

TALENT DEVELOPMENT MIDDLE SCHOOL: Essential Components

Serge Madhere (Howard University) and Doug Mac Iver (Johns Hopkins University) are leading the CRESPAR work on the Talent Development Middle School. They describe the Talent Development approach as being based on the belief that all students can learn challenging material if the right types of support are given. In *The Talent Development Middle School: Essential Components*, they identify the components and present the research they are derived from, and summarize how they have begun to be fleshed out at Central East Middle School in Philadelphia and at Evans Junior High School in Washington, D.C.

The work at Evans Junior High School in Washington, D.C., led by Madhere, and at Central East Middle School in Philadelphia, led by Mac Iver, illustrates how the essential components of the Talent Development Middle School are

implemented and adapted based on the needs and strengths of the local school and district. At the same time, the complementary work allows the Hopkins and Howard middle school researchers to evaluate selected components in both schools at once while evaluating other components in only one school or the other.

Evans Junior High School in Washington, D.C. is a regular junior high school, grades 7 to 9, located in a low socioeconomic area of the city. The school enrolls approximately 320 students, all of whom are African American. Enrollment is highest in the seventh grade (116 students), next in the eighth grade (91 students), and lowest in the ninth grade (78), and 35 students are in an ungraded program. Approximately 25 percent of the students receive Title I services and about six percent are in special education.

A small percentage of students speak a language other than English at home. The school's 29 teachers (12 male and 17 female) are all African American.

Central East Middle School in Philadelphia includes approximately 1,000 students in grades five through eight, mostly from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The school has a highly diverse student body—about 45 percent Hispanic (most of Puerto Rican descent), 24 percent African American, 13 percent Asian (mostly Cambodian and Vietnamese), 8 percent white, and 10 percent who identify themselves as belonging to other racial or ethnic groups, including Arab American and biracial. Many have parents who are immigrants. About 53 percent spoke a language other than English at home before they began attending school. In the following, we describe how Evans and Central East are imple-

EIGHT FUNDAMENTAL COMPONENTS OF THE TALENT DEVELOPMENT MODEL

- **Demanding curriculum aimed at active student learning.** For all students, the core curriculum is demanding, focusing on higher order competencies, and utilizing technologies appropriate to these goals;
- **Emphasis on cultural empowerment.** Instruction must be attentive to cultural patterns and norms, promote cultural literacy, and help students connect to and interpret cultural traditions;
- **Communal organization of school.** The school must be organized as a community to support stronger teacher-student bonds and address adolescents' needs for affiliation;
- **Total detracking of instruction.** Classroom organization replaces tracking with approaches that make student diversity in the classroom an asset rather than an impediment to learning and motivation;
- **Growth-oriented assessment.** The model for accountability and evaluation that teachers use in the classroom combines

ratings of both excellence and progress, so it can be successfully used with heterogeneous groups.

- **Multi-layered pedagogy.** This includes flexible use of time and resources to prevent course failures and grade retentions and to nurture students' talents;
- **Career exploration.** This calls for ongoing occupational exploration and goal-setting activities that use appropriate role models and future-oriented exercises. It also involves guidance experiences that encourage students' college aspirations and provide them with information about the realistic steps toward different secondary and postsecondary options; and
- **Family affirmation.** This goes beyond the traditionally loose connection between home and school to involve new forms of partnerships with parents and the community to coordinate learning activities and reinforcements in each setting.

menting some of the essential components.

Demanding Curriculum Aimed at Active Learning

Evans Junior High School is implementing a common curriculum for all students that includes a weekly lab period in each major subject. The curriculum emphasizes a constructivist approach to instruction and encourages extensive use of technology. The school is using the *Literacy through Film* program, which promotes writing across the curriculum, literature reading, and open discussion of high-level questions. The films that are used portray events and people that influenced African-American history, and tie math and science to themes that are highly interesting to young adolescents.

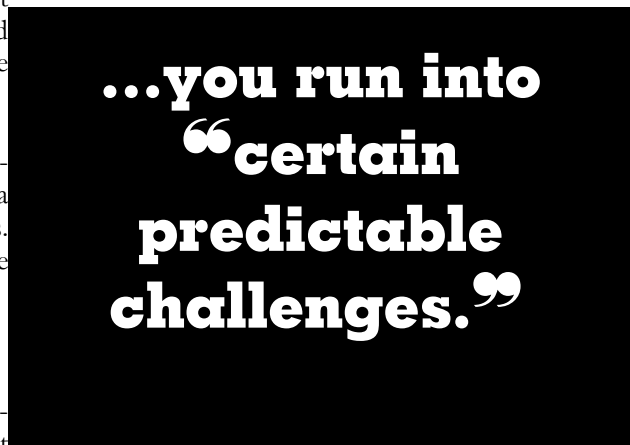
At Central East Middle School, all students are enrolled in high-track curricula in math, science, and social studies. Reading, literature, and language arts are covered as one subject.

Communal Organization of School

In too many middle schools, note Madhere and Mac Iver, “the teachers don’t know the students, the students don’t know the teachers, and there is no genuine opportunity for close, enduring student-teacher bonds to develop.”

Evans Junior High School is making organizational changes that address students’ needs for affiliation and help them see themselves as a community of learners. For example, in student-teacher grade-level weekly assemblies, students are publicly recognized for performance, behavior, and progress; are provided with strategies to help them cope with different situations; and are able to relate and discuss events or concerns that occurred during the week. The school also plans to integrate English, language arts, and reading courses, which will allow stronger bonds to develop between students and teachers—students will see one fewer teacher each day, and each Reading/English teacher will be responsible for about 50 less students each day. At Central East Middle School, which has established a semi-departmentalized,

interdisciplinary team core program, each student receives all his or her academic instruction from a two- or three-person interdisciplinary team—thus each student has greater opportunities to form stronger personal relationships with his or her teachers. Likewise, teachers are responsible for only 66 to 99 students each year, rather than the 165 or so they would have under full departmentalization, so they can form stronger relationships with their students. In many cases, the teacher interdisciplinary teams and their students stay together for more than one year, further promoting the building of strong relationships.



Detracking of Instruction

When you replace tracking with heterogeneous classrooms in which students work with a demanding higher-order curriculum, according to Madhere and Mac Iver, you run into “certain predictable challenges.” Some students will need frequent extra help within the classroom. Accountability measures need to motivate students by recognizing improvement. Peer support for achievement needs to replace anti-academic norms.

At both Evans Junior High and Central East, the use of cooperative learning instructional methods is a key to meeting these predictable challenges. These methods encourage help when needed from classmates, use improvement measures to show student growth in achievement, and encourage peer support for academic achievement of all students. Cooperative learning is being implemented at Evans in the fall and is well underway at Central East in the form of the Student Team

Reading and Student Team Writing programs. (Early results of the Student Team Reading program at Central East are described later.)

The Talent Development Middle School approach to student evaluation is designed to move low-achieving students step by step into the realms of higher achievement even as they confront tougher core curriculum classes. Focusing on meaningful improvement goals, this approach challenges all students with attainable goals, rewards them when they achieve the goals, and motivates them to achieve higher goals.

Guidance Experiences and Career Exploration

A Career Exploration/College Exploration program has begun at Evans Junior High School. Students have received a package that includes copies of the *College Digest* and a booklet on occupational interest exploration. This spring, students will complete a full self-assessment inventory of their interests and skills, using

the *Self-Directed Search* interest inventory and other instruments. This will be followed by a series of follow-up activities.

Advisors of 6th- and 7th-graders at Central East Middle School have begun leading their students through a series of specific lessons from the Talent Development Middle School’s *Career Exploration and Educational Decision-Making Course*. The course helps students engage in systematic self-assessment, make career and educational plans, gather occupational information, interview representatives of a wide variety of careers, identify suitable high school programs, and explore a wide variety of occupations.

Multi-Layered Pedagogy

Madhere and Mac Iver note another predictable challenge: Schools that institute a demanding core curriculum for all students need to “provide additional

support for students whose current proficiency is considerably below that of their classmates.”

At Central East Middle School, struggling students receive a substantial extra dose of instruction: these students are given an extra period of math or reading each day for ten weeks instead of their regularly scheduled electives.

Evans Junior High School has initiated an after-school tutoring effort called “Yes to Success,” to address a specific goal—preparing students in need for the upcoming administration of the CTBS.

Emphasis on Cultural Empowerment

Madhere and Mac Iver note a central operating assumption underlying the Talent Development framework: “...we must always begin with the assets that students, families, and communities bring to the educational process.” The programs and practices of Talent Development schools “respect and are sensitive to the integrity of individual children and the cultures from which they come.”

Both Evans and Central East are implementing cooperative learning, not only because of its research-based effects on achievement, but also because of its congruence with African American and Hispanic modes of learning. Both Evans and Central East also feature a pervasive use across the curriculum of literature and films whose authors and producers represent a wide variety of different cultures and groups.

Expectations for the Talent Development Middle School

Central East Middle School and Evans Junior High School have begun, in the 1995-96 school year, to implement the essential components of the Talent Development Middle School. These schools are already, according to Madhere and Mac Iver, “recognizably different from schools operating under the traditional ‘sorting’ paradigm.” They will become more different as the researchers and the school staffs collaborate over the next two years to complete the development of the model and evaluate the outcomes for students.

As the work proceeds, Madhere and Mac Iver expect to begin collaboration with other interested schools and, within five years, begin to move the Talent Development Middle School into a national program.

TALENT DEVELOPMENT MIDDLE SCHOOL: Implementation and Effects of the Student Team Reading Program

All of this is a tall order for a semester’s worth of implementation. But the analyses of survey responses from Central East (918 students from 34 classes) and from the control school (858 students from 38 RELA

The implementation and outcomes of the many Talent Development Middle School components that are underway at Evans and Central East will be evaluated closely in comparison to control schools. Early implementation and outcome data have already been collected to examine the beginning effects of the Student Team Reading program at Central East.

Teachers at Central East Middle School received training in the use of Student Team Reading in the summer of 1995 and began implementing the program in September. In February 1996, Mac Iver and his colleague Stephen Plank collected data about the degree of implementation and data on outcomes through the first semester for Central East and for its control school.

The Student Team Reading (STR) program, Mac Iver and Plank note, “changes both the instructional processes and the curriculum in middle grades reading, English, and language arts to create a conducive motivational climate...” They analyzed their semester’s worth of implementation and outcome data to see if, first, Central East teachers in reading, English, and language arts (RELA) classrooms were implementing STR and, second, if that implementation actually produced RELA classrooms where peer support for achievement is high, where student-teacher relations are positive, where students give their best and work hard to master the content and meet adults’ standards, and where students are confident both in their ability to learn and in the future utility of what they are doing.

classes) found significant effects of the Student Team Reading program on the motivational climate at Central East.

First, Mac Iver and Plank needed to determine that Central East teachers were implementing STR but control school teachers weren’t—not as clear-cut an issue as it sounds, because many Philadelphia schools use cooperative learning methods in their classrooms. In fact, one of the teachers in the control school used STR more frequently than any other teacher in any school. Nonetheless, the researchers found that implementation of STR was markedly greater at Central East on average.

Mac Iver and Plank then analyzed their survey data to determine effects of STR on ten measures of student perceptions—peer support for achievement, teacher caring, working to meet adult standards, the value of RELA classes for the future, effort, self-concept of ability, giving one’s best, the intrinsic value of RELA classes, anti-academic norms, and teachers’ respect for students.

Although STR had been implemented only for one semester, the use of the program was positively and significantly related to the first seven of the above ten outcomes. The significant effects ranged from about one-third to two-thirds of a standard deviation.

Thus the analyses of the effects of STR, Mac Iver and Plank note, indicate that the program’s use will “help Central East Middle School create ideal classroom conditions for developing the academic talents of middle school students....”

The researchers will continue to analyze STR effects (as well as effects of other components and the overall Talent Development model) as their work progresses at Central East.

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