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Review

OCTOBER 2006

The Abbott Secondary Education Initiative: How small learning communities are changing our schools



NJEA Convention 2006
Keynote Presenter Preview

Taking the initiative on secondary reform

by Stanley Karp

It was one of the best days of my 30 years as a teacher at John F. Kennedy High School in Paterson. The first senior class of our Communications Academy was graduating. Some two dozen students, who several years earlier had joined a small team of teachers to start a “theme-based, small learning community” inside my large comprehensive high school, had reason to celebrate. They were about “to walk the grass.”

A few of the Communications seniors came to the journalism office, a small, cluttered space that served as the hub, unofficial lunch room and meeting place for the Academy. They asked the Academy teachers to come out to the adjoining classroom. They had something to show us.

Yvonne, a bright, boisterous young woman who had made it through to graduation after several years of drama and effort, went to the front of the room. While her fellow seniors served up cake and ice cream, Yvonne presented the “CA” teachers with a plaque whose inscription read:

“The first graduating class of the Communications Academy would like to give special thanks to the following teachers . . . We appreciate the amount of work you put into our lives. Not only were you an inspiration to us but also our friends. The memories that you have shared with us will always be in our hearts. With love, your seniors, and those who are not with us.”

It was the kind of unexpected gesture of appreciation that sustains teachers everywhere, but is sometimes hard to come by in large, struggling urban high schools. Since I had taken on, somewhat warily, the role of Academy “lead teacher” after 25 years of teaching Eng-

lish and journalism at JFK, it also brought home to me how small, supportive learning communities can help transform such schools for both students and staff.

The need for reform

During my 30 years in Paterson, I’d seen school reform trends wash over the district like waves on the Jersey shore: back to basics, state standards and tests (and more tests), state takeovers, site-based management, whole school reform, school-based budgeting, NCLB. None of those reforms had as much positive impact on the daily experience of the teachers and students I knew as the Communications Academy.

Though they face many challenges and are no panacea, personalized small learning communities can provide important support to secondary students, families, and educators who face rising expectations and challenges. They can create a new collaborative framework, close to classrooms, for improving professional practice, integrating and aligning curriculum, and creating a supportive sense of community for students and families. They are also a central element in New Jersey’s ambitious Secondary Education Initiative (SEI) for Abbott districts.

The challenges that gave rise to the SEI are familiar to all who read the papers. While our state reports the best high school graduation rates in the nation, including those for students of color, this success is not spread evenly across New Jersey. Only about half of our urban students are making it to graduation. And more than a third of urban graduates pass

by taking the Special Review Assessment (SRA) that is being phased out in the next few years.

Business and university leaders report that many students who do graduate are poorly prepared for college and careers, which demand ever-higher levels of technical knowledge and skills. The federal No Child Left Behind Act has also put a spotlight on academic achievement gaps among students from different social and ethnic backgrounds (though it hasn’t provided the resources and strategies needed to eliminate them).

These achievement gaps have huge social and economic costs as well as educational ones. High school dropouts are three times more likely to get arrested and have twice the death rate of high school graduates. Crime, drug abuse, and health problems are all closely linked to dropout rates. We are losing thousands of young people to the streets, the unemployment lines, and the prisons.

The economic costs are equally staggering. According to an article in *Columbia Teachers College News* (Oct. 24, 2005), studies say that annual losses due to the lower earning power of dropouts “exceed \$50 billion in federal and state income taxes.” Even a one percent increase in high school graduation rates would save an estimated \$1.4 billion in costs associated with incarceration.

Successfully preparing students for college has an even bigger payoff. Today about 30 percent of whites over the age of 25 have a college degree compared to 20 percent of blacks and 12 percent of Hispanics. According to the N.J. Commission on Higher Education, these gaps in college completion rates cost the

“Raising achievement levels depends on making secondary schools better, not just harder.”



state \$4.6 billion in lost tax revenue in 2002 alone.

Want to balance the state budget? Want to make sure your pensions are paid? Slash the high school dropout rate and send students of color to college.

Enter the Abbott decisions

A series of school funding rulings from the N.J. Supreme Court, collectively known as the Abbott decisions, was designed to address such inequalities in educational opportunities and outcomes. Though New Jersey's citizens often don't see it this way, Abbott is the best school funding system for poor, urban schoolchildren in the U.S. It is the *Brown v. Board of Education* of school funding cases.

After decades of separate and unequal funding for urban districts, students in the 31 Abbott districts now get equal per pupil spending with the state's wealthiest and most successful districts. They also get additional aid to address special needs arising from concentrated poverty and years of neglect. Despite many challenges and implementation issues, Abbott represents an unprecedented attempt to equalize educational opportunity across deepening divisions of race and class.

Abbott funding has been in place for only a few years, but there are already signs of progress. Thousands of urban children now attend high-quality pre-K programs that improve school readiness. Recent elementary literacy and math scores reflect this improvement, closing the gap in fourth grade test results. Technology upgrades, health and social service programs, better classroom materials, and facilities repairs have all been made possible by Abbott funding.

But many challenges remain, including the need to improve education programs and outcomes for middle and high school students. In June, 2003 the Abbott X decision led to the creation of a collaborative workgroup to review guidelines for Abbott implementation in secondary schools. The new Secondary Education Initiative (SEI) that grew out of the workgroup's recommendations is now part of Abbott regulations for all middle and high schools.

The SEI requires that by fall 2008 all students in grades 6–12 have:

- a curriculum that prepares them for college and career options

- small learning environments with interdisciplinary teams of teachers that stay with groups of students over multiple years
- a personalized system of family-student advocacy with each professional providing support for up to 20 students and families through a series of regular "advisories," face-to-face family conferences, and home-school communication.

Though we still have much to learn about improving urban high schools, these elements reflect a growing body of experience about how to raise academic performance and close gaps in educational opportunity. Smaller, more personalized schools with a consistent focus on challenging academic curricula, effective, engaging classroom instruction, and real world connections show great promise in narrowing achievement gaps, particularly for urban students of color. Two and three generations of what began as isolated reform experiments, mostly in the northeast, have become models for "scaling up" efforts. Research shows that students attending smaller schools with academically rich environments and personalized support post higher test scores, pass more courses, accumulate more credits, graduate at higher rates and are more likely to continue their education. In the best cases, they also create vital democratic commu-

nities, adding elements of service, social justice, character-building and community pride to the educational experience. These successful innovative schools provide important lessons for transforming large, anonymous, comprehensive high schools into more effective institutions.

Seventy percent of all high school students attend schools with over 1,000 students. Nearly 50 percent attend schools with over 1,500 students. Hispanic and black students are more likely than white students to attend such large schools, schools with higher student-teacher ratios and high concentrations of poverty. In a typical high-poverty, urban school, about half of incoming ninth-graders read at a sixth- or seventh-grade level. Effective secondary reform means addressing both the academic and social dimensions of these challenges.

Making changes

As a member of the secondary workgroup, I was encouraged that it focused broadly on the need to address high school graduation rates, instead of narrowly on test score gaps. Over-emphasis on test scores often encourages schools to adopt short-term, sorting and labeling approaches, like cooking the testing pool or remedial test-prep for those closest to passing. Raising graduation rates requires a broader focus. It means addressing

NJEA Convention Keynote Presenter

Stanley Karp is one of 19 keynote presenters at this year's NJEA Convention in Atlantic City (Nov. 9–10). His workshop on "Improving Urban Secondary Schools" will be held on Thursday from 2:30–4:30 p.m. in Room 303.

Karp, an NJEA member and English teacher in Paterson for 30 years, retired in April and is now the director of the Secondary Reform Project of the Education Law Center and serves on the Abbott Secondary Education Advisory Group.

Since 1990, Karp has also served as one of the editors of *Rethinking Schools* magazine, a non-profit independent publication advocating the reform of elementary and secondary public schools, with an emphasis on urban schools and issues of equity and social justice. Subscriptions: 1 yr. (4 issues): \$17.95; 2 yrs: \$29.95. To learn more and for a catalog of other *Rethinking Schools* publications, visit www.rethinkingschools.org.



issues of school climate, academic motivation, curriculum relevance, and professional culture, and connecting these essential elements of successful school communities into a coherent whole.

Frankly, one of the biggest challenges in implementing the secondary initiative is to make sure that reform moves forward on both the academic rigor and the school climate/professional support sides. Raising achievement levels depends on making secondary schools better, not just harder. Tougher standards alone won't help schools and students that aren't meeting existing ones.

As Michael Cohen, former assistant U.S. secretary of education, and Adria Steinberg, president of Jobs for the Future, wrote in *Education Week*, "... the crisis in urban high schools can't be solved simply by setting high standards and then trying to push a larger number of students through the same pipeline that now works for only a portion of them.

The problem is that by the time young people reach high school, growing numbers of them are so alienated and disengaged from school that higher expectations and more challenging curricula—the primary tools of standards-based reform—are necessary but far from sufficient to engage or motivate them. In fact, some recent evidence on dropout rates points to the possibility that these strategies may cause more students to give up on school altogether."

New Jersey, in particular, will be facing a critical juncture in this regard over the next few years. We are already one of 25 states that require an exit test to graduate. Last fall, we became one of 22 states to sign on to the American Diploma Project to increase graduation requirements, including more demanding math, science, and language courses.

This combination of eliminating the SRA while raising graduation requirements poses a huge challenge for second-

ary schools in N.J.'s urban districts. Unless there are dramatic improvements in the way our urban high schools operate, we could see a spike in dropout rates. In the name of "reform," we could end up with a new tracking system in which a slightly larger slice of urban graduates find themselves prepared for college while a much larger percentage of our young people find themselves pushed out of schools without a diploma. At the very least, the plan to eliminate the SRA is all the more reason to give added support to the new secondary initiative.

The SEI has the potential to serve as a balanced framework for secondary reform. Launched last fall, implementation efforts are moving forward in several ways:

- Planning teams have been formed in all Abbott districts to develop timelines and processes for implementing reform.
- Curriculum reviews are underway to make sure all core courses required for

NJEA Convention Keynote Presenters



Juan Enriquez
Thursday, 9:30–11:30
Room 302

Education in the 21st Century—Juan Enriquez is one of the world's leading authorities on the dynamics of the knowledge economy and the impact of the life sciences. The author of *As the Future Catches You: How Genomics are Changing Your Life, Work, Health and Wealth*, Enriquez will discuss education in the 21st century. Immediately following his presentation, Enriquez will be available in the NJEA Park for a book signing.



Shirley Hord
Thursday, 9:30–1:30pm
Room 402

It's Here, It's There, But What is It? Professional Learning Communities—Shirley M. Hord monitors the Leadership For Change Project at the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory in Austin, Texas, and designs and coordinates professional development activities related to educational change. Hord will explore the characteristics and outcomes of professional learning communities in both K–12 and higher education settings.



Kathy Hurley
Thursday, 9:30–11:30
Room 303

Panel Discussion: Partnership for the 21st Century—Barbara Stein, senior policy analyst at NEA will facilitate a panel discussion including Joyce Powell, NJEA president; John Wilson, NEA executive director; Lucille Davy, N.J. commissioner of education; and Kathy Hurley, senior vice president, strategic partnerships for Pearson School Companies.



Stephanie Hirsch
Thursday, 12–2
Room 302

A Vision for High Quality Professional Learning: Challenges and Opportunities—The National Staff Development Council (NSDC) has a goal that all teachers will experience high quality professional learning by 2007. Consider challenges and opportunities for advancing the vision in more schools. Stephanie Hirsch is the deputy executive director for NSDC.



Dr. Willard Daggett
Thursday, 9:30–11:30
Room 403

Components and Characteristics of the Most Successful U.S. Schools—Dr. Willard Daggett is President of the International Center for Leadership in Education. He has assisted a number of states, hundreds of school districts, and several foreign education ministries with school improvement initiatives. Daggett will provide an in-depth overview of essential elements for successful schools.



Jay Doolan
Thursday, 12–2
Room 303

New Jersey High Schools in the 21st Century—Participants will learn about what's driving the high school reform movement. Jay Doolan, Ed.D. is the Acting Assistant Commissioner Division of Educational Programs and Assessment. Mary O'Malley, vice president of Prudential Financial, Inc., will also present.

graduation are academically challenging and aligned with state standards.

- The N.J. Department of Education (DOE) has formed an SEI team to build the DOE's capacity to provide technical assistance to districts to implement the reform.
- The DOE has engaged professional consultants with a record of success in secondary reform to work with selected districts on implementation.
- A series of secondary initiative network meetings have been held to share resources, experiences and challenges related to SEI.

These efforts are beginning to build a network of support for new and ongoing reform efforts throughout the state. Just last month, schools in Orange opened with small learning communities in the high school, a middle school, and grades 6–8 of a K–8 elementary school. Plainfield opened the second of five planned academies at Plainfield HS.

Pemberton, which received a federal small learning communities grant several years ago, is developing the family-student advocacy piece of its reform effort. Newark has created professional learning communities for teachers with common planning time as a step toward developing theme-based, small learning communities for all students.

Districts and schools have considerable flexibility within SEI to design their reform plans. They can include free-standing small schools, various configurations for small learning communities, different strategies for introducing personalization and can even seek waivers if they can show they've reached the academic and personalization goals through other means. The hope is that a sustained statewide focus on secondary reform will support a variety of approaches, promote collaboration and sharing among districts and educators, and bring national expertise to bear on New Jersey's efforts.

NJEA and local associations have been important partners in this process. In Orange, for example, teachers adopted a new contract with several provisions designed to support secondary reform. Teaching loads and lunch periods were modified to accommodate block scheduling. Also, the family-student advocacy period was defined as part of teachers' professional responsibilities, as opposed to an additional teaching period. In return, teachers received a modest raise and sustained benefits with no reductions. Such collaboration will be a key to the effort's long-term success.

Guidelines

While there is ample room for innovation, the regulations do require districts to support reform in some very specific ways. Teams of teachers must receive at least two to three hours of common planning time per week. Appropriate facilities in free-standing small schools or reorganized

NJEA Convention Keynote Presenters



Pattie Ralabate
Thursday, 12–2
Room 402

Rtl: Response to Intervention—Patti Ralabate is the professional associate for special needs at NEA. Stacy Skalski is the public policy director for the National Association of School Psychologists. Ralabate and Skalski will discuss how Rtl assists schools in meeting adequate yearly progress (AYP) while avoiding unnecessary labeling of students.



Pat Wright
Thursday, 2:30–4:30
Room 402

Professional Learning Communities—Patricia Wright, chief school administrator for the Borough of Spring Lake, will discuss professional learning communities (PLC) and facilitate a panel discussion featuring an experienced PLC and a novice PLC.



Rick Stiggins
Thursday, 12–2
Hall A

Assessment for Learning—Rick Stiggins has written extensively on student assessment and is the creator of numerous videos on the topic. In 1992, Stiggins founded the ETS Assessment Training Institute to provide professional development for teachers and school leaders.



Darryl Walls
Thursday, 2:30–4:30
Friday, 12–2
Room 403

Access to Success®: Leadership in the Classroom—An author, keynote speaker, and professional musician, Darryl C. Walls has an unparalleled message and a speaking style that always makes a profound impact on his audience. Learn about the nationally proven program that will lead to personal behavioral change. Walk away with an infrastructure that increases organizational effectiveness and supports the needs of those you lead.



Douglas Reeves
Thursday, 2:30–4:30
Room 302

Transforming Research into Action—Dr. Douglas Reeves is chairman and founder of the Center for Performance Assessment, an international organization dedicated to improving student achievement and educational equity. Dr. Reeves will explore the failure of silver bullets, sure-fire programs, and can't miss initiatives. He will identify the key contextual variables essential for the success of any initiative.



Mike Schmoker
Friday, 9:30–11:30
Room 302

The Opportunity: From "Brutal Facts" to the Best Schools We've Ever Had—A true renaissance could occur in our schools if we had an encounter with the "Brutal Facts"—those practices that educators know are important but have yet to occur in classrooms. A former middle and high school English teacher, Dr. Mike Schmoker has worked on school improvement and assessment.

large ones are required. Another provision requires that teacher teams in the small learning communities “are included in the preparation of grade-level, academic department and school budgets through representation on the school leadership council.” Professional development must be provided, including specific support for new roles like collaborative planning and student-family advocacy.

The advocacy piece is one many teachers have had questions about. Some worry that they’re being asked to become guidance counselors (some counselors have expressed similar concerns). Others wonder whether they will get the preparation, time and resources they need to meet this challenge. These are legitimate concerns.

The ideas behind family/student advocacy are sound. In recent years, the family, civic, and social structures that traditionally helped schools succeed have frayed, especially in urban areas. Schools

must bridge this gap. Students need in-school, adult advocates who can respond to individual problems, review academic progress and planning, and strengthen school/student/family communication.

Teachers have always filled this role in various ways, but family-student advocacy requires ongoing institutional support and preparation to do this well. That means sharing the load systematically among all professional staff. Again, it’s no “silver bullet,” but along with small learning communities and teacher teams, student advocacy or “advisory” groups are vehicles for personalizing school experience and creating support structures for academic success.

Of course any good idea needs good practice to make it real. Teachers know from painful experience that gaps between rhetoric and reform can be just as stubborn as academic achievement gaps. But the emerging consensus around the impor-

tance of improving our secondary schools as a matter of long-term economic health and urgent social need creates powerful possibilities for reform. It is an illusion to think that we can meet higher standards without moving to higher levels of support for the students, families, teachers and schools who are expected to reach them. The New Jersey secondary school initiative provides a framework to do that

By some measures, SEI is potentially one of the most ambitious reform efforts in the nation in its statewide scope and in its sustainability on a foundation of Abbott funding. The challenge is to make it a top education priority and to raise the reform effort to the level of the high expectations we say we have for all our children. 🏠

Stan Karp can be reached at skarp@edlawcenter.org.

NJEA Convention Keynote Presenters



Willa Spicer
Friday, 9:30–11:30
Room 303

Teacher as Assessor—Feedback has always been a critical part of learning. Dr. Willa Spicer will discuss all types of assessments and how they can be used to increase student learning. Spicer is the project director of the New Jersey Performance Assessment Alliance. She has served on committees for the Abbott Secondary School Initiative and for the Revision of the N.J. Assessment System.



Pedro Noguera
Friday, 12–2
Room 303

Creating Conditions to Raise Student Achievement: What it Takes to Leave No Child Behind—Pedro Noguera will discuss the challenges faced by schools and students trying to create a safe, secure, and academically rewarding environment. Noguera is a charismatic speaker who translates social theory into concise, hip language with emotional impact. He is a professor in the Steinhardt School of Education at New York University.



Joellen Killion
Friday, 9:30–11:30
Room 402

Putting Learning Back Into Professional Development—When teachers play an active role in their own learning, move professional learning from outside into their schools, and collaborate with their colleagues about their work, professional development can result in genuine learning for teachers. Joellen Killion is director for special projects at the National Staff Development Council.



Ann Delehant
Friday, 12–2
Room 402

Why is everyone talking about coaching?—What makes it unique anyway? Attendees will practice using three or four coaching processes that demonstrate why it such a powerful technique and use tools that they can apply immediately. Delehant has worked as an external training consultant for many national consulting firms, professional associations, universities, and school districts.



Tom Corcoran
Friday, 9:30–11:30
Room 403

Enhancing Your Professional Practice—Corcoran is co-director of the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE). He served as education policy advisor for Gov. Jim Florio, as director of evaluation and chief of staff of the N.J. Department of Education. Corcoran will discuss quality professional development.



Marcia Tate
Friday, 12–4
Room 302

Worksheets Don’t Grow Dendrites: 20 Instructional Strategies that Engage the Brain—A former teacher and executive director of professional development for the DeKalb County School system in Decatur, Georgia, Dr. Tate is the author of several books on brain research and its connection to learning. Experience 20 brain compatible strategies that maximize understanding and memory. Use music, metaphor, and movement to increase academic achievement.