
THE TALENT DEVELOPMENT HIGH SCHOOL: Early Evidence of Impact

The first Talent Development High School was established in September 1995 at Patterson High School in Baltimore, Maryland. The model at Patterson incorporates career-focused academies for the upper grades, a ninth-grade academy with teams of teachers and students, and other key Talent Development components.

Patterson High School enrolls about 2,000 students, of whom about 60 percent are African American, 30 percent white (mostly living in white ethnic neighborhoods of Greek, Polish, and Italian heritage) and 10 percent American Indian, Asian, and Hispanic. The school is non-selective and geographically zoned; thus it receives all the students within its boundaries who do not gain admission to one of the district's three citywide high schools or three vocational-technical high schools, all of which have entrance requirements based on grades, tests, and attendance.

Patterson was one of the first two high schools cited in 1994 by the Maryland State Department of Education as "eligible for reconstitution" because of its low rankings and negative trends on dropout rates, student attendance, and student achievement. This designation is tantamount to saying that Patterson was one of the two worst high schools in the state of Maryland in 1994. The school's problems included the following:

- The school learning environment was in chaos. Small groups of unruly students were constantly roaming halls and stairways, and repeated faculty efforts to bring order to the building were unsuccessful. Teachers, unable to maintain peace in the halls, retreated to their classrooms where they tried to do their best with the students in their own rooms. Student attendance and tardiness were serious problems.
- The rate at which students failed courses and were retained in grade was enormous. In 1993-94, over 80 percent failed the ninth grade (4 out of 5 students were *not* promoted to grade 10). Course failure and grade repetition, of course, feed a high dropout rate—Patterson enrolls over 600 new ninth graders each year, but has graduating classes well under 200.
- Student test score performance was also poor on the Maryland minimum competency tests in math, writing and citizenship, which are required for graduation. The math test is actually intended to be passed in the seventh or eighth grade, but only about one-quarter of Patterson students have done so by the end of the ninth grade.

In this context, Patterson administrators and staff and CRESPAR researchers and staff at Johns Hopkins—James M. McPartland, Nettie Legters, Will Jordan, Leslie Jones, and Edward L. McDill—began a collaboration in November 1994 to create the first Talent Development High School.

Components Implemented at Patterson

During the 1994-95 school year, Patterson planned and prepared to implement a large number of the components of the Talent Development High School. In September 1995, and continuing through the 1995-96 school year, the transformation of the school began in earnest.

The most dramatic organizational change was the establishment of five academies, each a self-contained school within the school. The ninth grade is housed in one wing of the building as "The Ninth Grade Success

Academy,” with its own entrance and classrooms (including computer and science labs). The ninth grade has its own Academy Principal, Academy Leader, and a teaching faculty that is divided into five teams, each of which teaches a common group of 150-180 students in a four-period block schedule. Each team has a common planning time each day to work together on student and instructional issues.

Four college-preparatory but career-focused academies were designed by Patterson staff for the upper-level (grades 10-12) students. The academy themes were generated by drawing on and combining multiple proposals submitted by Patterson faculty members or groups of faculty. The four upper-level career academies are Arts and Humanities, Business and Finance, Sports Studies and Health/Wellness, and Transportation and Engineering Technology. Like the Ninth Grade Success Academy, each upper-level Career Academy has its own entrance and area of the building, and its own faculty and administrators.

Other Talent Development components at Patterson include:

Homeroom advisory groups and the four-period day in the upper-level career academies.

Improvement Grades and Credit School in the Ninth Grade Success Academy.

Methods for recovering from poor attendance.

Voluntary coaching classes before and after school for students who need extra help.

A full-time professional health suite and a staff of social workers, school psychologists, and guidance counselors.

Regular instruction and discussions by Patterson staff on topics of teenage sexuality and drug or alcohol issues.

Twilight School for students who have serious discipline problems.

Early Evidence of Impact

McPartland, Legters, Jordan, and McDill present early evidence of the impact of the Talent Development High School by comparing conditions at Patterson in the 1994-95 school year with conditions in 1995-96. The comparisons are drawn from faculty surveys about climate and teaching conditions, student attendance rates by grade level and month, and report card grades and course credits through the first 18-week term of 1995-96. In brief, school climate, student attendance, and student promotion at Patterson High School have all significantly improved in school year 1995-96 with the implementation of the Talent Development model.

School Climate. There has been an almost complete turnaround in teacher perceptions of the learning environment. Last year, almost all of the Patterson teachers (80 percent of grade nine teachers and 86.7 percent of upper grades teachers) believed the school’s learning environment was *not* conducive to school achievement for most students. This year, only 27.2 percent of grade nine teachers and 4.5 percent of upper grades teachers feel this way.

Other analyses of survey data show the following teacher perceptions:

School spirit of faculty and administration—79.2% of teachers say better than last year

Students taking school seriously—81.2% of teachers say better than last year

Teachers working together—83% of teachers say better than last year

Student behavior in halls & stairways—94.4% of teachers say better than last year

This school seems like a big family: grade 9—45.5% agree, compared to 13% last year; upper grades—54.5% agree, compared to 13.7% last year.

Attendance. Patterson shows significantly higher rates of ninth-grade attendance compared to recent previous years. The upper-level Career Academies, which started out with higher base rates of previous attendance, also show some improvement this year.

McPartland, Legters, Jordan, and McDill examine monthly student attendance rates for this year (1995-96) compared to the average of the previous three years at Patterson High School. The ninth grade, which has had the poorest attendance in recent years of any grade in the school, has improved attendance by 9.4 percentage points since the beginning of the year. Schoolwide, attendance is up 6.1 percentage points over the average of the past three years (from 71.6 to 77.7).

Patterson teachers agree that the school is moving in the right direction in improving attendance. Last year, almost all Patterson teachers—96 percent of ninth- grade teachers and 97.8 percent of upper-grades teachers—indicated that absenteeism was a serious problem. This year, those numbers have dropped substantially, to 45.5 percent of ninth-grade teachers and only 19 percent of upper- grades teachers.

McPartland and his colleagues also compare attendance at Patterson with attendance at the eight other Baltimore City non-selective high schools. Here they find that Patterson has moved from second worst in attendance in 1994-95 to second best in attendance in 1995-96.

The researchers note that “The improvements in attendance so far have been produced by a safer school climate and especially by the efforts of teachers in regularly phoning students who miss school.” They expect further improvement to come about as “...Patterson’s teachers become more comfortable at using technology, project-based learning, cooperative learning and other methods to more actively involve students in challenging learning activities...”

Student Promotion. The researchers compare Patterson promotion rates at the end of school year 1994-95 with predicted promotion rates at the end of school year 1995-96. The predicted promotion rates are based on first-term course grades received by Patterson students in 1995-96.

Of ninth-grade students, 47.3 percent earned promotion the previous year, but 69.1 percent are poised for promotion this year, based on passing most of their courses in the first term.

McPartland, Legters, Jordan, and McDill note that: “...being left back to repeat a grade is the first decisive step in the dropout process. Improvements in promotion rates, especially from grade 9 to 10 where many students are currently lost, are critical for reducing the dropout rate.”

Expectations for the Talent

Development High School Model

These early results, the researchers note, indicate that one of the worst high schools in an urban district, designated for reconstitution by the state, is well on its way to becoming a very good school in the very first year of its operation as a Talent Development High School. The teachers and administrators of Patterson High School have been able to turn their school around in terms of the climate for learning. They have also significantly improved student attendance and the probabilities of student promotions and graduations—enough so that next year they will need to add a fifth upper-level Career Academy to accommodate the greater numbers of students who are attending school regularly and earning promotion to the next grade.

In the remainder of this year and in next year and beyond, the curriculum and learning activities will be further improved to incorporate career themes and to present more engaging lessons. Plans are in place to add more Talent Development High School sites at the beginning of the 1996-1997 school year—sites that will apply the lessons learned and practices developed at Patterson and, with Patterson, will create the basis for moving to national dissemination. ■