

Talent Development Middle Schools in Philadelphia

URBAN MIDDLE SCHOOLS that serve high-poverty populations are often attended by large numbers of students who are multiple years behind grade level, staffed by inexperienced and under-supported teachers, and operate in a chaotic teaching and learning climate. As a result, few students obtain a rigorous and standards-based middle grades education and high levels of teacher turnover are the norm.

The Talent Development Middle School (TDMS) has been specifically designed to enable middle schools to engage students with rigorous curriculum and instruction, provide teachers with the support they need to develop deep content knowledge, and develop safe, nurturing, and challenging learning environments.

Since 1995, through a partnership with the Philadelphia Education Fund and the School District of Philadelphia, the Talent Development Middle School model has accomplished this in 12 challenging middle schools within the district: 1995—Central East; 1997—Cooke, Beeber; 1998—Shoemaker, Clemente; 1999—Strawberry Mansion, Roosevelt; 2001—Lewis, Edwin Vare, W. Pierce, Tilden, Penn Treaty.

There is significant achievement advantage to attending a TDMS school. Evaluations of the model have been conducted in seven Talent Development Middle Schools and their comparison schools. These evaluations provide strong evidence that full implementation of the model leads to substantial gains in student performance and improved morale for both students and staff. TDMS students on average have had achievement gains which are two to three times higher than the district average on the Pennsylvania State Student Assessment (PSSA) in 8th grade. These schools have also out-performed a matched set of demographically similar control schools.

The first two schools in Philadelphia to fully implement the Talent Development model were Central East and Cooke Middle Schools. Each school has significant achievement gains in mathematics, reading, and science. These gains have put both schools on trajectories to reach ambitious performance goals.

On multiple indexes and measures, Central East Middle School has exhibited strong and sustained achievement gains since the implementation of the TDMS model.

After two years in a Talent Development Middle School, students at Cooke Middle School had twice as much achievement growth in reading and mathematics as students in the control school.

TDMS students report high use of recommended reading strategies. On the most recent PSSA reading test, eighth graders were asked about the reading strategies they use. The results indicate that students in Talent Development Middle Schools are already employing many of the core strategies recommended in the School District of Philadelphia's ELA Scope and Sequence and Balanced Literacy documents.

Teachers give high marks to Talent Development Middle Schools' training and curriculum. Focus groups and interviews with 60 teachers in seven Talent Development Middle Schools conducted in February and March 2000 by independent researchers indicate that teachers are quite favorable when asked to evaluate Talent Development's professional development sessions, curriculum materials, and instructional approaches.

New teachers in particular found the support they receive is crucial to their professional growth as teachers.

The researchers have also found evidence of a notable positive impact of the TDMS model on pedagogy, content, and learning environment. They compared Central East to five other schools not using the model and concluded that the model has produced "greater consistency in pedagogy, content, and environment...[and] a greater emphasis on mastering challenging content."