
THE TALENT DEVELOPMENT HIGH SCHOOL: Essential Components

In *The Talent Development High School: Essential Components*, CRESPAR researchers Velma LaPoint and Donna Penn Towns (Howard University), and Will Jordan and James M. McPartland (Johns Hopkins), describe the essential components of the Talent Development High School and present the rationales and research upon which each is based. The researchers describe the components under two key headings: the curriculum and the learning environment. But they first note an important point—the Talent Development High School, unlike many schoolwide innovations, is based not only on research-based principles that guide school improvement, but also on specific organizational and curricular components that schools can apply to operationalize the principles. Thus the Talent Development model “provides a comprehensive package of specific high school changes [in school organization, social relations, and instruction] for students placed at risk, based upon research on student motivation and teacher commitment, that can be reliably implemented with adaptations to meet local circumstances.”

The Talent Development High School components include a common core curriculum based on high standards—all students take college-preparatory courses in the major subjects of English, mathematics, science and history/social studies. Separate program tracks—college prep, general and vocational-business—are eliminated, replaced by a single core academic program of demanding courses for all students.

Achievement in this demanding curriculum by all students is accomplished through the creation of a learning environment that motivates all students and provides teachers with the resources and abilities to meet the demands of providing a good education to diverse students. The components of this learning environment are research-based, having been identified through reviews of both quantitative and qualitative research on high schools and students.

The components include relevant schoolwork that focuses on careers, the development of a human learning community, the provision of opportunities for academic success, and the provision of assistance to students in handling their personal and out-of-school problems.

Relevance of Schoolwork

The Talent Development High School reorganizes schoolwork around several broad career themes and provides students with a choice of one of several career academies in which they will spend their last three years of high school. The themes of the career academies are developed by the school’s own faculty, based upon strengths and interests of the teaching staff, actual job opportunities and trends, and coverage of some broad career categories.

All the academies are college-preparatory with demanding standards. All students select and attend an academy in the tenth through twelfth grades. Each academy exists as a school-within-the-school. Students are prepared for their academy choice in the ninth grade. They take interest inventories that help them identify their own strengths and career interests, enroll in course units on career types and pathways, and attend

presentations and discussions by faculty.

The career academies use employer advisory boards to develop a curriculum of elective courses, internship learning opportunities, and basic academic courses that blend career academy themes into their learning activities and applications.

LaPoint, Towns, Jordan, and McPartland note that the career academy themes “give focus to a student’s high school program by encouraging student career planning and tying curriculum content to each student’s career plans.”

Human Learning Community

The Talent Development High School creates conditions for close positive teacher-student relations and for an orderly academic climate through several related reforms.

Each career academy exists in its own part of the school building, with a separate entrance and stairway areas. The maximum size of each career academy is 300-350 students and the maximum size of ninth grade teams is 150-180 students. Thus, the teaming in the ninth grade and the career academies in the last three grades very effectively create a set of small high schools operating where one large comprehensive high school used to be.

A four-period day replaces the previous six-or seven-period day, providing longer classes for more in-depth instruction and requiring fewer adult-student relationships. Teachers now need to get to know fewer different students (about 90 individuals); students now deal with fewer teachers; thus teachers and students can form stronger interpersonal relationships.

Special adult advisory and advocacy relationships are established to give each student access to a specific caring and problem-solving adult who serves as that student’s point of contact in the school. In the ninth grade academy, which is often much larger than any upper-level career academy, several interdisciplinary teams of teachers are formed, each of which shares the same block-scheduled group of students. These teams include a homeroom teacher who has the first period with each class, plus three other teachers who share the same daily planning period to address student and team problems.

In the upper-level academies, each teacher is given a homeroom group of tenth, eleventh and twelfth graders that meets daily and that remains intact for each student’s remaining years in high school. These homeroom teachers function in advisory and advocacy capacities for their individual students as they face problems or decisions across the upper high school grades.

In the Talent Development High School, teacher roles and responsibilities are also modified to foster more positive teacher-student relations around shared academic goals. The role of the teacher is shifted from evaluator to coach by using external departmental exams, not constructed by any single teacher, as a major criterion for student grades in each course.

Opportunities for Academic Success To be sure that all students are able to succeed in a demanding curriculum based on high standards, the Talent Development High School focuses on improving student attendance, giving students extra academic help as needed, providing recognition for student improvement, and providing mechanisms for students to recover from previous poor attendance or earlier failures.

Addressing attendance. Attendance is a major facet of opportunity to learn—you can’t learn if you’re not there. The Talent Development High School reaches out specifically in a personal way to students when they first begin to have attendance problems. Personal calls to the home are addressed at first to the student (not

the parent) to deliver an initial message of positive outreach rather than punitive sanctions.

LaPoint, Towns, Jordan, and McPartland point out that “Having an instructional program that is attractive and engaging to students is the ultimate source of producing good student attendance.” However, initial direct and personal approaches are necessary in most high schools to begin improving attendance while career academies and active instructional programs are being developed and implemented.

Extra Help When Needed. The Talent Development High School is flexible in its use of various resources to meet the diversity of student needs. Approaches include coaching classes before or after regular school hours, peer tutoring via cooperative learning activities in the regular classroom or as pullout activities, extra computer drill and practice during or outside the regular school day, smaller classes or longer periods for students who are most behind (while maintaining all core curriculum elements), and double periods of time in demanding courses.

Recognition for Improvement. The Talent Development High School uses a modified report card that gives credit for achievement measured according to general standardized criteria and improvement measured according to a student’s own starting point.

Recovery Methods. The Talent Development High School gives students who do not at first succeed another chance to earn passing grades or to earn course credits. The researchers note that recovery always entails “extra cost,” which encourages students to try to succeed on their first efforts. Mechanisms are provided for students to recover from poor attendance records (by recording better attendance), from poor course performance (by retaking courses at Summer School, Saturday School, or Credit School), and from failure to be promoted (by earning missing credits during the first 18-week term of a four-period day schedule.

Help with Personal Problems

The Talent Development High School provides assistance to students through social workers and mental health professionals on the school staff and through an alternative after-hours school in the building. This alternative—the “Twilight School”—holds classes in the basic academic subjects with a small teacher-student ratio (10 to 1) and includes training students in coping skills. Twilight School attendance is temporary, as the school prepares students to return to the regular school or to continue their education at another part-time or GED location. ■