parents to check the progress of their students and get homework assignments. Although it is a district-wide goal, Parkland teachers have embraced its use. The site is updated with new grade data daily, so the students have the most recent information at their disposal. The website can also be accessed from libraries for the families that do not have on-line access at home. In addition to EdLines, the principal also records messages to be phoned to each home on Sunday night. These messages include important reminders of any upcoming activities and help to get the students in the mindset for school the next day. An archive of these messages is kept on the school's website. These sources, coupled with a variety of parent nights and informational meetings, help the school to focus on the needs of the students in meeting the rigorous objectives of the magnet. Teachers reported that parents have also increased in attendance at the school events; although, the teachers admitted that the out-of-consortium parents were more likely to be seen than the in-consortium parents.

Structure and staffing

As with Loiederman and Argyle, there are structures in place at Parkland to support the MSMC components. One of the common threads of comments from all Parkland teachers interviewed was the impact and importance of the professional development offered at the school.

Professional Development

With all the expectations for rigorous coursework and meaningful assessment, the professional development of the staff has been critical in assisting teachers to better serve the students. Many of the teachers reported that the professional development topics for the 2006-07 school year related much more to the classroom than the sessions from the pre-

vious year. Parkland administrators have had the challenge of making sure the needs of the school and the magnet are not overlooked with all the different stake-holders wanting to give input into what those professional development periods cover. In particular the leaders have the challenge of balancing the input of the teachers at the school with the pressure from central office in what the sessions cover. As one administrator noted,

“...taking the input from people [central office], having them critique what we are doing...but really having to protect that [professional development period] because there are so many people that want to pull on you to go into different directions.”

The ability of the Parkland administrators to incorporate the requirements of the central office while still meeting the specific needs of the Parkland staff has earned a great deal of respect from the teachers. Although there were disagreements in how often the professional development period should occur, every teacher thought they were valuable for the teachers at the site. In particular, the less experienced teachers found the sessions very informative. One teacher commented,

“I guess it really does start with the teacher where we have this professional development period, which has really been extremely beneficial for me, especially last year being a first year teacher and coming into this new and not really knowing what to expect and having these very high expectations for our students and in turn having high expectations for the teachers too.”

Although many of the experienced teachers felt that the professional development periods were valuable, they often felt that time would be better served if the sessions were only once a week. Currently the teachers are assigned a particular period to participate in the professional development training. With an alternating block schedule, the teachers meet every other day for training. The topics for the sessions were determined by school leadership teams with input from the central office. For the 2006-07 school year, topics were arranged to progress more logically through the material to be covered. Sessions observed covered using feedback on assessments to inform teaching practice and examining standardized test data to determine how best to support students.

Whereas many teachers criticized the first year sessions for lack of consistency, many felt that the trainings this year were much more applicable to their classroom. Other teachers voiced their belief that the sessions would be more powerful if they were further differentiated based on what the teachers already knew and on the amount of experience the teachers had on a particular topic. However, the teachers all still acknowledge the usefulness of the sessions. With the changes implemented in the second year, there were improvements to the overall program. The professional development was intentional in its design, it was on-going throughout the year, and it was systemic with all teachers involved in the process all of which are crucial in the long-term success of such programs consistent with best practices in professional development.

Strengths and challenges

Climate

With the formation of the magnet, there was a shift in the population of the school. Teachers have noticed that there were some differences among the students with the formation of the magnet. These differences were not only linked to the presence of out-of-consortium students but also to the in-consortium students. A teacher who was at Parkland for over three years reported on the differences:

“There is a huge difference in general that I can see, that I was even able to see last year. By having students choose Parkland, even those who are assigned Parkland, I think I feel a different feeling here. There is...more of a sense of pride; there is more of a sense of, ‘I’m in a school that other students want to come to.’”

This difference in attitude was also evident when teachers compare Parkland students to students at other schools. Even with the students in 8th grade this year and 7th and 8th grades last year, the teachers reported that the focus of the students had shifted to academics. The main difference that the teachers reported noticing was the increased diversity of the students and smaller class sizes.

One teacher noted that the students in the magnet also seemed to be more self-directed and capable of doing more authentic research, a shift seen by one teacher between two semesters:

“And it wasn’t that I changed between those semesters, it really wasn’t. It wasn’t an attitude thing or any of that kind of stuff. It was sheer pragmatics, which is what I am really excited about as I look at our 6th and 7th graders now. Just having some diversity in the class and working on keeping class sizes small, which I just can’t emphasize enough, that is a make it or break it.”

In spite of the renewed focus on academics, some teachers were quick to point out that not every student remained motivated. Although the attitude of the students has improved greatly from before the school was a magnet, teachers are still challenged to find ways to keep all the students engaged and on target with the curriculum. Some teachers noted how tiring it can be to keep the students on target but reported that the school leadership helped to keep the teachers focused on the goal.

Visionary leadership

The strong leadership and talented principal were often brought up as key reasons why the teachers have been able to overcome challenges. Several teachers reported on how the principal’s vision for the school not only helped to set the direction for Parkland, it still allowed the teachers the freedom to decide how the goals played out in their specific classrooms. As one teacher stated,

“We have a great principal...I think anyone who speaks to him will want to work with him, he’s got a vision, and he is very articulate. But I think also to be in the forefront of something, this is a whole new way of teaching middle school. I think people like to do something new, like to see whether something will work or not to be on the cutting edge.”

Teachers reported feeling that they were treated as professionals by the principal. As a result, they felt they could suggest changes to help the students be more successful at the required curriculum. Another teacher commented:

“I think we have a principal that I could say for my department we all respect and he has given us some leeway to what we want and I

think he has just created this environment of we really work with the kids and if that is not what you are about this probably is not the place for you.”

The other school leaders also felt the principal valued their input and that it was a true leadership team that led the school. Every teacher and administrator noted the importance of the principal’s role in the success of Parkland.

Resources

In spite of the grant funding, many teachers still reported the need for more resources at the school site. Whether it is the inclusion of professional storytellers in the program for authenticity, more content area teachers to bring down class sizes, more paraprofessionals to provide support for English language learners/special education students, or specific magnet themed technology, many teachers had several items they felt would help the students at Parkland. Some were also concerned about the upkeep of the resources that are currently at the school.

“With our robotics class if we didn’t have the materials and the technology to apply our aerospace investigation classes, we simply would not be able to do what we are doing with the kids.” (teacher)

Many teachers reported the importance of computers for their courses. Some of the magnet-related courses relied heavily on computers for their coursework while teachers in other courses felt they lacked easy access to the computers since science classes used the available ones so often. In particular, the English department felt they should have their own computer lab to help with the writing process. Overall, there was an acknowledgment that, although the Parkland staff has come together to focus on student success, more buy-in for the actual magnet theme was needed by all teachers to help determine the priority of future funding.

Culture of collaboration and professionalism

Every individual interviewed at Parkland reported the high caliber of teachers and administrators at the school site. In particular the flexibility of the teachers to collaborate with each other and to handle all the

changes that occur with a new magnet school has been noted by many of the teachers as key to the success of Parkland's magnet program. This ability to adapt was noted by several teachers:

"I have never worked with a more friendly and sharing group of teachers, more than willing to share information, even when they come up with a new idea, it is just put out there whether it is through e-mail or just at a meeting and what we try to do is basically analyze how something that you may have developed has worked in my class and if it works okay then we may roll it out for the whole department."

"I have never seen a staff like this, above and beyond what is expected...so many teachers seem to be so willing to do things that are not even in the description of duties."

"I am amazed at the intelligence, at the range of knowledge of the staff, at the expertise of the staff, not only in each individual subject area, but we have very accomplished people here."

Even when expressing concerns, the interviewees were careful to point out that they felt the administrators and teachers were doing a great job. Many of the new faculty members at the school came to Parkland because of the reputation of the teachers or principal when each had worked at previous schools with those individuals. Although non-science applicants for positions did not necessarily have a strong science background, their willingness to learn how their subject could link to the magnet theme was evident in their initial interview at the school site with the principal.

Staff were concerned that many of their peers were burning-out from the increased expectations of teachers. Although many teachers expressed it as a positive, it also was seen as an area of stress. One teacher confirmed this challenging schedule by saying,

"I have never seen a staff like this...I get here an hour before school starts, the parking lot is already half full. When I used to be able to...stay until 6:00, you would think I would be the last one here, but no, people live here."

Some were reluctant to be on tape when they shared this issue because they believe in what Parkland is doing with the magnet and do not want their concerns to reflect poorly on the school or the school's leadership. However, several teachers reported after the interview was over, that many people were very stressed due to long days and additional pressure to make Adequate Yearly Progress at the school. Some of these teachers did not think they could keep up the same pace with early mornings and late nights for too much longer.

Electives

Each student At Parkland is required to enroll in a magnet-related course each year. Some teachers feel that the students are missing out on other opportunities for electives. Computer, art, and music are offered as one semester courses but there are not many other choices. A few teachers expressed concern that this lack of choices limits the ability of middle school students to explore more subject areas. Of particular concern was the lack of choices for English language learners who have required ESOL courses.

“One disadvantage to the ESOL students at this particular school is that because our focus is the aerospace technology, the students who don't have enough language skills are at a huge disadvantage and they are required to take these courses but they don't have the skills to cope or to be truly successful.” (teacher)

“If you are in the ESOL, if you look at those kids, 6th Grade and 7th Grade, their schedules are full and they have no electives. We say we are an aerospace magnet, right now as it stands there are kids that could go through the whole program and not take any aerospace electives.” (teacher)

When the students are not able to understand the language of a course, it makes it difficult for them to understand the material. Since these students have their own ESOL course to take, the possibility of taking electives in computer, art, or music becomes very unlikely. Considering that 12.5% of the students are English language learners, students at each grade level are left to face these limited choices.

Conclusion

Many teachers and administrators interviewed felt that additional time to prepare for the magnet would have been useful. Although there were key people involved in the planning process, many of the current staff was not directly involved. As a result, some of the teachers felt additional planning time could have helped address issues before they became concerns. For example, additional time to plan out the full science and magnet courses would have helped to ensure that milestones and other assessments were appropriate for the students and fit smoothly with the magnet theme. Other teachers interviewed were very passionate in their belief that the central office was not aware of or did not understand the specific constraints and challenges at Parkland. These teachers felt that the central office leaders should come to the school and learn more about the students and the faculty to better understand how Parkland meets the needs of its students. Although teachers were often critical of central office, they were still impressed with their colleagues at the school site. As one teacher said,

“I am just having the time of my life to be honest with you...It is a good group of people to work with all the way from the top down, a very friendly, very personable group. I do not notice, especially in this school, the cliqueness or the cattiness that you sometimes [find]in school...it is almost like we are thrown into this together, so hey, we all sink or we all swim So it is very interesting - a very interesting group of people that we have here.” (teacher)

Regardless of the challenges the teachers and leaders are facing at the Parkland Middle School, they feel like they are making a difference with the students, and everyone is putting all their effort into making Parkland a success.

Chapter 7

CROSS-CUTTING THEMES

The MSMC is a coalition of schools with similar demographics, challenges, and structures. The individual case studies demonstrate how each school has addressed the components established by the school district through the magnet grant. In this section, several themes that cut across all three consortium schools are explored. We address the following:

- Teacher and administrator professionalism
- Leadership
- Professional Development
- Strong academic curriculum
- Physical plant and equipment issues

Teacher and administrator professionalism

[The *Turning Points 2000* model] ...assumes that teachers are *interested* in engaging in ongoing dialogue and are willing to leave behind the notion that teaching is essentially a matter of “private practice.”

Turning Points 2000, p. 222.

All three MSMC schools demonstrate a high level of professionalism among teachers and administrators. The findings clearly support a significant level of professional collaboration, a climate of mutual respect, and commitment to student success and the goals of each school’s program.

Our observations and discussions with teachers and administrators suggested that all three schools value the team approach to instruction. They described themselves as working together in a professional community to promote student success. Every professional articulated his or her desire to be united in the effort to increase student learning and success. Teachers, in interdisciplinary teams, collaborate in defining curriculum, designing instruction, creating and interpreting assessments, setting challenging achievement goals, and discussing student issues. Teachers expressed that working together to create effective instruction and address barriers to student learning allows all team members to share the responsibilities and rewards for success. One teacher said,

“I’ve never really worked on a middle school team before that did so much to help kids. Oh, we had teams in other schools, but here it’s different. We take responsibility for all these kids. When somebody gets it in [the math teacher’s] class, and they haven’t gotten it before, we are all happy about it. We’ve all struggled with it.”

In addition to the planning through academic teams, professional development cohorts help to continue the community discussion about student learning. Teachers work together to create opportunities to apply learning from the PDC. Clearly, professional staff expressed a belief in partnerships and collaboration as they discussed their schools.

While teachers point to leadership as the big difference, administrators point to the commitment of teachers and other staff. To be sure, there is disagreement, but in the end teachers and administrators both expressed mutual respect and common goals. Each school had teachers and administrators that commented on how their colleagues were among the best they had ever worked with. One teacher talked about the administration’s impact on the school climate:

“I think we really play off of [the principal’s] incredible positive attitude... [The magnet coordinator] and the assistant principals are all very upbeat all the time, almost disturbingly so. I think that really helps.”

Another teacher shared his feeling of administrative support in taking risks,

“We do take a lot of risks in the way that we teach. I take a lot of risks because I have to change things up so students get it. At least I have gotten free rein to do so, and that is a really good thing for me, so I can go and do what I need to do with the kids.”

Many teachers were interviewed in pairs, and in nearly every case, the interplay between them demonstrated their respect for one another.

Teachers and administrators in all three schools admit they are working harder than ever before. Administrators praised the hard work of teachers in supporting students and making every effort to see students succeed. A teacher stated,

“What we are doing here is a tremendous amount of work. I mean, you show up at 6:00 and there are a half-dozen cars already in the parking lot an hour and a half before our contract time. You come by at 7:00 at night and there are still a half-dozen cars there. I think people get exhausted, they get tired, they have problems with the school, but they feel like they have a say, and we feel like we are getting something done.”

With the required three-year teaching commitment, there was knowledge that all of the teachers had agreed to be there by their own choosing. A magnet coordinator said,

“I think in terms of strengths, there is a really strong desire for kids to succeed. I think teachers work really hard at trying to reach most of the kids in their classes with their lessons. I think in terms of when you walk down the hall and there are productive things happening in classrooms and not constant opening doors and a number of kids milling through the halls. Teachers want the kids engaged.”

Teachers are equally aware of the commitment of school leaders. A teacher shared this about her school’s instructional leadership team:

“I am surprised at how hard the administration and the instructional leadership team (even...department chairs and team leaders) work. The work that they do is beyond anything I can imagine doing. It gives those of us who are not on the instructional leadership team, who are just classroom teachers, the freedom that we have to do a really great job, because of all the groundwork that they lay. All that is done to make it possible to do what we do is something that is beyond my imagination that people can do that. I know the compensation, monetarily, does not at all come close. There is a huge time commitment.”

Leadership

“One of the most consistent findings in educational research is that high-achieving schools have strong, competent leaders.”

Turning Points 2000, p. 156.

“The sustained improvement of middle grades school students’ learning requires a relentless focus on improving the quality of teaching. It is the principal who must see that the school maintains its unwavering commitment to the goal of every student fulfilling the Turning Points vision.”

Turning Points 2000, p. 158

The professional staff at all three schools articulated the importance of leadership in creating a successful school. While many statements were directly focused on administrators, there also was acknowledgment about the importance of the leadership team, including team leaders and resource teachers. Leadership themes included: leadership focused on learning, situational leadership, and concern about the demands of leadership.

All teachers agreed that administrators were highly focused on student academic success. When asked about the most important elements of success, one teacher said,

“Clearly, we have a phenomenal leadership team here, people working together, looking at things in multiple perspectives and getting a clear plan in place for monitoring our goals and a way to say, ‘Are we headed in the right direction?’”

Another teacher stated,

“So the fact [is] that I think that this is an administration that has a common vision. We have a vision of where we are trying to get the kids and what that means.”

In further discussion, teachers suggested that professional goals and evaluations are centered around student learning. They also saw administrators in classrooms more, monitoring the vision, and then taking time to discuss instruction and achievement. A social studies teacher shared,

“I never had any real feedback from an administrator until I came here. Now, when the assistant principal walks into my room, I know we are going to have a conversation – a meaningful conversation – about students and learning.”

The interviews also uncovered positive perceptions related to situational leadership. Teachers view the decision-making processes at their schools as varying according to the context and variables of the situation. Many teachers talked about the openness of principals and the feeling that teachers’ opinions mattered. One teacher said,

“This school functions. We have an administration that works hard. We have an administration that asks teachers what they want, which is huge.”

Another teacher compared the current administration with his previous school:

“Where I came from...it was authoritarian government. It was the principal and no ILT [Instructional Leadership Team]. No teachers were involved, and he fought big time to avoid the instructional

leadership team... It is nice to have a voice and it is nice to...be able to be treated professionally.”

Teachers appreciated the willingness of principals and the leadership team to listen carefully to their concerns and allow for shared decision-making when possible. One teacher discussed a specific issue related to having bells or not having bells. All of the teachers and administrators came from different schools with different philosophies regarding the use of bells during the day. The school started out without them, but tardiness became a problem. The principal asked teachers, the leadership team, and students to offer their opinions about bells. Students overwhelmingly asked for them. The teacher concluded with:

“I knew in [the principal’s] heart that she didn’t want bells, but she knew that the teachers and the students wanted them, and she never does things just for herself, she does it for the good of the teachers, the good of the school.”

Democratic processes are encouraged by most best practices research; however, teachers also noted that a principal’s willingness to make a decision and to act quickly when necessary was also important. A teacher who was frustrated with a tardiness issue shared this:

“I think we have an incredible administrative team that is very, very receptive to staff and inclusive of staff comments and recommendations. They hear what we say, and not only do they hear and listen, but they act when it is called for. They definitely act. If there is an issue, it is dealt with immediately and I can think of one instance where it was dealt with school-wide. It was dealt with within 5 minutes of my bringing it to the administration.”

She went on to say that the principal’s immediate intervention curtailed the problem in a short period of time. This kind of situational leadership is described by one teacher:

“What she [the principal] has conveyed to us is that there are different ways to manage decisions. Some decisions she will get input and then make her own decision. Some decisions she needs to

make right away...and some decisions she will get input from the whole group and then collaboratively we make a decision or rebuild it.”

Although no administrator expressed concern, teachers are worried about the demands on members of the instructional leadership team, including teacher leaders.

This may be an extension of findings in the case studies that showed teacher concerns related to assessments, the future of the magnet programs, and perceived rigidity in the curriculum. Administrators had opportunities to discuss the workload, but each interview showed more excitement over the possibilities the programs are providing for students than stress or pressure from sources outside the school.

In the end, teachers viewed the leadership of all three schools as positive and contributory to teacher and student success. One teacher summed it up:

“To me the most important thing is having administrative support. I worked at a couple of middle schools earlier in my career where that support wasn’t there. That makes the biggest difference.”

Professional development

The Professional Development Cohort is a significant resource investment. The money from the magnet grant pays for staff development teachers and the additional release block. One district administrator stated,

“We decided the best money was put into the staff so that we could do the professional model, to run the schedule with the extra period – release period... the bulk of the money is the staffing to do the specialty courses and to run the professional development model.”

Several common themes were raised by all three of the schools relative to this portion of the magnet program. First, the general consensus is that the PDC is a positive contributor to the success of the magnet schools. A

second theme is that the PDC has not differentiated for the needs of a diverse teaching staff. Third, too much control of the PDC has been dictated by a “top-down” approach, and more flexibility is needed to meet the specific needs of each school. Finally, teachers and administrators are seeing improvements in design and implementation.

Teachers and administrators are overwhelmingly in favor of the PDC and believe it has had a very positive effect on teaching and student achievement. One teacher said,

“I think PDC is very, very valuable...Having a time to work with colleagues within the school day is valuable and it will always be valuable. It will just get better as we give input and make it stronger.”

Another teacher shared,

“I think it is useful to them, and, again, the benefits outweigh the risks.”

While most of those interviewed were positive about the PDC, many teachers and some administrators felt that the program did not account for the needs of teachers. The most significant concerns in this area were that the programs were created without differentiation for teacher experience and without regard for effective adult training, including time to practice and implement. Some veteran teachers found the presentations to be restatements of concepts and skills they felt they had already mastered. One teacher said,

“I have been teaching for 30+ years, so my needs are not as great as the first year teachers. Hopefully they are not as great. So, my need for PDC doesn’t exist in my opinion. The county feels otherwise, so I have to attend.”

One teacher made this suggestion:

“I think our time would be better spent with action research. Action research would probably cover it because then you would have the differentiation, teachers could see, ‘What is it that I feel?’ and

they would have metrics to prove this. ‘What is it that I need to know about in order to be better at doing what I am doing?’ and then they could research what has been done in the past; what is being done now; what works best with these types of students,; go and observe different teachers doing that, but more of a self study instead of coming in, having a lesson plan that the staff developer makes and having a ‘one size fits all’...And perhaps the answer with that would be to scale it, just as we do in the classroom. For the new teachers and teachers who need more support, you have more support available. They might need those regular every other day meetings and have more supportive collaboration in that way.”

Teachers also were concerned that the district was satisfied with the presentation of material, but not accounting for the need to practice and develop skills. One teacher said,

“So all of these things that have been implemented, it’s like they would tell us one thing one day, and then we’re expected to just make that a habit and part of our life, and then something new the next day, and it’s not realistic. Adults learn the same way that children do.”

Another teacher commented,

“You would learn a lot, and you would get so excited, but you never really had enough time to use the strategies, you know, because you really don’t use something immediately. You maybe use it in the next week, or it may come to you, when you’re looking at another lesson, that this thing that you learned two weeks ago might be good, but we never had enough time, because we were always learning something new the next day or the next day.”

Teachers and administrators also raised concerns about how the PDC topics were determined. Perhaps the most recurrent complaint was that a school would determine specific needs, but not be able to address them because the PDC had been determined for them based on district priorities. A teacher complained,

“The consortium has the PDC people meet and they decide what they think. The people up there decide what they think we need. People outside the classroom, who have not been in the classroom, certainly not in this classroom or school. They dictate to us what sounds like what we need. ‘This sounds great. Let’s see if they can do it.’”

Changes are occurring however. Teachers and administrators noticed greater input in the process, and commented on a more positive direction. One teacher who complained about the philosophical and general nature of PDC topics observed that, after teachers had expressed concern about specific learning problems with student, some things changed. He said,

“So the last couple of meetings, I guess it was in November, we stopped dead, we shared strategies...So last year, or even last semester, this wouldn’t have been tolerated. I mean it would have just gone by the wayside while we did this perfunctory thing. We spent three sessions last year learning how to write a proper mastery objective.”

An administrator noticed more response to teacher needs:

“I’ve seen a lot of improvement this year already from what we did last year, and I think, over time, it will get even better. I think that one of the biggest things we did last year was they did focus groups with us. They asked, ‘What do you need in PDC?’ and ‘What do you feel you’ve been given this time?’ We were able to say, ‘This is where the issues are,’ and they targeted a little bit better in terms of planning and getting us the tools that we need.”

Most of the professional staff recognize the importance of the PDC to assist the schools in meeting student needs and improving student achievement. One teacher is pragmatic in her support:

“I think it is short-sighted for teachers nationwide and here to complain about the PDC. It is grad. school while we are going to

work. It is an opportunity to interact with your peers, which is so rare in school. The majority of people who will complain about it would say they would rather be doing something else. They would be teaching another class if they didn't have PDC. I mean, come on!"

Strong academic curriculum

There are two crucial components of improving student achievement: teachers' knowledge of subject matter and their ability to translate that knowledge into classroom learning activities appropriate to learners at different developmental levels and of different backgrounds.

Turning Points 2000, p. 115.

Research evidence indicates that the most successful teacher professional development activities are those that are extended over time and encourage the development of teachers' learning communities.

Bransford, Brown, and Cocking, *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School*.

The focus of the MSMC is academic excellence for all students. All three schools prioritize reaching the students where they currently are academically, ensuring they meet the standards defined as adequate yearly progress, and preparing them through rigorous courses for high school and beyond. One teacher said,

"We're addressing how to have students that are achieving; students that are minority students; students that are disadvantaged economically; how we're helping them to become successful in the middle school program."

Research on closing the achievement gap suggests that quality instruction decreases the gap more than any other in-school strategy. "Any instructional regime that is responsive to the needs of individual

children and flexible enough not to place ceilings on their progress is likely to benefit all children, and by the very nature of what it means to be responsive, to enhance the opportunities for those who start behind to catch up.”¹⁷ Each school had examples where the faculty was reaching students and helping them to succeed in the coursework. Whether working with in-consortium students or out-of-consortium students, the teachers were challenging them with content and using curriculum that reinforced the theme. Although each school desired more interdisciplinary units and lessons related to the magnet, they all maintained focus on the goal of student success. One of the principals stated it this way:

“It really looks at the vision and the mission of the entire school district, and you’re looking at achievement across the board for all groups of children, socioeconomic, race, and ethnicity. You’re looking at a rigorous curriculum. You’re looking at getting more students in advanced placement classes. You’re looking for minority achievement. You’re really looking at success for all students, and you’re looking at it for the advantage of every student that walks into the building, and I think that’s what one advantage of the Middle School Magnet Consortium is, because it’s a total school magnet. Every child that walks in the door has access to our programs.”

Physical plant and equipment issues

Each of the three schools has expressed complaints regarding the quality of the physical plant and/or the availability of equipment. In some cases this has taken some of the momentum away from the excitement of implementing a new program. Physical plant issues may be the most frustrating at Loiederman, because they are more permanent. There are no plans for further remodeling soon, and the issues are not easily resolved. One Loiederman administrator said,

“This building is...old. They should have torn it down and built us a new building, so we had a lot of struggles with that. Like our

¹⁷ Ferguson, *Can schools narrow the black-white test score gap?* (Chapter 9), in Jencks and Phillips, (Eds.), *The Black White Test Score Gap*, p. 336, (Brookings Institution Press, Washington, DC, 1998).

heat doesn't work right all the time, and our air conditioning doesn't work, and so things leak. Our teachers have been real troopers about that stuff, the kids too, because some days we'd have to put everyone in coats just to get through the school day. I just don't think it should have to be that way."

Parkland's building is undergoing renovation, so they are operating from a temporary site. The temporary building has been acceptable to the faculty, but they are anxious to return to their own site. Argyle's construction of additional computer labs resulted in health issues. An Argyle teacher discussed the resulting problems:

"That's affecting a lot of things going on in school right now, which is a shame because it's hurting others;...it's hurting the kids, [and] the rest of the staff in school because a lot of people are getting sick."

Another concern is having the proper equipment and facilities to operate the program as it is designed. An Argyle administrator expressed this concern:

"Equipment. Some things were not ordered centrally, and we're still waiting on them. So the process of getting everything you need [is frustrating]..."

A Loiederman teacher expressed this frustration regarding both the available facilities and equipment:

It has been very, very challenging and tough, you know. Tables: not until January; one art room, but we have two full time art teachers. Next year we will have three; [with] rooms that don't have sinks... People don't realize the grunt [work] of getting a new school off the ground without having appropriate equipment...We still don't have a lot of things...We are supposedly getting this digital lab, [but] it is January of the second year, and we don't have these computers."

Parkland's teachers felt they had many resources available to them, however some teachers did express concern over access to computers by non-science teachers.

Chapter 8

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE PLANNING AND REFORM

The MSMC has done significant work in applying the recommendations and strategies that reflect “best practices” in the predominant research on middle school reform. The findings from the case studies and common themes lead to several further recommendations related to both the consortium and MCPS middle schools in general.

MSMC

Three recommendations are offered specific to the Middle School Magnet Consortium. Each of these recommendations is a response to concerns raised by professionals from the district office as well as those in the schools. They deal with transition of students from the magnet focus to the high school, preparing for the end of the magnet grant, and further study and evaluation of the consortium.

Transition to high school

“My biggest concern regarding curriculum and coursework for our students is that they’re going to be so far ahead of what a typical 9th grader knows in terms of technology... I’m not sure how the high schools will be adequately prepared.”
-school administrator

One of the most significant benefits for students in the magnet schools is that they will enter high school with strong backgrounds in the magnet focus. Many of them will already have several high school credits

in their area of interest. It is important that the receiving high schools be ready for these students. Specifically three problems may occur. First, students who enter high school with a significant number of credits may reach senior status early. Although there are programs in Montgomery County that allow for high school students to take college courses, these programs will need to grow in availability as more students earn high school credits in middle school. Second, students who already have up to three credits in a specialty area may not have adequate choices to continue study in their area of interest. Third, students have experienced an integrated curriculum, which includes more authentic assessments and opportunities to express knowledge through the magnet focus. There may be a disconnect between high school instruction and the exhibited strengths of these students.

Many students who leave grade eight in 2008 will have high school credits before the freshman year begins. One district administrator points out:

“The potential is there for a student who does all three years and performs academically quite successfully to actually leave middle school with 7 or 8 high school credits for graduation. You only need 22 to graduate in the State of Maryland.”

This means that a student may enter high school with as many as a third of their required credits already done. Conceivably, a student could start high school as a sophomore. MCPS has had some discussion about offering college credit courses through partnerships with local colleges and universities. However, some policy work should probably be done to anticipate how class status is determined and what parameters might be used to facilitate early graduation.

Students who already have credits in the magnet focus may find it difficult to access classes that continue to develop their learning in the area of specialty, especially if students are diffused into multiple high schools. Parkland students may be able to extend their scientific inquiry from aeronautics and robotics into the other sciences, and Loiederman students may branch out into other arts endeavors. However, Argyle students may find limited information technology course offerings. Even if Parkland and Loiederman students do branch out into other areas of inquiry, it would be desirable for students to continue to develop and mas-

ter the concentrations they have already studied. MCPS may wish to extend the magnet emphases into specific high schools, primarily accessible to in-consortium students. In this way, courses can be created to continue student development, either for additional high school credit or at the college level. Additionally, the eighth grade counselors at all three schools will have to work carefully with high school counselors to explore options for eighth graders as they schedule for high school.

It is also important that high school teachers have some idea of the kinds of instruction promoted at the middle schools. Students who have been immersed in highly engaging curriculum with authentic performance assessment and integrated lessons may have difficulty adjusting to more traditional forms of pedagogy and assessment. This issue has probably been addressed to some degree when students from magnet programs have moved from elementary school into traditional middle schools. However, high schools may want to consider ways to ease this transition for consortium students for the fall of 2008.

End of the magnet grant

“A decision will have to be made next year whether or not those resources are continued. So, for example, the three magnet coordinators are paid for through the grant. Each school has roughly three professional positions, teacher level positions, that are funded through the grant.” -*district office staff*

Over the course of this study, many teachers and administrators expressed concern about what might happen once the magnet grant funding is gone. Speculation includes loss of the Professional Development Cohort, loss of the magnet coordinator, and loss of support for magnet focus specialties.

The PDC has had a great deal of scrutiny, because it represents a very significant financial investment. A central office administrator noted,

“One of the most difficult links in education today is to link professional development to improve student achievement. And we’re working on documenting that so that we can show that when we’re doing this professional development it is in fact helping the student achievement. If we can make connections, we’ll be much more

likely to be able to convince the funders, the Board of Education, that this is worth supporting in the long run.”

The PDC has been instrumental in ensuring the essential reforms were understood and implemented by faculty. It is an appropriate strategy as indicated by *Breaking Ranks in the Middle*; however, district administrators will have to determine the importance of continuing this investment in light of other district priorities. If it is possible to continue the PDC in consortium schools, it will have the benefit of supporting schools with high at-risk populations and increasing the value of the magnet for students opting in.

The magnet coordinators have functioned in the schools as additional administrators, instructional coordinators, and recruiters. Building principals have identified the coordinators’ responsibilities to be keeping the magnet focus fresh and alive and making certain the school is clearly presented to all students in the district. One district administrator described the coordinator’s importance this way:

“It’s like a dean of instruction and that person can (in addition to the school system’s staff development person) really focus on instructional issues and support the principal in that way.”

In other district schools, magnet programs within schools are able to function because there is administrative assignment to the program. In whole-school magnet programs, principals and assistant principals are certainly involved in maintaining the magnet focus and program integrity, but they are also involved in the day to day operation of the school itself, including building operations, discipline issues, student and staff monitoring, and accountability. The magnet coordinator ensures the viability of the program by monitoring the curriculum and providing the impetus for stable enrollment. The future success of each magnet program is dependent on the dedication of staff to these functions. We would strongly recommend continuation of the magnet coordinator position in each school.

Many teachers are concerned that the magnet programs will dissolve completely once the grant has been spent, especially if there has not been a significant change in achievement on the MSA.

“I think it would be really wrong if we were to shut down because we didn’t make annual [sic] yearly progress, because the bottom line is, there is a significant disconnect between what the state tests and what kids should be able to do and can do at the appropriate ages.” (teacher)

They are particularly concerned that specialties will be lost in favor of further re-mediation, if AYP continues to be problematic.

“I see the light in their eyes when they have a chance to something they love to do. How can we take that away from them? How does that impact their ability to learn, when you take away the one thing that they can do?” (school administrator)

Both *Turning Points* and *Breaking Ranks in the Middle* suggest that student engagement is key to student achievement. As illustrated throughout this study, the magnet focus, chosen by the student, engages students in the academic curriculum. Students need the opportunity to have some choices in how they achieve those goals and how the goals are assessed. These whole school magnet schools provide this opportunity by giving an interest-based focus to student work, and hopefully the specialty courses will not dissolve for additional re-mediation.

Further study

This study does not evaluate the success or failure of the MSMC. Instead, it is an assessment of early results and documents the implementation and processes used in change. Additional research and evaluation is necessary in order to quantify success in achieving the goals of the magnet grant and the objectives of the school district. After the third year of the program, we recommend a review of available test score data to determine student achievement. Two specific comparisons can be made. We also recommend a qualitative study after five years.

First, disaggregated student data on the MSA should be compared over time to determine if the achievement gap is closing. This will be important in assessing progress toward NCLB targets. If the achievement gap is not closing, schools should be required to reassess their continuous improvement plans to address subgroups who are not progressing at levels high enough to make adequate yearly progress.

Second, we recommend a review of individual teacher reports regarding actual student growth in comparison to expected student growth on the NWEA Measure of Academic Progress. This information should help to identify places where students are achieving at or above expected levels. In classrooms where this expectation is not met, targeted professional development can be used to improve student achievement. The NWEA data should also be shared among staff, allowing for professional dialogue about successes and failures in achievement in the academic disciplines.

The qualitative study could focus on three areas: climate, instructional environment, and student transition. In researching the climate, teacher, parent, and student interviews could shed light on a quantitative climate survey. Teachers and administrators should be given an opportunity to reflect on changes in the instructional environment over time as part of the regular evaluation of the program. This 2007 study could be used to benchmark. Finally, students who have completed the magnet program should be studied for transition into high school. It is important to determine whether or not the transition needs additional support.

MCPS Middle School Reform

Much of what has been learned from this study could have impact on other MCPS middle schools as they work through reform. We make four recommendations for application to the wider middle school reform movement. We suggest principal cohorts, embedding professional development into the school day, ensuring resource availability, and exploring the possibility of de-tracking middle school classes.

Principal cohorts

Both district administrators and building principals believed that the additional meetings between consortium principals afforded the opportunities to problem-solve and keep focused on consortium objectives. According to one district official:

“I think the [consortium] principals have created a good cohort amongst themselves, where they share their own best practices, and I don’t think they feel as isolated as a lot of principals do.”

This observation is important, because one of the issues of leadership in schools is isolation. Developing collegiality through support and accountability in a cohort can increase the critical examination of roles, responsibilities, and decision-making.

“I think the overall structure for the consortium helps lead to that [good decision-making] because the three schools were able to compare notes on how they were all doing...so it wasn’t just one school trying to figure it out on their own. The three of them were working together trying to solve the problem and I think that helped considerably toward making sure that they’re making fair and good decisions.” (district office)

The cohort could be established with three or four principals in much in the same way as DuFour’s professional learning communities.¹⁸ An alternative model is one suggested by Kochan, Bredeson, and Riehl describes a ‘critical friends,’ model in which “school leaders form dyads or groups to examine one another’s practice and to offer challenging and constructive reflections on each other’s work.”¹⁹ In either model, the purpose is to reduce the isolation of principals and to increase dialogue and exploration of best practices.

In order to ensure the success of principal cohorts, organizational and operational discussions should be minimized; however, it is recognized that sharing on these matters assists in good decision-making and builds collegiality. The MCPS Middle School Reform Leadership and Professional Development Project Team makes the following recommendations regarding the responsibilities of middle school leaders:

¹⁸ see Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker, Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement, (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Alexandria, VA, 1998).

¹⁹ *Rethinking the Professional Development of School Leaders*, in Joseph Murphy (ed.), The Educational Leadership Challenge: Redefining Leadership for the 21st Century, (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 2002), p.296.

- Foster and sustain elements of an effective team
- Lead for equity
- Model beliefs and support practices of a professional learning community (PLC)
- Create conditions for a PLC
- Function as a change agents with colleagues, students, and the organization
- Use data to inform decisions
- Support the norms of a healthy school culture
- Collaborate in decision-making
- Develop leadership capacity in others
- Apply the stages of change in leading initiatives
- Facilitate collaboration that focuses on curriculum, instruction, and assessment²⁰

Cohorts could use these recommendations as the basis for developing their own explorations, reflectively and intentionally practicing them. The results of the cohort's work could then be shared in a larger principal venue creating accountability and increasing leadership capacity.

Embedded professional development focused on instruction and learning

Even though there were some concerns with the Professional Development Cohort's structure, most teachers and administrators found it crucial to the success of the consortium's implementation. As noted earlier, the PDC is a significant investment, but it may be one way to marshal the implementation of middle school reform. An open-ended commitment to the PDC at all middle schools would probably be cost-prohibitive; however, it may be possible to do a two or three year commitment to a specified number of schools, rotating this model through the district until all schools have had the rotation. This could continue for several rotations, allowing for important professional development initiatives to take root systemically.

Concerns related to the PDC centered mostly about meeting teacher needs. Marzano suggests that important content be presented multiple times in increasingly complex formats in order to force the brain into ordering, rethinking, and challenging misconceptions from prior learning.

²⁰ MCPS Middle School Reform Leadership and Professional Development Project Team Final Report, p. 8.

Through this process, students will engage with the content and develop mastery.²¹ This will also be true with teachers, leading to differentiation, conceptual change among teachers, and significant practice with the material. Schools should also be given some autonomy in directing professional development. Just as each school's continuous improvement plan derives from the district's strategic plan, schools should have the ability to design professional development appropriate to teachers' needs within the broader framework of the district design.

Another idea for embedded professional development has significantly less financial impact, but will require more coordination and monitoring for accountability. In this model, professional learning communities are created within interdisciplinary teams. A specified percentage of the team planning time would be devoted to professional development in the learning communities. Multiple topics can be covered through the model, and communities within a team or period could change as the needs of the school change.

The *Turning Points 2000* report includes seven important recommendations for student instruction:

- ❖ Differentiate content, process, and product
- ❖ Stress experiential learning
- ❖ Provide opportunities for collaborative work
- ❖ Encourage reflection on learning
- ❖ Use authentic assessments
- ❖ Use student work as formative assessment
- ❖ Collaborate with specialists and other teachers in planning and design of instructional strategies

Not only should the professional development process use these recommendations in delivery, but the recommendations may also be used as overarching themes addressed with specific strategies and practices. Several teachers suggested that using experienced teachers, who are teaching in the school, to deliver the professional development may add credibility and naturally differentiates.

One area of concern raised by teachers was that they are not sure they have enough training to effectively teach and model reading in their content areas. Not surprisingly, English teachers and sixth grade teachers did not express this concern, but mathematics, social studies, and

²¹ Robert J. Marzano, *What Works in Schools: Translating Research Into Action*. (ASCD, Alexandria, VA, 2003).

arts teachers suggested that they needed more support and professional development. Teacher interviews suggest that there is reasonable comfort with vocabulary development, but teachers do not feel they have the pedagogical understanding they need to effectively model and instruct students in other reading skills. One teacher said,

“You know, I can help kids understand words. We can practice it – I can use it – I can make them use it. That’s easy. What I don’t know how to do is to help them understand what they read without lecturing, and that doesn’t help them read. Somehow, they have to learn to get it out of the book without my help. How do I do that?”

Because of the number of activities related to vocabulary and evidence of good literacy instruction in some content classes, there is evidence that professional development has targeted literacy to some degree. The frustrations of some teachers, however, would suggest that there may be a need for more ongoing support.

Ensure resource availability

Teachers and administrators expressed significant frustration over physical plant and equipment issues. Some of the teachers were very direct in stating that a significant amount of excitement and momentum in preparing for the school’s program was lost when implementation was changed or compromised by the lack of physical capacity or equipment.

Balancing financial commitments is an important administrative task, and priorities must be established in the allocation of resources. Evidence from interviews with district staff and school administrators suggests that most of the available funding for MSMC schools was put into personnel. If personnel is to continue as the priority for MCPS, we recommend a clear and realistic assessment of available resources be communicated to all stakeholders, not only in the MSMC, but also in the implementation of middle school reform across the district. In this way, building administrators and teachers can make curricular and instructional decisions based on likely resources.

Expand Differentiation

Both *Turning Points 2000* and *Breaking Ranks in the Middle* make strong recommendations against tracking students. In the *Turning Points* report, the authors point to a great deal of research that shows three negative impacts of tracking: “tracking is not a neutral act...tracking reinforces inaccurate, and ultimately damaging, assumptions about intelligence...[and] the technology of schools, instruction, is complex, not well understood, and ultimately dependent on human interaction.”²²

In the accelerated core curriculum, students are challenged to achieve at the highest levels possible. At some points, students show readiness to move to an entirely different level in the curriculum. An example would be a student who demonstrates enough mastery of reading and language arts to begin formal study of a foreign language. Another example would be a student whose MSA scores indicate readiness for algebra prior to its normal introduction in the curriculum sequences. Students should have access to these new levels when they are ready to learn them regardless of age or grade. Providing access to more rigorous coursework through the accelerated core curriculum is not the kind of curriculum tracking discussed in the literature. However, when the essential curriculum is the same for all students, such as in an English or social studies class, creating different levels of the courses can have a detrimental effect on student learning.

In *Breaking Ranks in the Middle*, Carol Ann Tomlinson shares an essay detailing the impact of tracking and suggests real alternatives. She writes, “Moving beyond a pedagogy that sorts students and a pedagogy that ignores their essential differences and needs, we would look at classrooms in which all students work with high-level, engaging, meaning-making curriculum in a flexible classroom environment. In such settings, teachers would routinely provide support for students who need additional scaffolding to succeed with meaningful curriculum and for students who need to work at a more complex level. In other words, such classrooms would raise both the floors of expectations and the ceilings of possibility.”²³ She goes on to state that most teachers do not bring the tools to effectively accomplish this, yet. Her argument, though, is that schools will never move to the point of creating engaging and excel-

²² Jackson and Davis, (2000), p. 66.

²³ p. 182.

lent instruction for all students until urgency is created and comfort is abandoned.

Raising “floors of expectations” and “ceilings of possibility” are very much like the MCPS stated objectives to increase both support for students who need it and the bar of achievement for all. Interviews and observations at the three middle schools uncovered evidence of differentiated instruction in classroom practice. The ways in which teachers and administrators discussed differentiation suggests that this has been a district initiative in professional development. By investing in strong professional development and high levels of support for schools, teams, and individual teachers, it may be possible to move away from leveled classes and labeled students to heterogeneous communities with high learning growth for all students.

In the meantime, those students who are ready to access the advance curriculum available to them, should continue to stretch and grow as far as the district can take them.

Chapter 9

CONCLUSION

“I think a lesson that can be learned is that **it can be done**. There are so many people that won’t jump into this kind of thing because they don’t think it can be done, and I think they are starting to prove that it can be done, if it is done correctly and thoughtfully.” *-teacher*

Montgomery County Public Schools is a learner-focused school system that has demonstrated the ability to increase student achievement through challenging curriculum, significant attention to resource allocation, and intentional support of at-risk populations. The strategic plan is the guide to this process.

When the district turned its attention toward middle school reform and, at the same time, a magnet school grant was available, the strategic plan was used to guide the planning process for creation of the Middle School Magnet Consortium. This study has documented that MCPS stayed true to the vision, mission, core values, and goals of the strategic plan in the construction of the MSMC. The planning process used the context of district middle school reform, including the foundational research presented in *Breaking Ranks in the Middle* and *Turning Points 2000*. Other best practice research informed decisions made in the implementation and structure of specific programs within the consortium and individual schools.

Each school was used as a case study to illustrate a specific recommendation from *Turning Points 2000*. However, it is clear from the observation and interview data that all three schools represent strong illustrations for all seven of our recommendations. None of the consortium schools is perfect, but all of them have made significant progress in implementing research-based reforms over a short period of time.

The lessons learned through the first year and a half of the Middle School Magnet Consortium are important considerations as the district begins implementation of middle school reform in the fall of 2007. These

lessons could be applied in the planning process for pilot schools or they could be considered as a contextual comparison as the pilot program is evaluated and adjusted. In either case, they should inform the evolution of middle school reform in MCPS.

Teacher and administrator support and enthusiasm are high. Students are coming to the schools and filling out all available openings. Significant opportunities for individual students to meet the district's goals have been established and are supported. In the words of one district administrator:

“There were a whole lot of discussions about whether this middle school magnet consortium would really and truly get off the ground, especially if it meant attracting kids from outside of these areas, which was really important for the purposes of the grant. My theory was they should build a magnet, and it will draw, and indeed it has done that.”

Indeed, it has. The challenges of planning and initial implementation have been met. The challenge of sustaining continues.

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Appendices

APPENDICES A-H

Appendix A: Design and Methodology

The Peabody College at Vanderbilt research team conducted a seven-month multiple-case study on behalf of the Montgomery County Public Schools in Maryland to assist the school district in clarifying and documenting the impact of the middle school reform effort. Research design included site visits to the MSMC, document analysis, school site observations, and interviews with district office and school personnel.

During the first site visit, the research team met together with the Department of Shared Accountability to establish routines and negotiate study parameters. The team also conducted forty-five minute interviews with district administrators involved with the planning and implementation of the MSMC and middle school reform. No compensation was offered to administrators for their involvement in the study. Team members then split up to meet with administrators and conduct informal observations at individual consortium schools.

Upon completion of the first site visit, several documents were collected for review. These include the current strategic plan, *Our Call to Action: Pursuit of Excellence*, documentation of the strategic planning process, the program booklet for marketing the MSMC, and various promotional and staff documents from each middle school. After communication with the director for middle school reform, the middle school reform initiative final team reports and the *Middle School Reform Report*, presented to the board on January 9, 2007, were sent for review two months later.

Using reviewed documents and developed themes from the district interviews, the team developed interview and observation protocols. Dis-

district administrators requested the research team use individual schools to explore three reform issues: leadership, instruction, and rigorous standards. Protocols were developed to address a specific area of reform as identified by *Turning Points 2000*. Leadership and professional development was explored at Argyle Middle School; instruction to improve teaching and learning was explored at Loiederman Middle School; and curriculum and assessment to improve teaching and learning was explored at Parkland Middle School. These areas of focus were submitted to the Department of Shared Accountability for approval.

Each researcher, individually, conducted a follow-up site visit of two to three days to conduct a case study of one magnet school, interviewing twelve to fifteen teachers and administrators at each site. Interviews were conducted for thirty to forty-five minutes each with two peers at a time to increase interaction in the interview sessions. Some teacher interviews were conducted alone due to scheduling constraints. Principals were interviewed alone. Some teachers were compensated at the rate of \$25.00 for interviewing before or after school. Administrators and other teachers were also interviewed during the school day, giving up a professional duty to participate. Researchers gathered evidence of goal and benchmark achievements, processes and routines, policy values, instructional practices, and school culture with emphasis on organizational structures that support learning and the specific reform issues identified for each school. Researchers also conducted school observations during this visit.

All interviews were transcribed and the transcriptions and reviewed documents were coded. Initially, coding was conducted using the themes and issues identified by MCPS administration. As new themes emerged, these were added to the coding structure.

Appendix B: MCPS District Interview Protocol

District Administrators

Thank you for agreeing to talk with me about the process used in planning for, implementing, and monitoring the Middle School Magnet Consortium. We are interviewing district administrators, like yourself, about your perceptions of the impact of this process on students and learning in Montgomery County middle schools. The purpose of the study is to find out how the middle schools are implementing their magnet programs in accordance with the district strategic plan and how they address policy issues surrounding magnet schools. We also are interested in documenting lessons learned during the first year of implementation and the transition to the second year. In this interview, we are attempting to get a foundation for the planning process in order to have a context for the case studies of individual schools. However, we will also ask you a few questions about your perceptions of the program as it has been implemented.

I will be audio taping this session in order to collect the best information possible. However, if you do not wish to be audio taped, please let me know and we will accommodate your request.

We will not identify you in any of the reports we make following this study. Do you have any questions?

I have a consent form for you to sign, acknowledging your voluntary participation in this study. Please take a moment to review this document and sign at the bottom if you wish to continue.

Strategic Plan – I first want to ask you some questions about how the Middle School Magnet Consortium grew out of the district strategic plan.

1. During the planning process, do you recall when the MSMC was first considered?
 - a. Were there other ideas considered at the time? What were they?
 - b. What brought the MSMC idea to the forefront as the method for middle school improvement?

- c. Who was involved in making the decision to implement the MSMC?
2. What elements of the strategic plan is the MSMC designed to address?
3. As planning moved forward for the MSMC, what were the most important considerations?
 - a. How were these determined?
 - b. What was done to ensure these priorities were maintained?
 - c. Who was involved in the planning of the MSMC?

Policy Values – Now I would like to ask you about magnet schools.

1. What is the district's primary goal in creating magnet schools?
 - a. How is this reflected? Possible follow-ups: In evaluation? Benchmarks? Communication? Practice?
 - b. How will magnet schools accomplish this goal?
2. How important is the theme of the school to the overall goals of the school district?
 - a. How were themes selected?
 - b. How are themes connected to the goals of algebra achievement in grade 8 and access to the accelerated curriculum?
3. In what ways are MSMC school resources allocated differently than other district middle schools?
 - a. What are the priorities for expenditure of the USDOE magnet school assistance grant?
 - b. What is being done to assure that resources are used effectively and efficiently?
4. A decision was made to provide full access to only a portion of the students in the district. What are the reasons for this decision?
5. What is being done to promote cultural, ethnic, geographical, and socio-economic diversity in MSMC schools?
6. How have the values and goals of the MSMC been communicated to staff?
7. How have the values and goals of the MSMC been communicated to parents and the community?
8. How does the MSMC fit into the broader picture of middle school reform in MCPS?

Lessons Learned – I’m now going to ask a few questions about the first year and a half of the program’s implementation.

1. What were some of the surprises you found in the first year of implementation?
 - a. Were there some parts of the program that went better than you expected?
 - b. Were there some parts of the program that needed more support than you expected?
2. How well do you think the program has done in meeting the benchmarks set for the first year?
3. What kinds of course corrections were discussed during and immediately following the first year of implementation?
 - a. Were any changes made to address specific issues? If so, does it appear the changes have been successful?
4. Are there elements of the planning process you would change the next time the district implements a program like this?
5. Are there elements of the implementation process you would change the next time the district implements a program like this?
6. In reviewing the first year and a half of the MSMC, what has been learned that can be applied to reform in other district middle schools?

Closing – As we finish up, I want to thank you, again, for your help, and ask if there is anything we’ve missed.

1. Is there anything I should have asked you about the MSMC that I haven’t?
2. Do you have any other information you think I would be interested in?

Appendix C: MCPS MSMC Interview Protocol

(Argyle Middle School)

Administrators

Study Introduction: Thank you for agreeing to talk with me about the Middle School Magnet Consortium. We are interviewing school leaders, like yourself, about your perceptions of the impact of this process on students and learning in Montgomery County middle schools. The purpose of the study is to find out how the MSMC is addressing the needs of middle school students. We also are interested in documenting lessons learned during the first year of implementation and the transition to the second year. This study is not an evaluation of your school or the program. Rather, it is a case study that may be used to help other schools implement the lessons you have learned effectively. In this interview, we hope you will share with us your perceptions of your school's program and the impact it has had on your school's students, teachers, and families.

We will not identify you, personally, in any of the reports we make following this study. You are free to end your participation at any time. Do you have any questions?

Strategic Plan – I first want to ask you some questions about the district strategic plan, *Our Call to Action*.

1. Which parts of the MCPS strategic plan does the MSMC address?
2. How does your school's program support the overall goals of MCPS?
 - a. Are there specific ways the program addresses district goals?
 - b. Do you believe most teachers and students are aware of the primary goals of the district and the MSMC? How are these communicated?

MSMC and Middle School Reform – Now I would like to ask you about your school.

1. What is the district's primary goal in creating magnet schools?
 - a. How is this reflected?

- b. How does your school accomplish this goal?
2. What differences, if any, are there between students from the consortium's attendance area and those who come from without this area?
 - a. What impact are these differences making?
 - b. Are students integrating?
3. What are the significant changes you have seen from your middle school experience before the MSMC?
 - a. How is the schedule different?
 - b. What is different for students?
 - c. In what ways do you feel the school is organized for learning?
4. How important is the information technology theme in the way the curriculum is presented?
 - a. How important is curriculum integration?
 - b. Do you believe curriculum integration is occurring in all subjects?
 - c. Are the elective classes reflecting information technology supporting the core curriculum?
5. Tell me some things that have happened at this school in the last year and a half of which you are particularly proud.
6. In what ways does your school connect with the larger community?
 - a. How are parents involved in the school?
 - b. How do the business, professional, and cultural communities get involved with your school?
7. Who is on your school leadership team?
 - a. How were these members selected?
 - b. How does the leadership team communicate with the staff?
8. When issues or problems occur, what process is used to resolve them?
 - a. Do teachers have the opportunity to participate in the decision-making? How?
 - b. Are students involved in decision-making? How?
9. How does the district support Argyle Middle School?
10. How much autonomy is given to Argyle Middle School?
 - a. How much autonomy does the leadership team have to make personnel decisions?
 - b. How much control does the school have over the budget?

- c. How much flexibility does the school have with curriculum?
- d. How does the district hold school leadership accountable for achieving established standards and benchmarks?

Lessons Learned – I’m now going to ask a few questions about the first year and a half of the program’s implementation.

1. What were some of the surprises you found in the first year of implementation?
 - a. Were there some parts of the program that went better than you expected?
 - b. Were there some parts of the program that needed more support than you expected?
2. What are your impressions about the success of the program during the first year?
3. In reviewing the first year and a half of the MSMC, what has been learned that can be applied to reform in other district middle schools?

Closing – As we finish up, I want to thank you, again, for your help, and ask if there is anything we’ve missed.

1. Is there anything I should have asked you about the MSMC that I haven’t?
2. Do you have any other information you think I would be interested in?

Teachers

Study Introduction: Thank you for agreeing to talk with me about the Middle School Magnet Consortium. We are interviewing school leaders, like yourself, about your perceptions of the impact of this process on students and learning in Montgomery County middle schools. The purpose of the study is to find out how the MSMC is addressing the needs of middle school students. We also are interested in documenting lessons learned during the first year of implementation and the transition to the second year. This study is not an evaluation of your school or the program. Rather, it is a case study that may be used to help other schools implement the lessons you have learned effectively. In this interview, we hope you will share with us your perceptions of your school’s program

and the impact it has had on your school's students, teachers, and families.

We will not identify you, personally, in any of the reports we make following this study. You are free to end your participation at any time. Do you have any questions?

Strategic Plan – I first want to ask you some questions about the district strategic plan, *Our Call to Action*.

1. Which parts of the MCPS strategic plan does the MSMC address?
2. How does your school's program support the overall goals of MCPS?
 - a. Are there specific ways the program addresses district goals?
 - b. Do you believe most teachers and students are aware of the primary goals of the district and the MSMC? How are these communicated?

MSMC and Middle School Reform – Now I would like to ask you about your school.

1. What is the district's primary goal in creating magnet schools?
 - a. How is this reflected?
 - b. How does your school accomplish this goal?
2. What differences, if any, are there between students from the consortium's attendance area and those who come from without this area?
 - a. What impact are these differences making?
 - b. Are students integrating?
3. What are the significant changes you have seen from your middle school experience before the MSMC?
 - a. How is the schedule different?
 - b. What is different for students?
 - c. In what ways do you feel the school is organized for learning?
4. How important is the information technology theme in the way the curriculum is presented?
 - a. How important is curriculum integration?
 - b. Do you believe curriculum integration is occurring in all subjects?

- c. Are the elective classes reflecting information technology supporting the core curriculum?
- 5. Tell me some things that have happened at this school in the last year and a half of which you are particularly proud.
- 6. In what ways does your school connect with the larger community?
 - a. How are parents involved in the school?
 - b. How do the business, professional, and cultural communities get involved with your school?
- 7. Who is on your school leadership team?
 - a. How were these members selected?
 - b. How does the leadership team communicate with the staff?
- 8. When issues or problems occur, what process is used to resolve them?
 - a. Do teachers have the opportunity to participate in the decision-making? How?
 - b. Are students involved in decision-making? How?
- 9. What are some of the elements of your school improvement plan?
 - a. What is your school's vision?
 - b. What are priorities for the school?
- 10. What is the principal's role at Argyle Middle School?
 - a. In what ways does the principal impact student learning?
 - b. What would you most like to tell your principal?

Lessons Learned – I'm now going to ask a few questions about the first year and a half of the program's implementation.

- 1. What were some of the surprises you found in the first year of implementation?
 - a. Were there some parts of the program that went better than you expected?
 - b. Were there some parts of the program that needed more support than you expected?
- 2. What are your impressions about the success of the program during the first year?
- 3. In reviewing the first year and a half of the MSMC, what has been learned that can be applied to reform in other district middle schools?

Closing – As we finish up, I want to thank you, again, for your help, and ask if there is anything we’ve missed.

1. Is there anything I should have asked you about the MSMC that I haven’t?
2. Do you have any other information you think I would be interested in?

Appendix D: MCPS MSMC Interview Protocol

(Loiederman Middle School)

Administrators

Study Introduction: Thank you for agreeing to talk with me about the Middle School Magnet Consortium. We are interviewing school leaders, like yourself, about your perceptions of the impact of this process on students and learning in Montgomery County middle schools. The purpose of the study is to find out how the MSMC is addressing the needs of middle school students. We also are interested in documenting lessons learned during the first year of implementation and the transition to the second year. This study is not an evaluation of your school or the program. Rather, it is a case study that may be used to help other schools implement the lessons you have learned effectively. In this interview, we hope you will share with us your perceptions of your school’s program and the impact it has had on your school’s students, teachers, and families.

We will not identify you, personally, in any of the reports we make following this study. You are free to end your participation at any time. Do you have any questions?

Strategic Plan – I first want to ask you some questions about the district strategic plan, *Our Call to Action*.

1. Which parts of the MCPS strategic plan does the MSMC address?
2. How does your school’s program support the overall goals of MCPS?
 - a. Are there specific ways the program addresses district goals?

- b. Do you believe most teachers and students are aware of the primary goals of the district and the MSMC? How are these communicated?

MSMC and Middle School Reform – Now I would like to ask you about your school.

1. What is the district's primary goal in creating magnet schools?
 - a. How is this reflected?
 - b. How does your school accomplish this goal?
2. What differences, if any, are there between students from the consortium's attendance area and those who come from without this area?
 - a. What impact are these differences making?
 - b. Are students integrating?
3. What are the significant changes you have seen from your middle school experience before the MSMC?
 - a. How is the schedule different?
 - b. What is different for students?
 - c. In what ways do you feel the school is organized for learning?
4. Tell me some things that have happened at this school in the last year and a half of which you are particularly proud.
5. In what ways does your school connect with the larger community?
 - a. How are parents involved in the school?
 - b. How do the business, professional, and cultural communities get involved with your school?
6. How important is the arts theme in the way the curriculum is presented?
 - a. How important is curriculum integration?
 - b. Do you believe curriculum integration is occurring in all subjects?
 - c. Are the elective classes reflecting the arts supporting the core curriculum?
 - d. Do you think curriculum integration is positive for student learning? Why or why not?
7. How important is the arts theme in the way the instruction is presented?
 - a. How important is it to integrate the arts in all subjects?

- b. Do you believe arts integration is occurring in all subjects?
 - c. What do you notice about student learning and engagement when you have observed integrated lessons?
 - d. How often should lessons integrate the arts theme? How often do you believe integrated lessons are occurring?
8. How do teachers differentiate instruction to meet individual student needs?
- a. How are student needs determined?
 - b. What methods do teachers use to challenge learners who have mastered material and support students who have not?
 - c. Are certain groups tracked at Loiederman?
 - a. How are these tracks determined?
 - b. What safeguards are used to prevent discrimination?
9. What must a teacher do to lay the groundwork for learning new skills and concepts?
10. What is the link between instruction and assessment?
- a. What have you found to be the most effective form of assessment?
 - b. For what purposes should assessment be used?
 - c. How do teachers use assessment to inform instruction?
11. What is the role of reading instruction in the middle school?
- a. Where should reading be taught?
 - b. How is reading linked to non-language arts disciplines?
 - c. How does Loiederman Middle School approach reading instruction?

Lessons Learned – I’m now going to ask a few questions about the first year and a half of the program’s implementation.

- 1. What were some of the surprises you found in the first year of implementation?
 - a. Were there some parts of the program that went better than you expected?
 - b. Were there some parts of the program that needed more support than you expected?
- 2. What are your impressions about the success of the program during the first year?

3. In reviewing the first year and a half of the MSMC, what has been learned that can be applied to reform in other district middle schools?

Closing – As we finish up, I want to thank you, again, for your help, and ask if there is anything we’ve missed.

1. Is there anything I should have asked you about the MSMC that I haven’t?
2. Do you have any other information you think I would be interested in?

Teachers

Study Introduction: Thank you for agreeing to talk with me about the Middle School Magnet Consortium. We are interviewing school leaders, like yourself, about your perceptions of the impact of this process on students and learning in Montgomery County middle schools. The purpose of the study is to find out how the MSMC is addressing the needs of middle school students. We also are interested in documenting lessons learned during the first year of implementation and the transition to the second year. This study is not an evaluation of your school or the program. Rather, it is a case study that may be used to help other schools implement the lessons you have learned effectively. In this interview, we hope you will share with us your perceptions of your school’s program and the impact it has had on your school’s students, teachers, and families.

We will not identify you, personally, in any of the reports we make following this study. You are free to end your participation at any time. Do you have any questions?

Strategic Plan – I first want to ask you some questions about the district strategic plan, *Our Call to Action*.

1. Which parts of the MCPS strategic plan does the MSMC address?
2. How does your school’s program support the overall goals of MCPS?
 - a. Are there specific ways the program addresses district goals?

- b. Do you believe most teachers and students are aware of the primary goals of the district and the MSMC? How are these communicated?

MSMC and Middle School Reform – Now I would like to ask you about your school.

1. What is the district's primary goal in creating magnet schools?
 - a. How is this reflected?
 - b. How does your school accomplish this goal?
2. What differences, if any, are there between students from the consortium's attendance area and those who come from without this area?
 - a. What impact are these differences making?
 - b. Are students integrating?
3. What are the significant changes you have seen from your middle school experience before the MSMC?
 - a. How is the schedule different?
 - b. What is different for students?
 - c. In what ways do you feel the school is organized for learning?
4. Tell me some things that have happened at this school in the last year and a half of which you are particularly proud.
5. In what ways does your school connect with the larger community?
 - a. How are parents involved in the school?
 - b. How do the business, professional, and cultural communities get involved with your school?
6. How important is the arts theme in the way the curriculum is presented?
 - a. How important is curriculum integration?
 - b. Do you believe curriculum integration is occurring in all subjects?
 - c. Are the elective classes reflecting the arts supporting the core curriculum?
 - d. Do you think curriculum integration is positive for student learning? Why or why not?
7. How important is the arts theme in the way the instruction is presented?
 - a. How important is it to integrate the arts in all subjects?

- b. Do you believe arts integration is occurring in all subjects?
 - c. What are some ways in which you have attempted integrated instruction?
 - d. What do you notice about student learning and engagement when using integrated lessons?
 - e. How often should lessons integrate the arts theme? How often do you attempt integrated lessons?
8. How do you differentiate instruction to meet individual student needs?
 - a. How are student needs determined?
 - b. What methods do you use to challenge learners who have mastered material and support students who have not?
 9. What must a teacher do to lay the groundwork for learning new skills and concepts?
 10. How do students practice new skills and reinforce new knowledge?
 - a. Which of these strategies do you use most often?
 - b. Which of these strategies do you believe is most effective?
 11. What is the link between instruction and assessment?
 - a. What have you found to be the most effective form of assessment?
 - b. For what purposes should assessment be used?
 12. What is the role of reading instruction in the middle school?
 - a. Where should reading be taught?
 - b. How is reading linked to your discipline?
 - c. How does Loiederman Middle School approach reading instruction?

Lessons Learned – I’m now going to ask a few questions about the first year and a half of the program’s implementation.

1. What were some of the surprises you found in the first year of implementation?
 - a. Were there some parts of the program that went better than you expected?
 - b. Were there some parts of the program that needed more support than you expected?
2. What are your impressions about the success of the program during the first year?

3. In reviewing the first year and a half of the MSMC, what has been learned that can be applied to reform in other district middle schools?

Closing – As we finish up, I want to thank you, again, for your help, and ask if there is anything we've missed.

1. Is there anything I should have asked you about the MSMC that I haven't?
2. Do you have any other information you think I would be interested in?

Appendix E: MCPS MSMC Interview Protocol

(Parkland Middle School)

Administrators

Study Introduction: Thank you for agreeing to talk with me about the Middle School Magnet Consortium. We are interviewing school leaders, like yourself, about your perceptions of the impact of this process on students and learning in Montgomery County middle schools. The purpose of the study is to find out how the MSMC is addressing the needs of middle school students. We also are interested in documenting lessons learned during the first year of implementation and the transition to the second year. This study is not an evaluation of your school or the program. Rather, it is a case study that may be used to help other schools implement the lessons you have learned effectively. In this interview, we hope you will share with us your perceptions of your school's program and the impact it has had on your school's students, teachers, and families.

We will not identify you, personally, in any of the reports we make following this study. You are free to end your participation at any time. Do you have any questions?

Strategic Plan – I first want to ask you some questions about the district strategic plan, *Our Call to Action*.

1. Which parts of the MCPS strategic plan does the MSMC address?
2. How does your school's program support the overall goals of MCPS?
 - a. Are there specific ways the program addresses district goals?
 - b. Do you believe most teachers and students are aware of the primary goals of the district and the MSMC? How are these communicated?

MSMC and Middle School Reform – Now I would like to ask you about your school.

1. What is the district's primary goal in creating magnet schools?
 - a. How is this reflected?
 - b. How does your school accomplish this goal?

1. What differences, if any, are there between students from the consortium's attendance area and those who come from without this area?
 - a. What impact are these differences making?
 - b. Are students integrating?
2. What are the significant changes you have seen from your middle school experience before the MSMC?
 - a. How is the schedule different?
 - b. What is different for students?
 - c. In what ways do you feel the school is organized for learning?
3. Tell me some things that have happened at this school in the last year and a half of which you are particularly proud.
4. In what ways does your school connect with the larger community?
 - a. How are parents involved in the school?
 - b. How do the business, professional, and cultural communities get involved with your school?
5. How important is the science theme in the way the curriculum is presented?
 - a. How important is curriculum integration?
 - b. Do you believe curriculum integration is occurring in all subjects?
 - c. Are the elective classes reflecting the science theme supporting the core curriculum?
6. How are the Maryland voluntary standards used at Parkland Middle School?
 - a. Are standards communicated to students and parents?
How?
 - b. What kinds of discussions have teachers and administrators had regarding standards?
7. How does assessment reflect the school's curriculum?
 - a. Are assessments standards-based?
 - b. How frequently are assessments made?
 - c. How are formative assessments used by teachers?
 - d. What evidence have you seen of authentic assessment?
8. How does the program ensure curriculum articulation grades 5 through 9.

9. Does the school's curriculum reflect more depth or breadth in coverage?
 - a. What examples can you give to illustrate your opinion?
 - b. Regarding either breadth or depth, which do you believe is most important and for what reasons?

Lessons Learned – I'm now going to ask a few questions about the first year and a half of the program's implementation.

1. What were some of the surprises you found in the first year of implementation?
 - a. Were there some parts of the program that went better than you expected?
 - b. Were there some parts of the program that needed more support than you expected?
2. What are your impressions about the success of the program during the first year?
3. In reviewing the first year and a half of the MSMC, what has been learned that can be applied to reform in other district middle schools?

Closing – As we finish up, I want to thank you, again, for your help, and ask if there is anything we've missed.

1. Is there anything I should have asked you about the MSMC that I haven't?
2. Do you have any other information you think I would be interested in?

Teachers

Study Introduction: Thank you for agreeing to talk with me about the Middle School Magnet Consortium. We are interviewing school leaders, like yourself, about your perceptions of the impact of this process on students and learning in Montgomery County middle schools. The purpose of the study is to find out how the MSMC is addressing the needs of middle school students. We also are interested in documenting lessons learned during the first year of implementation and the transition to the second year. This study is not an evaluation of your school or the program. Rather, it is a case study that may be used to help other schools implement the lessons you have learned effectively. In this interview, we hope you will share with us your perceptions of your school's program

and the impact it has had on your school's students, teachers, and families.

We will not identify you, personally, in any of the reports we make following this study. You are free to end your participation at any time. Do you have any questions?

Strategic Plan – I first want to ask you some questions about the district strategic plan, *Our Call to Action*.

1. Which parts of the MCPS strategic plan does the MSMC address?
2. How does your school's program support the overall goals of MCPS?
 - a. Are there specific ways the program addresses district goals?
 - b. Do you believe most teachers and students are aware of the primary goals of the district and the MSMC? How are these communicated?

MSMC and Middle School Reform – Now I would like to ask you about your school.

1. What is the district's primary goal in creating magnet schools?
 - a. How is this reflected?
 - b. How does your school accomplish this goal?
2. What differences, if any, are there between students from the consortium's attendance area and those who come from without this area?
 - a. What impact are these differences making?
 - b. Are students integrating?
3. What are the significant changes you have seen from your middle school experience before the MSMC?
 - a. How is the schedule different?
 - b. What is different for students?
 - c. In what ways do you feel the school is organized for learning?
4. Tell me some things that have happened at this school in the last year and a half of which you are particularly proud.
5. In what ways does your school connect with the larger community?
 - a. How are parents involved in the school?

- b. How do the business, professional, and cultural communities get involved with your school?
- 6. How important is the science theme in the way the curriculum is presented?
 - a. How important is curriculum integration?
 - b. Do you believe curriculum integration is occurring in all subjects?
 - c. Are the elective classes reflecting the science theme supporting the core curriculum?
 - d. Do you think curriculum integration is positive for student learning? Why or why not?
- 7. How are the Maryland voluntary standards used at Parkland Middle School?
 - a. Are standards communicated to students and parents? How?
 - b. What kinds of discussions have teachers and administrators had regarding standards?
- 8. How does assessment reflect the school's curriculum?
 - a. Are assessments standards-based?
 - b. How frequently are assessments made?
 - c. What variety of assessments do you use in the classroom?
- 9. How does the curriculum link between grades?
 - a. How have you been given information about the grade above and the grade below in your discipline?
 - b. How do teachers build on previously learned skills and content and lay the foundation for the next level?
- 10. Does the school's curriculum reflect more depth or breadth in coverage?
 - a. What examples can you give to illustrate your opinion?
 - b. Regarding either breadth or depth, which do you believe is most important and for what reasons?

Lessons Learned – I'm now going to ask a few questions about the first year and a half of the program's implementation.

- 1. What were some of the surprises you found in the first year of implementation?
 - a. Were there some parts of the program that went better than you expected?

- b. Were there some parts of the program that needed more support than you expected?
2. What are your impressions about the success of the program during the first year?
3. In reviewing the first year and a half of the MSMC, what has been learned that can be applied to reform in other district middle schools?

Closing – As we finish up, I want to thank you, again, for your help, and ask if there is anything we've missed.

1. Is there anything I should have asked you about the MSMC that I haven't?
2. Do you have any other information you think I would be interested in?

Appendix F: MCPS MSMC Observation Protocol

Physical Environment – Look on walls, whiteboard, announcements, hangings, and other displays:

- *How has the teacher prepared the classroom?
- *Evidence of the magnet theme.
- *Student work.

Classroom Organization – Look at the arrangement of furniture and materials, and document procedures:

- *What materials are available to students?
- *What routines are followed in beginning class?
- *What routines are followed in instruction?
- *What routines are followed in ending class?
- *How is the space arranged to accommodate instruction?

Classroom Climate – Look at student and teacher interactions

- *What evidence is there of student engagement?
- *How does the teacher manage student behavior?
- *How does the teacher manage student support during the class?

Classroom Governance – Look at teacher action

- *How does the teacher involve students in the classroom?
- *What choices are available to students during the instructional period?
- *What opportunities for student leadership are in evidence during instruction?

Appendix G: Letter to MCPS MSMC School Staff

Dear School Staff Member,

Our research team from Peabody College at Vanderbilt University will begin a dissertation project in Montgomery County, Maryland. The research team is composed of three doctoral students in the Ed.D program of Leadership, Policy, and Organization at Vanderbilt University. All three students are also educational professionals: Melissa Hamilton is the Curriculum Specialist for Science in Alexandria, Virginia; Erin Henrick is the Assistant Division Head of Middle School at Currey Ingram Academy in Brentwood, Tennessee; and Gene Hollenberg is the Principal of Grisom Middle School in Mishawaka, Indiana. Erin Henrick will be conducting the research at Argyle Middle School.

The purpose of our study is to examine the first year of implementation of the *Middle School Magnet Consortium* (MSMC) and determine if this reform effort is “answering the call” as directed in the strategic plan to “raise the bar and close the gap.”

In each of the schools we are exploring how organization is impacting learning, as well as examining recommendations from *Turning Points 2000* in depth. At Argyle, the impact of effective leadership will be a focus. Our goal would be to talk with teachers and administrators about their successes with the full magnet school program and the lessons learned after a year of implementation. Your participation is completely voluntary, and it is important. We sincerely hope you will assist our team in preparing a comprehensive study that will provide valuable information for middle school reform and give you a voice in future decision-making regarding middle schools in Montgomery County Public Schools.

We would like to conduct a brief interview with you during our next visit to your district on _____. We look forward to speaking with you!

Sincerely,

Melissa Hamilton

Erin Henrick

Eugene Hollenberg