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2005

A Year of **Transformation**
in the Lives of Ohio's Urban
High School Students

THE TIPPING POINT IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

KnowledgeWorks Foundation is on a mission. Our staff and our partners won't rest until every high school student in this state graduates ready to excel in higher education or a competitive career.

To achieve this end, we are focusing the majority of our efforts and resources on dramatically improving Ohio's high schools. We're beginning with some of this state's largest, lowest-performing urban campuses and districts. Our ultimate goal is to create a tipping point that revolutionizes teaching, learning, resources, structures and, most importantly, outcomes, in one of this nation's most sacred icons—the American high school.

The stories captured on the following pages do not share statistical evidence, or instructional strategies; those will emerge later, well after the first year. The purpose of this publication is to chronicle stories of a quest that has just begun, an arduous quest to redesign a high school, and to establish a community.

KnowledgeWorks Foundation knows these new small schools have a very long way to go in a very short period of time if they are to set the standard for high performing high schools in this state. These stories give us hope. They are the first chapter in a revolutionary tale, and are points of light in a dim urban high school landscape.



President & CEO Chad P. Wick



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RIGOR IS PRIORITY

One of the goals of the Ohio High School Transformation Initiative is to offer all students a rigorous and relevant curriculum that inspires them to achieve. Aligned with state standards, this curriculum combines non-traditional teaching methods and scheduling, providing students with challenging and exciting learning opportunities while still in high school. Elements that encourage innovative learning include:

- Schools that infuse real-world learning opportunities from business, leadership, the arts, or other areas into core subjects in a way that generates excitement
- Non-traditional scheduling with longer class periods so students and teachers can be involved in project-based learning, discussion, and research that leads to deeper thinking and understanding
- Hands-on opportunities to apply knowledge through innovative projects and off-campus, community-based learning opportunities
- Teaching methods that are beyond the traditional “stand and deliver” lecturing style supported by the more than 30,000 hours of professional development provided by the initiative



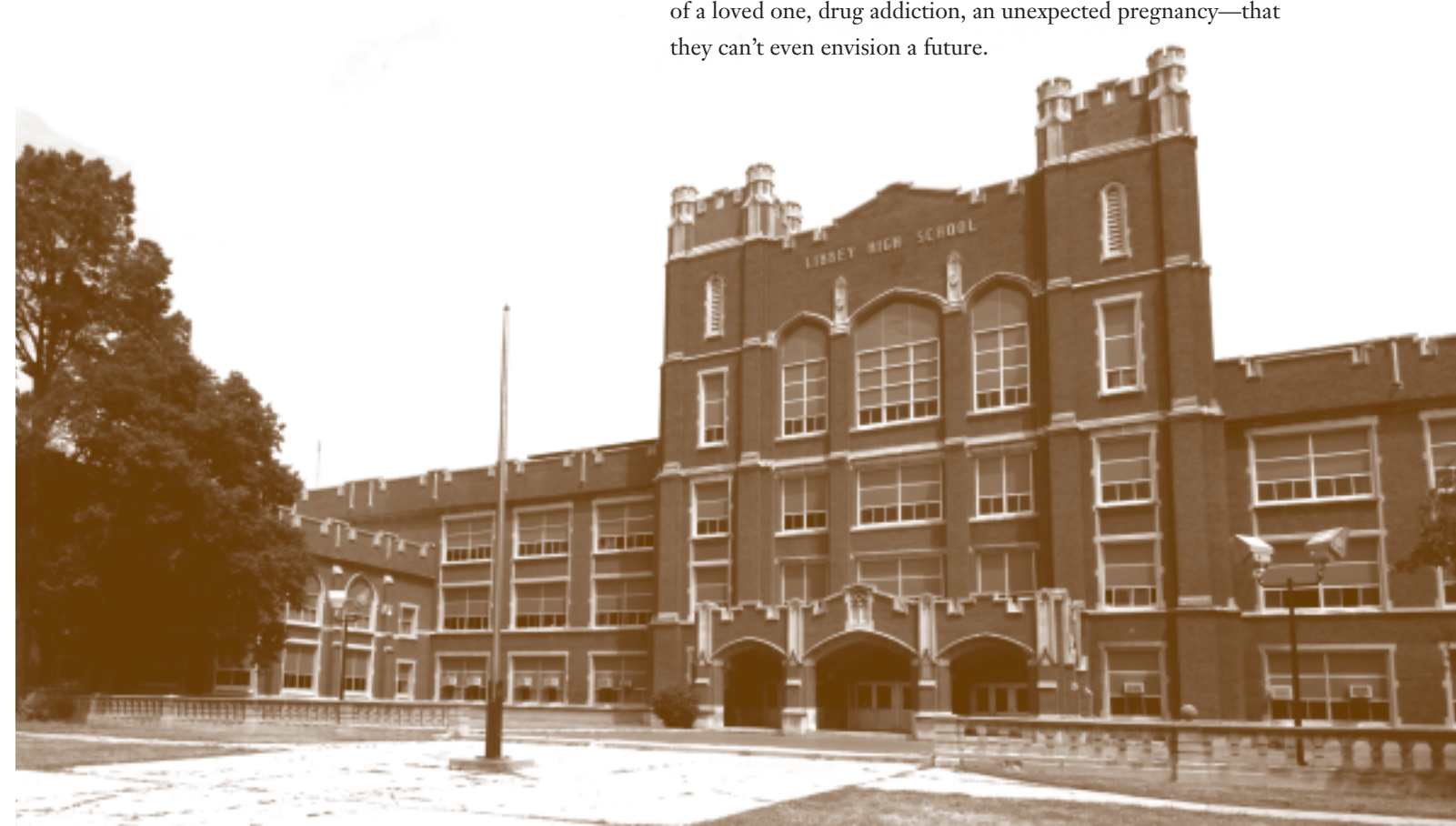
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Open any high school yearbook and you'll see pictures that you would never see in the real world—they just aren't possible.

Idyllic, these scenes belong to a place in time that can never be replicated: The beautiful cheerleader caught without make-up in the locker room; the marching band drummer trying for one last shot at coolness his senior year by sporting unsanctioned black sunglasses with his uniform.

These images typify the Americana high school experience that many of us remember. The romantic view is that high school was a time when dreams were possible; everything was at least possible, even if it never came true in the end.

But for some students, these pictures are just a distant fantasy. For students in Ohio's large impersonal urban schools, in particular, just graduating can seem like an impossible dream. Some find themselves in high schools where the graduation rate is not bragged about and celebrated but used as a barometer for the projected population rate at the nearest correctional institute. Other students are dealing with such loss—the death of a loved one, drug addiction, an unexpected pregnancy—that they can't even envision a future.



2005

EDUCATION IS THE SOLUTION

There is no magic solution to this problem. Trying to get students who are dealing with these issues “excited about education” is challenging. However, education is the most accessible solution for helping them overcome the obstacles in their lives.

In 2002, our Foundation joined with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and others, to help students begin imagining possibilities for the future. Together we invested what would eventually become more than \$50 million to Ohio’s urban schools through the Ohio High School Transformation Initiative, an aggressive high school reform effort that has converted 18 large, underperforming urban high school campuses across the state into 58 new small schools, where students receive personal attention from teachers. We expect to open 10 more over the next year. Never before has such a large scale conversion been attempted, but such a transformation is necessary for Ohio if we want to achieve our goal of creating a tipping point in high school reform—an opportunity for a tiny percentage of educators to transform a decades-old system. The same year we opened these 58 new schools across Ohio, we also invested nearly \$3 million, through a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, toward the development of an Ohio-based network of up to 10 Early College high schools. These schools give students the opportunity to graduate with not only a high school diploma but also an associate’s degree or up to 60 hours of college credit.

EDUCATORS WORK TO OVERCOME OBSTACLES

This summer marks the end of the first year of operation for these 58 Transformation schools and two Early College High Schools, a year that alternated between the hope and chaos typical of overwhelming change. The creators of these schools were just people, with years of experience and stalwart hearts, working sometimes 80 hours a week to dismantle and transform a decades-old system. In the pages of this yearbook are stories of the leaders, teachers, and students involved. They document moments of hope and gratitude, struggle and despair; they show more possibility and challenge than many involved could have ever imagined. Told by freelance writers who were

in these schools on-site from the day they opened, these stories describe schools struggling toward growth, and they paint yearbook portraits of a very different kind than those described earlier.

“...we are not failing all of our students—we are only failing some of them, and we have rationalized this as normal.”

Rather than a student council that is planning dances and bake sales, there is a Student Leadership Team that is planning and catering staff luncheons to tackle teacher indifference and inaction related to the small schools’ effort. There is a small school leader who chooses to wear a smile instead of the stereotypically stern expression of an authority figure, who is available to help students dealing with every issue from Ohio Graduation Testing to sexual harassment, during her weekly advisory session. At another high school, there are students who are experiencing innovative, interdisciplinary education, many for the first time. They are becoming so immersed in an 11-day unit on “The Face of Adversity: World War II,” that they’re driven to write poetry. Asked to complete the task of finishing the sentence, “In the face of adversity, one must...,” one student writes, “Be strong...Have faith....Believe...Remember.”

SMALL MOMENTS REVEAL OVERWHELMING CHANGE

Some of these moments would occur in any large, urban high school where the teachers have the time and structure to form strong relationships with their students and create innovative learning opportunities. But most high school teachers aren’t given the time, or structure, to engage at this level. Hundreds of students and a rigid schedule prevent teachers from collaborating on interdisciplinary units and truly getting to know their students on a one-on-one basis. Ideally, as smaller schools dismantle the system that has created these limitations, in its place they create the flexibility and structure that enables all teachers to collaborate and develop relationships with all students, not just a privileged few.

Some of the moments in the pages that follow are small, but their significance is large; it is sometimes just a brief interaction between teacher and student that can begin to shift a pattern in that student’s life. These are snapshots of schools immersed in transformation and the leaders, students, and teachers who are making that possible.

Welcome to our yearbook.



A ROMANTIC ICON, A GRIM REALITY

Our romantic notions of the high school experience sometimes deter us from changing an inadequate system that has isolated many. This system, which was antiquated even when we were in school, is even more outdated now. It's a system modeled after the Industrial Age, but it's preparing students for the Information Age and beyond.

It's no surprise that this system is failing Ohio's students. Lack of engagement, low achievement, and low graduation rates are the norm in our state's urban high schools; only 7 in 10 students graduate, 5 in 10 enroll in college, and less than 3 in 10 complete a bachelor's degree within 10 years.

THE SYSTEM IS ONLY FAILING SOME

But a truth even more disturbing than these statistics is that we are not failing all of our students—we are only failing some of them, and we have rationalized this as normal. Ohio's graduation rate is especially low among African American and Hispanic populations; only 52% of African Americans and 61% of Hispanics graduate each year. Even more disappointing is the fact that only 12% of students in these populations are considered college ready, the second lowest rate in the nation. We can't ignore these problems and still function as a state.



THE TRANSFORMATION IS SERVING ALL

In 2002, our Foundation worked with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Ohio and U.S. Departments of Education, the Ford Foundation, and other local community-based foundations, to invest what would eventually become more than \$50 million to Ohio's high schools to change this situation. The effort took 18 of Ohio's largest urban high school campuses—with populations of about 1000-2000 students—and transformed them into 58 new small schools of no more than 400 students. With 30 years of research behind the small schools model, the initiative showed promise. Other states had formed small school models that successfully improved student performance, reduced violence, and increased student graduation rates, but none had attempted such a large-scale, statewide conversion.

Until the Ohio High School Transformation Initiative, schools had been redesigned district by district, meaning that only a few hundred students at a time were helped. At such a slow rate, it can take generations to transform an education system. Many of the school administrators in Ohio felt that our state didn't have that much time. As a result, our Foundation decided to transform 10 districts at a time instead, helping 25,000 instead of a few hundred.

That same year, we also partnered with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to open a second and third Early College High School, adding to a network that will eventually become 10 high schools across the state. These high schools allow disadvantaged students to graduate from high school with an associate's degree or up to 60 hours of college credit.

THE NEW SYSTEM EMPHASIZES "RIGOR, RELEVANCE, AND RELATIONSHIPS"

Our vision for both of these initiatives was a school system that replaced the three outmoded R's—'reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic—with rigor, relevance, and relationships. Grounded in the belief that real, lasting learning is the result of relationships—of making dynamic connections among people, places, resources, and ideas—these new schools would emphasize a rigorous curriculum that adhered to state standards but was also rewarding to teach, challenging to learn, and as relevant to students' lives as the movies they chose to see and the music they loaded on to their iPods. These new schools would support teachers by offering more professional development and work with community organizations to create innovative, off-site learning opportunities. They would replace the traditional "stand and deliver" lecturing style with dynamic facilitation and project-based learning that taught to multiple intelligences. And they would offer themes such as leadership and business that would inspire students to achieve in an area for which they had passion.

Perhaps the most hopeful aspect of the Ohio Transformation Initiative was that innovative learning opportunities formerly available only to a select, elite group of students would now be available to all of Ohio's students.

OUR FOUNDATION'S ROLE: FUNDING AND GUIDING THE CHANGE

But the transformation would involve an incredible amount of restructuring, as the old system was dismantled. In response to this need, our Foundation offered these 58 new small schools guidance from some of the best small school experts in the country, support from a solid community partner, a total of more than 30,000 hours in professional development, \$15.5 million in direct grants to schools, and \$30 million in technical assistance.

But in many ways, the schools we funded were very much on their own. Each small school that received funding had to adhere to an autonomous governance structure, meaning that each was given complete control over the school's individual budget, hiring, scheduling, assignments, and other resources. With little experience restructuring a high school, these small groups of leaders and educators struggled to learn an entirely different way of teaching and leading within an entirely new structure.

The challenge continues, as 10 new small high schools open in fall of 2005. We believe Ohio will continue to take charge of this great challenge.

At Toledo's Libbey High School, the transformation has converted an impersonal institution of 1017 students into four smaller schools, each with an autonomous governance structure. This autonomy has empowered teachers to enforce discipline based on their personal knowledge of students, instead of predetermined, one-size-fits-all rules. Breaking from tradition, co-leader Kathy Stone soon becomes friend, confidant, and a natural disciplinarian.

Libbey High School



TOLEDO, OH: HOW THE WEST WAS WON: STRUGGLE AND SUCCESS AT THE COWBOY ACADEMY OF BUSINESS

by Peggie Cypher

FALL: The First Day of School

The first thing you notice upon approaching Toledo's Libbey High School is the police car parked in front. Then you see the majestic building circa 1923—a crown jewel of this African-American and Hispanic neighborhood. The streets surrounding the school are less than regal; the houses run down, the yards unkempt.

On the first day of the new Libbey—a day that took two years of planning to arrive—there was no fanfare welcoming students to the new small schools. Boys in baggy, below-the-waist jeans and girls in tight ones seemed oblivious to the change. They wandered back and forth searching for classrooms. Others congregated by the bathrooms, munching chips and Cheetos. Everywhere songs and rap rang out.

A parent walked up to a hall monitor. "Where's the office?" she asked, puzzled. "Which school?" he said. "They got four of them now."

In the Cowboy Academy of Business (CAB) school—one of four new small schools on the transformed Libbey campus—Kathy Stone, veteran teacher and co-leader, pounded away on the computer as if life depended on it. In a way it did.

Many lives.

The state of Ohio grade card placed Libbey in "academic emergency," because it met only two of the 12 indicators for success. Attendance is 89%, graduation rate only 65%. Stone had no time to waste.

Outside her door, a small boy in a FUBU jersey paced. He sighed loudly. "What do you need, honey?" Stone called from the computer, her voice soft, her smile big and welcoming.

"I've walked around this school 500 times," he said. "I'm so tired. I can't find my room." Stone ushered him into her office.

For Stone, the most exciting aspect of small schools is the prospect of building relationships with the students. "Relationships are the key component," she said. "Some of our kids lack positive relationship with adults."

Stone examined the student's schedule. "You're supposed to go to keyboarding," she explained. The boy looked confused. "You've got the

wrong day. Today is a red day on block scheduling.” She continued to chat with the student—like an advisor, a friend.

“On my first day of high school, I was confused, too.” Stone confessed. “I went to a classroom and some kid accused me of being in his seat. It turns out I was in the right classroom but in the wrong hour.”

The boy’s face eased as Stone wrote him a pass. Their conversation ended, but for Stone it was only the beginning of what she hoped would become a positive four-year relationship with one of her 250 students. This reduced number would allow her and co-leader Gayle Schaber to get to know the students; to identify their strengths and weaknesses; and to chart them on their educational course. In turn, it would allow students to feel connected to those charged with overseeing their education.

At least, that was the theory.

Rough Beginnings

In reality, most of those relationships in the first few weeks started off on the wrong foot. The CAB office was crowded with students who had been fighting, cursing, and wearing gang beads. Even a parent paraded into the office, angry because her daughter, Shawna, had lost her bus privileges for acting out on the ride to school. The mother shouted at Stone, whose soft voice and welcoming smile did little to soothe her.

Each morning students surrounded the secretary’s desk chanting an all too familiar mantra, “I didn’t do it.”

“Back on your side of the desk,” the gruff woman said. During these first weeks, the reconstructed CAB office had no counter.

Throughout the day students drifted into the office. More fighting. More cursing. More tardiness. In between offenses the leaders worked on scheduling, attendance, data entry, and monitoring the halls and cafeteria with two-way radios in hand.

...Kathy Stone, veteran teacher and co-leader, pounded away on the computer as if life depended on it. In a way it did. Many lives.

In September, a bomb threat was called in. Stone and Schaber, accompanied by police officers, searched each classroom and closet. While bomb threats are rare, they represent the complex challenges the co-leaders must meet in an urban school.

Police officer Hobbe, who is assigned to the building, believed that having a central discipline office with one dean—the way it was last year—would cut down on some of the offenses. A small number of teachers agreed with him. At an early faculty meeting, a young teacher raised her hand and asked why a student in one small school was suspended for saying motherf---er and a student in another school only got detention.

The answer was autonomy. And Stone embraced it.

Discipline Challenges

By handling referrals themselves, Stone and Schaber became familiar with the students, their parents, and their issues. The leaders took an aggressive, hands-on approach to discipline. First, they asked for the student’s side of the story and then, depending on the offense, either issued a warning or contacted the parents immediately.

Yet equally as important as handling their own discipline referrals, Stone and Schaber knew they must show a positive appearance in the school. Each morning the leaders stood outside of the CAB office to greet students. “We want to show them our presence,” Stone said. “Often times kids in high school have little contact with their principals.”

They also devised a plan to visit each CAB classroom and personally introduce themselves to students. One fall morning, Schaber interrupted a sophomore English class reviewing a grammar lesson. Some students stared into space. Others slept.

Schaber waltzed over to the board and wrote down her name. “Good morning. Let me tell you about myself.” A few students popped their heads up. Schaber continued. “The person I love most is my son. He graduated in 1989. If I would have sent the person I love most to Toledo Public Schools, I believe the school would have given him everything he needed.” She unrolled a yellow banner with the word “Responsibility.” “It’s all about ‘I’. I’m making good choices for me. Here’s some tips to help you succeed....”

“And by the way,” Schaber added. “I don’t respond to ‘man’. It’s a shock to my parents who think they have a daughter.” Some students smiled. Some giggled. All had their eyes wide open.

WINTER: “HE CAN CAUSE YOU GRAY HAIR”

The streets surrounding Libbey were gray and slushy. Inside the CAB, office floors reflected winter’s residue. Students waited patiently, a counter now separating them from the secretary.

Stone, in CAB polo shirt with a Toledo Federation of Teacher’s key ring, worked quietly at her desk. A boy strolled into her office like it’s his own living room. “Can I get a whatchamacallit for being good?”

“Next week,” Stone replied. “If I don’t see you in here one more time.”



LIBBEY CAMPUS

Location: West Toledo

BEFORE REDESIGN

- Enrollment: 1017
- Percent of students who agreed that their old high school was overcrowded: 35.3
- Percent of students who agreed “my teachers care about and listen to me”: 32

AFTER REDESIGN

One High School Becomes Four Small Schools

- Enrollment: 200-250 students (per school)

Schools include:

- Cowboy Academy of Business
- Gateway Academy
- Humanities Academy
- Smart Academy



“Relationships are the key component... Some of our kids lack positive relationships with adults.”

“That’s James,” she explained. “The last two days I’ve had him in here for two out of the four class periods. I don’t know that keeping him out of class is the answer. Out of 250 students in our school, five are always in the office losing out on education.”

Handling discipline remained the biggest concern among the campus-wide faculty. A group of teachers marched out of the monthly meeting because school leaders refused to address their issues; among them, the need for consistent discipline policies and a central office. With a central discipline office for all four schools, Stone feared her students would get “lost” and their problems left unresolved. And for Stone, getting “lost” was not an option.

James stepped back in the office. “Can I go to the bathroom?”

“Go sit down outside, James,” Stone commanded. She held up James’ referral record—both sides were full. “I’ve met with his parents,” she said. “Nothing has changed. He can cause you gray hair. But I will get him some sort of prize if he’s good.”

Saving “Lost” Students

In a short amount of time, Stone had gotten to know many students like James. They were students who were not violent or malicious but who often arrived to school late, dirty, and unfed. They were unable to sit and pay attention, unable to bring pencils and books to class, unable to stop poking the person sitting in front of them. It was these students who Stone hoped to reach in the new small schools model. It was these students she didn’t want to see “lost.”

On the bright side, Stone had also gotten to know many students like Liticia. She was a CAB sophomore who was on the honor role and a member of the University of Toledo’s Gear Up program. Liticia was also a representative on CAB’s Student Governance Committee, which was set up to give students and community members a voice in the direction of the small school. According to Stone, Liticia provided a much-needed perspective. When the committee came up with an idea, Liticia was not shy to tell them why, from a student’s point of view, it would or would not work. So far, Stone said, Liticia had been right on.

Listening to the student’s point of view is something Stone is used to. Every week for 45 minutes she met with 15 students in an advisory session. This advisory helped students establish at least one relationship with an adult in the building, since teachers and administrators served as advisors. Stone’s class met in the basement woodshop and discussed everything from Ohio Graduation Testing to peer conflict to sexual harassment. It was a chance for students to open up and speak frankly about their experiences. For most students, it was also a novel way to interact with an authority figure. For Stone, it was a successful way to get to know the students.

Although slightly less intimate, an unexpected place of bonding happens in the cafeteria. While the space was once dreaded by Kathy because of the noise and chaos, the co-leaders implemented a rule requiring students to remain seated the last 15 minutes of lunch. The result is that students talked to each other and their leaders.

Stone and Schaber went from table to table with the trash barrel making a point to converse. “It’s a neutral time,” said Stone. “We’re not saying anything negative. We tease some kids about their bagel, cream cheese, and Cheeto sandwiches,” says Stone. “And there’s one young man I’m always trying to find a girlfriend. ‘Check her out,’ I say. Or ‘over there, you’d like her.’”

SPRING: LEAVING THE PARTY EARLY

During the spring quarter, the ground surrounding Libbey was brown and muddy, yet the budding forsythia seemed to foreshadow the slow but sure progress of the small schools.

Near the front doors of the school, students in jeans and hooded sweatshirts gathered for a field trip. Liticia had organized the students to attend a FLOC (Farm Labor Organizing Committee) Freedom and Justice rally in the neighborhood. “There were so many that signed up,” Liticia said with a smile, “we had to order a bus.”

In front of the CAB office, under their new wooden sign, Stone and Schaber greeted students as usual. Students returned the salutations, no longer oblivious to the small schools or the leaders who guide them.

When the bell rang, students dissipated and Stone stationed herself at the front counter of the CAB office to issue tardy notices. But even this routine chore became another opportunity to chat with students, to let them know she’s there, that she cares.

Stone set her two-way radio down and opened the tardy records. A tall boy sauntered in.

“Anthony, you’re tardy. And someone as smart as you!” Stone said. “I saw you got an A in English. You know how hard English teachers can be. I used to teach English.”

She marked down his tardy and issued a pass. He left with tardy slip in hand and a smile on his face.

Next, a young man was sent in for using foul language with his teacher.

“Tell me what happened,” said Stone, seeking to hear his view of things.

“I wasn’t talking to her,” said the student. “I was mumbling to another kid. I said excuse me. I didn’t know she’d get all upset.”

Stone thought for a moment but did not peel off a detention slip. “OK. Later, you could apologize to your teacher?” The student nodded and was on his way.





Stone issued more tardies, and she and Schaber headed downstairs to the advisory session. It was the last time they would meet this year, so it became a time of celebration instead of the usual work. Drinks and donuts were passed out. Schaber started a game of Bingo with the students and passed out candy prizes. She then informed them that this was really called “stealing Bingo” and that now any future winner could steal someone else’s candy. Students drank and ate, joked, yelled Bingo, and took guilty pleasure in taking their neighbors’ Nestle Crunch Bars.

Stone regrettably had to leave the party to do hall guard duties. She snapped a few photos and departed. “The population of Libbey is transient,” she said. “I hope we can keep the same group of kids together next year. That would be a good thing. Providing relationships where kids have someone to come to is essential.”

Next year, Stone has additional plans for the CAB students. She’d like the CAB school to host a weekly activity after school—including events like test preparation, exercising, or drawing with sidewalk chalk. It doesn’t matter. It’s the group identity that counts, the cohesion, the getting to know one another. It’s what puts the “relationship” into small schools.

Discipline Problems: A Cry for Companionship?

The remaining weeks of the school year brought tufts of cottonwood in the air and a calmer, more relaxed Stone. She was no longer pounding at her computer. “My job is 100% easier,” she said, emptying her pockets of confiscated cell phones. The reason, Stone believed, was CAB’s policy of personally relating to students—which is much more difficult in a larger traditional school setting. “I’m always talking to students and talking to their parents,” Stone said. She recounted how just a moment earlier she counseled a student with a personal problem. “Her tears are still on the floor,” Stone said, pointing to a small pool in front of her chair.

By 9 a.m. it was not unusual for Stone to have talked to three parents on the phone. Recently one of those parents was Shawna’s mother, the woman who gave Stone a hard time in the fall about her daughter’s revoked bus pass. What started out on the wrong foot has become right. Stone mediated a dispute between Shawna and another student in her class. “I had them sign an agreement of what they will and will not do to each other. Now both Shawna and her mom are happy with the resolution.”

Of course, not all problems are so easily resolved. James still regularly gets sent to the CAB office and has even been suspended. “His work is over there on that table, waiting,” Stone said. “I think he comes to the office because he wants someone to talk to.”

The Sizeable Effects of Small Talk

One measure of CAB’s success could be James having someone to talk to; or the sheer number of other students who drop by the office after school to hang out with Stone. “It’s so many that I have a hard time getting any work done,” she laughed.



But Stone is getting work done. While she admits she doesn’t have all the answers to helping students like James or for raising Libbey’s academic standing, she does know a few things for certain. She knows that change is slow and that small talk in the cafeteria, the halls, in her office, or on the phone can lead to not-so-small results.

For Stone, there is no turning back. “The old Libbey was not working,” she says emphatically. “We had to do something.”

So tomorrow and the next day and next year and the one after, that “something” will include Stone and Schaber leading their advisory session, collecting trash in the cafeteria, and standing in the hallway of their small school greeting students. “Just to let them know we’re here,” Stone says. “We’re always here.”



Peggie Cypher is a freelance writer, former educator, and mother of three children. She has been published in Mothering, Woman's Day, and Ladies' Home Journal, among other publications.

“The old Libbey was not working... We had to do something.”

Lorain Early College High School

At Lorain County Early College High School, teachers were sometimes given the flexibility to create innovative, powerful interdisciplinary units that, at times, were just as challenging as the courses offered to high school students by Lorain County Community College. One, titled “The Face of Adversity: World War II,” succeeded in not only engaging but moving students.



ELYRIA, OH: PLAYING BINGO AT LORAIN EARLY COLLEGE HIGH SCHOOL

by Charu Gupta

Roslyn Valentine felt it was more than just her job to make sure Lorain County’s Early College High School was a success. After all, the 52-year-old small school leader had something in common with her new charges. She, too, had grown up among the working poor, though in a small town on the edges of Appalachia, far from Elyria. And she had been a first-generation college student—something she hoped all her new students would become.

Valentine was taking the reins of an unprecedented experiment in this low-income, former manufacturing hub in a now lost corner of northeast Ohio. If the students in this previously uncharted school were to follow in her footsteps—be the first in their families to attend college and thereby help the region pull itself out of a 30-year economic slump—Valentine would have to make sure Lorain Early College was nothing like its local counterparts.

At the area public high school, it was no surprise if 350 or so seniors graduated, even though nearly 700 ninth graders had been enrolled four years earlier. With the aim of raising graduation rates and increasing college attendance, the school district gave its blessing, along with Lorain County Community College (LCCC) and KnowledgeWorks Foundation officials, to establish the Lorain Early College High School on the campus of LCCC. Sixty freshmen started in the fall of 2004.

FIRST TASK: HIRE THE TOP 10% OF THE TEACHING CORPS

Valentine was waiting for them. Her low, raspy tones belied her capacity for urgency and action. It was her hands that revealed them, moving frequently to her forehead, patting a neatly cropped hairdo.

A veteran educator and hardened administrator, one who had worked in public schools for almost 30 years, Valentine was a tough sell on yet another set of education reforms. She had seen so many changes come and go that the small schools concept was just another pendulum swing. For Valentine, there were other balls in the air she needed to keep a close eye on; mainly literacy and student interaction.



LORAIN COUNTY EARLY COLLEGE CAMPUS

Location: Elyria

Unlike the other small schools supported by this initiative, Lorain Early College High School was not a conversion but an invention. An entirely new school, Lorain ECHS admitted students from Elyria City Schools its first year and will admit students from Lorain City Schools next year. Leaving large, impersonal urban schools, these students will now have the opportunity to learn in a smaller, more personalized environment—and gain college credit in the process.

BEFORE START-UP

Elyria City High School:

- Enrollment: 1771 students
- Percent of students who agreed that their old high school was overcrowded: 85.5
- Percent of students who agreed “my teachers care about and listen to me”: 38.3

Lorain City Schools (Admiral King and Southview):

- Enrollment: Southview—1270 students
Admiral King—1575 students
- Percent of students who agreed that their old high school was overcrowded: 40.1
- Percent of students who agreed “my teachers care about and listen to me”: 30.4

AFTER START-UP

Lorain Early College High School:

- Enrollment: 60 students

Her first agenda item was to hire teachers. She started with two instructors; Jeff Gott for social studies and Rosey Wagner for English and counseling. Gott, 33, the youngest and greenest of the group with only one year of teaching under his belt, was easy going and preferred to work alone. After graduating high school, Gott had treated leather hides for 10 years. It showed in his calloused hands and work ethic. He was now a full-time teacher, but still cured hides twice a week after school—partly for the extra money, partly because he hated being idle.

Wagner was a 43-year-old bundle of energy. She gestured grandly to grasp meaning and explain the essence of things. She laughed with her mouth wide open, her chin tucked into her neck, her soft, wavy, shoulder-length brown hair falling forward. Wagner was getting her counseling certificate while she taught English. “It helps if kids see you’re interested in what they are—the rapport enters into the classroom too,” Wagner said.

Then, many weeks later, came Gwen Gilmore, a pastor and adjunct faculty in LCCC’s math department. She was hired into the district to be Early College’s math teacher. With a “do your best but be better” mentality, Gilmore was a pep rally in slacks.

“What is Early College?” Gilmore said the question out loud, knowing she didn’t yet have the official answer. “This is Early College,” she said, pointing to the table she was sitting at. “What we’re doing is Early College. We may have to fine-tune things... Nothing good comes without a struggle.”

A science teacher remained to be found. There were no candidates from the school district, so LCCC went hunting among its rank and file. They hired Julie Cordonnier, an adjunct science professor, to teach physical science and biology. Cordonnier was a true believer in the Baldrige system—one that measures students early, tailors instruction to meet different learning styles, and gives students tools to chart their own progress, also known as student-directed learning. She taught only three days a week but quickly became the creative go-to for ideas gleaned off her training.

Valentine’s first order of business was complete. She had found a group of Early College teachers that would have been in the top 10% of a regular high school’s teaching corps. That’s because of “how they spoke about students and instruction,” Valentine said. “It wasn’t about content but about how you help students understand the information. And the excitement they showed about what they had done in the classroom.” These teachers were process-focused and student-oriented. They were willing to make a connection and then think about how to extend that bond, she said. Valentine was also excited. Here was a chance to work with the best.

In past years as an administrator, Valentine had tried alternative methods, like interdisciplinary units. Whatever KnowledgeWorks Foundation thought Early College was or should be, Valentine knew she had to somehow bring such techniques to the fore, to plan ahead and make sure they were done well. Teachers were also aware of the need for long-term planning. No one, however, realized just how difficult it would be to find the time to do so.

HIGH SCHOOL FRESHMEN START COLLEGE

The LCCC campus is an oasis of fountains, tree-lined grounds, and state-of-the-art facilities in science and technology. Located on the northeastern edge of Elyria—about 30 miles west of Cleveland—the college is just miles from downtown Elyria, a rundown mix of single-story houses, smoky bars and an almost 200-year-old high school, a place where leaks and poor heating are a matter of course.

Efforts to boost college attendance rates and increase the number of bachelor’s and master’s degrees have made LCCC a key linchpin in the county’s economic future. And there is a long way to go. Elyria residents, on average, have among the lowest household incomes in the county, which in turn has some of the lowest incomes in the region.

Though Early College staff knew little about the small school reforms of the Gates and KnowledgeWorks Foundation, they did know what was at stake in Lorain County—and how to be effective teachers. They knew how to communicate with students, get deep into their lives, and offer up their time and support. As Early College opened its doors, the student interaction piece quickly fell into place.

During a summer orientation, Valentine cemented her style. A counselor was trying to get a point across. Mind over matter, he urged, as a student desperately but futilely plunged a straw into a potato for the second time. Everyone watched in near silence as the student tried once again. This time the straw went through. Mission accomplished; the counselor started to move on. But Valentine stopped him. There was an important message she wanted the students to understand first.

“What did you learn from that?” Valentine asked a room filled with 60 students.

“Confidence,” some students said in unison.

“Good answer,” Valentine said, “but what else?”

“You can do something that seems impossible,” came another reply.

“Really good answer,” Valentine kept going. “But what else?”

“If you fail, try again,” said a girl in front of the room.

Valentine paused, then smiled.

Bingo.

For Valentine, it was also a personal mantra and one worth repeating. Valentine asked the student to stand up, turn around, and say it again to the class.

Valentine’s demeanor was endearing her to the teachers as well. Together for only a few weeks, their rapport was already uncannily strong.

Evidence of this came the very first day. Schedules had already changed, one classroom had no chairs, and neither students nor teachers knew where to go when. But none of the teachers had complained.

Valentine assembled the small staff briefly in the empty math classroom. Her best decision to date, she told them, had been her choice of



Gott, still worried about losing his job to cuts, had to teach a remedial class he had taken on at the regular high school.



teachers. “It’s going really well,” she said. “We haven’t lost anyone yet.” Valentine meant both students and teachers. “You guys are doing an amazing job.”

The teachers wanted to share the credit. Each told Valentine how she had carried so much on her shoulders.

“No, all I’ve done is delegate,” Valentine replied. “You guys have really taken on leadership and the responsibility for making things happen.”

Part of that was simply the energy of new places and faces. Another part of it was the smallness of it all. Wagner looked forward to finally implementing, among other things, an inter-disciplinary unit—something that before had been hindered by the more faraway bureaucracy of Elyria City Schools.

NOT EVERY PROFESSOR IS WELCOMING

In the first few days of school, teachers often found themselves in the “control room”—a grey concrete 15’ x 15’ square filled with a refrigerator, coffee maker, office supplies, text books, and round table. They came down here, from an alcove of four classrooms above, during two hours in the morning when students went off to introductory college classes in health, computer applications, and music. (These were introductory college classes offered on campus and taught by professors. Such courses made up about half of the freshman Early College schedule. Students would slowly ease into more difficult classes, until their entire junior and senior years were filled with tougher requirements like chemistry, algebra, and humanities electives.)

With most students away, mornings were supposed to be set aside as a planning time for teachers, and preferably a time they could collaborate on teaching projects.

In staff meetings early on, Valentine had invited teachers to pioneer teaching strategies and take initiative in curriculum planning. If their new ideas didn’t work, they would find out why as a team. Valentine wanted teachers to occasionally bend the 50-minute class periods into block schedules that would allow for longer science labs or field trips. With block schedules, classes meet on alternating days and for longer times. This gives students more time to think and engage in active learning during class.

But teachers had barely found their way to the gray concrete work space, when Valentine all but ran through college hallways to find them. She had just sat in on the college computer class students were taking. Things didn’t look good. Valentine hustled into the square room. The bagels, muffins, and grapes she had brought in that morning were still on the table.

The computer instructor was overwhelming the students with more than 70 complex technology terms to learn in just a few days, Valentine told the teachers. (It was the start of a pattern of high, college-level expectations that would continue throughout the year.)

“She’s told them that she’s going to repeat everything only once,” Valentine said, slightly in shock. “That’s not going to work; these are 13- and 14-year-olds. They’re going to need more.”

Gilmore, the math teacher, covered her mouth with her hand. “There’s someone who didn’t want to teach high school students,” she said.

Perhaps it was a scare tactic, Valentine countered. Science teacher Cordonnier thought the college instructor might be establishing ground rules.

Valentine had no say in how community college professors conducted their classes. She regrouped.

“What is in our control is helping these kids manage that workload,” she said. “What we need to do now is help them establish study skills. More than content over the next few days, I want you to help them figure out what they need to do and how they’re going to do it.”

The four teachers nodded in agreement. They knew they would have to act quickly to improve students’ reading levels and comprehension if they were to keep up with their college counterparts. Weeks into the first semester, the two-hour morning planning periods turned into student study groups that teachers monitored. Prep time was shifted to after school.

THE LEARNING CURVE GROWS FOR EDUCATORS

But nothing seemed to gel that first semester, especially not with the study groups.

Teachers spent most of their time trying to coax students into studying for the college computer class. A word wall of computer terms went up in each classroom. The English teacher walked around the room and begged students to at least take out their textbooks.

It soon became clear that the student study groups needed more structure if they were to give students skills to cope with college-level work.

As teachers tried to rein in the study groups, other things out of their control malfunctioned. A college-level orientation class, meant to build trust and community among the incoming freshmen, seemed to have no fixed time and kept intruding upon regular, core classes. As a result, the four teachers often found themselves huddled in the middle of the alcove, shortening or lengthening 50-minute class periods to make time for the orientation.

At the other end of the spectrum, college employees complained of disruptions. Stationed in offices underneath the classroom alcove, this group of college employees wasn’t too happy about backpacks, chairs, and feet shuffling every 50 minutes and made their distress public.

Such logistical challenges overwhelmed what little time teachers had, leaving planning periods elusive. Last-minute trouble-shooting sessions took up time after school. Staff meetings were dominated by student safety concerns and other operational matters.

Wagner looked forward to finally implementing, among other things, an inter-disciplinary unit—something that before had been hindered by the more faraway bureaucracy of Elyria City Schools.



...it was Gilmore who led Wagner in a bursting, doubled-over rendition of Gloria Gaynor's 'I'll be there to love and comfort you/I'll be there with the love I'll see you through...'



FINDING MOMENTS FOR PROFESSIONAL CONNECTION

Despite the ad hoc nature of planning, however, teachers were surprisingly finding ways to bond in the short breaks during the day. They were somehow unearthing random moments of professional connection—as they ran into the control room to pick up supplies, on their way to lunch, or in empty classrooms.

One September morning, as students left the alcove for college classes, after their half-hour advisory session, Gilmore made her way out. She noticed Gott sitting at his desk and tightly gripping a large, travel coffee mug. Gott was mulling over his 7:30 a.m. advisory session—none of it seemed right. KnowledgeWorks Foundation wanted advisories to be a time for relationship building, a time when teachers could tap into students' aspirations for their future. Valentine wanted it to be a time to hone students' study skills. Gott was letting students sit around and chat while some caught up on homework.

Gilmore seemed to have the most intuitive connection to advisories. She told Gott that advisories weren't a time to do homework, but a time for both students and teachers to get to know each other. Gott looked up.

"I ask them about their celebrations, like birthdays, and what they're doing for them," Gilmore said. "How the homework is going, anything from last night or home that might affect their attitude and work today."

Gott looked skeptical. Gilmore went on. "I have the kids say one good thing about the person next to them." Bingo.

"That's a good idea," Gott said.

THE DISTRICT ANNOUNCES CUTS

Winter vacation was fast approaching. Valentine was trying to do something similar to what had transpired between Gilmore and Gott, albeit in a more directed fashion. She hoped to bring forward more peer learning; i.e., drawing from the classroom next door. At a staff meeting near December, Valentine asked each teacher to make monthly presentations on a technique that was working for them. Valentine turned to Gott and Wagner to ask if they could create an interdisciplinary unit.

"Come up with a joint lesson plan and let's have your peers critique this sample," she told the two.

That never happened. It was now mid-December and teachers were focused on closing out the grading period.

Besides, in November, Elyria had lost another crucial levy, this one to keep operations running. The school district was determined to axe teaching jobs. Gott, Gilmore, and Wagner's stress levels skyrocketed. As recent additions to the district, their jobs were no longer certain. (Cordonnier was on the college payroll.) Valentine's office was bombarded with angry and confused phone calls from parents and community members. What was the future of Early College?

Valentine tried to proceed normally. She performed another set of teaching evaluations and dropped off books for Gott to look into but didn't bring up the joint lesson plan again.

When the Early College teachers returned to school in January, they were faced with even more dire news: Elyria was reneging on Early College. Though the district would see the 2004 students through to graduation, it would send no more.

Almost everyone turned to Gilmore for support. For Gott, Gilmore was a calming force, one who didn't get worked up and she reminded him to relax. Wagner needed to vent. At the end of a student awards ceremony in late January, after everyone had left, it was Gilmore who led Wagner in a bursting, doubled-over rendition of Gloria Gaynor's "I'll be there." "I'll be there to love and comfort you/I'll be there with the love I'll see you through..."

EXTRA STUDENT TIME THREATENS PLANNING TIME

Though the three teachers wouldn't know their fate for a few more months, they plunged into the second semester. This time, the teaching team seemed to have a better sense of what small schools should be. The 15:1 student-teacher ratio had allowed teachers to work individually with students, see how they learned, and create structures accordingly. But all this extra time with students had also meant less time to plan ahead.

Now a new phase of planning needed to start for next year's students who would come from Lorain. But Valentine first wanted to remedy the sore points so far.

"Things are still being planned on the fly," she told teachers at a staff meeting in late January. "We need to start planning events sooner, get a schedule in place."

Two weeks later, Valentine upped the ante again. She walked into the staff meeting. Improving poor reading and literacy was still a challenge. Valentine asked teachers to devise ways to teach vocabulary words outside regular class periods, and integrate this work into math, science, and social studies. A brainstorming session came up against the clock, however. Cordonnier had to get her son out of day care. Gott, still worried about losing his job to cuts, had to teach a remedial class he had taken on at the regular high school.

Despite a few good ideas on the table, the teachers needed more time. Valentine told the team to continue the discussion—and iron out the details—at their professional development day a week later.

But then Elyria cancelled the scheduled in-service day. Instead of rescheduling, Valentine made a radical departure.

TEACHERS PLAN A HIGHLY SUCCESSFUL INTERDISCIPLINARY UNIT

She realized one-day events let teachers begin conversations but not finish them. What if professional development took place over a series of days?



Teachers could start and stop discussions, only to pick up where they left off. They could process ideas overnight. A chunk of time could finally let teachers develop an interdisciplinary unit they could still implement this year and tweak for the next.

Valentine first made a phone call to the Center for Leadership in Education, an independent professional development arm located on the college campus.

“They need to go somewhere in the morning where they can talk about their frustrations and vent,” Valentine told Jeff Jaroscak, KnowledgeWorks Foundation Coach and the Center’s director of teaching and learning.

Then she called a substitute science teacher who filled in for Cordonnier on her days off. For one week in March, Valentine and the substitute worked with student study groups for two hours every morning while teachers sat in a conference room about a mile away.

After the professional development session, a four-day block schedule would commence to give teachers chunks of planning time. The task at hand was to devise an interdisciplinary unit. English and social studies would get two days to work together, as would math and science. Finally, the Early College teachers had a chance to more closely knit their lesson plans together, without the looming worries of finding subs, copying lesson plans, or returning to class.

But Cordonnier was weary. She had been given interdisciplinary topics before, only to find no connection to her subject matter and state tests.

Gott worried that perhaps it would only be more paperwork.

Wagner and Gilmore thought of all the homework and tests they had to grade.

Despite these concerns, everyone sat together away from students, to slow down and reflect on the past and future. They first talked about teaching and learning philosophies.

How does one pick out the most important information from a story?

How does one make sure that all students working in a group are productive?

Then the group got into the nitty gritty work of cobbling together an interdisciplinary unit.

Gott brought up World War II for social studies. The facilitator made a list of state content standards, and major points the unit would have to cover. When the Manhattan Project came up—which created the atom bomb that was dropped on Japan—science teacher Cordonnier piped up. She would give a Power Point presentation to the students. Gilmore threw out chart and graph possibilities that would help students understand the amount of weapons used and casualty numbers. Wagner’s students would read Elie Wiesel’s *Night*.

Bingo. In the end, teachers came up with an 11-day unit titled “The Face of Adversity: World War II.” There would be nine days for English and social studies; two for math and science.



THE LESSON? STRENGTH AND FAITH

Early College now had an interdisciplinary unit. English teacher Wagner wanted even more—at least two each semester—and she wanted better. Subject ties between English and social studies needed to be more overt. And perhaps the entire unit could be planned with a block schedule in mind, rather than having to bend class time only as student needs arose.

So far, there had been glimpses of all of the above. During the two weeks of the World War II unit, the 50-minute periods were shrunken to allow more time at the end of the day for students to work on final presentations.

To Gott, the freshest of the group, light bulbs went off. He had been reluctant to mess with the class periods at first, skeptical of their effectiveness. But being a fan of hands-on projects, he soon realized that students were more productive if given slabs of time, rather than smaller time slots here and there. Bingo. Indeed, during the interdisciplinary unit in mid-April, long-form student presentations were easier to incorporate because teachers had extended the 50-minute class patterns as needed.

Throughout the unit, students also heard similar themes and timelines. In social studies, they took notes on the Japanese internment. A few steps away in English, students wrote a letter to the author of *Night*. They thought of adversity, and how they could avoid falling into the same hole again and again.

Most had already been given a chance to complete that thought. At the start of the unit, students were given this half a sentence: “In the face of adversity, one must...” Each had written and printed out a response. These were plastered throughout the alcove.

In the face of adversity, one must “stare it straight in the eyes,” wrote one of the students.

One must “Be strong... Have faith... Believe... Remember....” wrote another.

The group of four Early College teachers and Valentine nodded in agreement.

“They thought of adversity, and how they could avoid falling into the same hole again and again.”



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At Euclid's Business and Communications School, the transformation has converted an impersonal institution of 1884 students into six smaller schools with distributed leadership that engages students. Here, the Student Leadership Team (SLT), led by Small School Leader Jim Poulson, presented at a conference; it was the first time many students had left Ohio or flown on a plane.

Euclid's Business and Communications School



EUCLID, OH: STUDENTS RULE AT BUSINESS AND COMMUNICATIONS SCHOOL

by Jill Miller Zimon

Euclid, Ohio is a shrinking suburb a few miles east of Cleveland, Ohio. Factory closings, job losses, and demographic shifts have destabilized this city that used to attract families from other deteriorating metropolitan areas. Today, Euclid has 52,000 residents, a decline of more than 20,000 since its peak in the 1970s.

Faced with this demise, Euclid's high school had stalled at the state rating of Continuous Improvement. Though this rating isn't Academic Watch or, worse, Academic Emergency, Euclid still wanted to avoid state and federal sanctions for poor performance. So it needed to gain a foothold in the next rating up—Effective.

District Superintendent Joffrey Jones believed a four-year infusion of grant money and technical assistance from KnowledgeWorks Foundation was vital to rising up. Jones hoped that his district would see the high school leave the Continuous Improvement ranking behind once it was transformed into six small schools on its campus. Jones also hoped that this effort would serve up a relevant, rigorous, and relationship-driven education for all students.

In June 2004, the Euclid High School marquee conveyed a break with tradition. Rather than school staff wishing new graduates congratulations, the new graduates wished the new freshman, sophomores, juniors, and seniors well: "GOOD LUCK—SMALL SCHOOLS—CLASS OF 2004."

When the 2004-2005 academic year began in August, it felt as though that wish had helped. Items that had been shoved into hallways during the summer filled classrooms in the fall. On Convocation Day, a motivational speaker rallied the faculty into raucous applause. The building reverberated with the sounds of teachers moving desks and chairs, decorating walls with encouraging slogans, and chatting with one another about what the future may hold.

A LEADER INSPIRES STUDENTS TO FLY (LITERALLY)

According to the KnowledgeWorks Foundation grant, one of the necessary steps for future improvement required each small school's structure to



EUCLID CAMPUS

Location: Euclid, a suburb of Cleveland, OH

BEFORE REDESIGN

- Enrollment: 1884
- Percent of students who agreed that their high school was overcrowded: 39.6%
- Percent of students who agreed “my teachers care about and listen to me”: 35.2%

AFTER REDESIGN

One High School Becomes Six Small Schools

- Enrollment: 300-350 (per school)

Schools include:

- The Business and Communications School
- The Academy of Intellectual and Interpersonal Development
- The International Academy of Accelerated Achievement
- The Euclid Academy of The Arts
- “STEM”: Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math
- The Professional Path

reflect distributed or shared leadership. This form of leadership demands that each school use input from a team of students, parents, teachers, and at least one administrator to make major decisions. Together, these people comprise the small school’s governance team and make decisions on issues like curriculum, staffing, and discipline.

Poulson, the small school leader of the Business and Communications School (BCS), makes shared leadership a priority. His school’s effort had its formal beginning on September 14, 2004, when he met with his newly created Student Leadership Team (SLT) for the first time. (Poulson’s SLT would eventually consist of 20 students—five from each of the four grades. By January 2005, a Parent Leadership Team of 16 to 20 parents had started to convene regularly and discuss the school’s operations. By May 2005, a BCS governance team—composed of up to eight teachers, four parents, four students, and Poulson—had formed and begun to direct the school.) But on this autumn day in 2004, 11 students settled into an old science room without windows. Chairs rested against the edges of a large group of tables that were pushed together to form a rectangle. The fluorescent lights reflected an overwhelmingly unnatural light on the high-gloss black counters.

The students shared a levity with Poulson. A number of teenage girls were speaking in the room, and their rapid-fire statements told a story about how things had changed by having been involved with BCS.

“We can’t believe things are gettin’ done,” said one girl who looked to be a sophomore or junior.

“Yeah,” another said. “We’d been sayin’ how the women’s bathroom needed the latch fixed, so that us girls don’t have to sit with our hand on the door.”

“We hated having to hold the door shut! So we told Mr. Poulson. And it got done!” The students feigned amazement and laughed.

The discussion points on the team’s agenda indicated the breadth of issues the SLT would handle, issues that are determined by the school. How would they recruit freshman to the SLT? Which SLT members would represent the students on the school governance team? Which students would attend which faculty meetings? Finally, what plans must be made for the students’ trip to the Coalition for Essential Schools annual forum in San Francisco? The forum was the first time that BCS students would present a workshop to an audience of adults, much less education reformers. It would also be the first time several of them had left Ohio or flown on a plane. Months later, the students and Poulson would agree that that trip could never have happened in a single large high school where the student council focused on traditional school events.

Poulson was constantly trying to move the SLT along:

“Let’s stay on task here.”

“We’ll need a committee.”

“Come on people, who’s going to step up?”

The Coalition for Essential Schools promotes education reform, but Poulson was also promoting reform as he instigated his students to organize



themselves. The students formed subcommittees to brainstorm ideas to pay for the San Francisco trip. Although school money covered the air fare, the students had to pay the remaining costs of the trip. As the meeting moved toward an end, three sophomores volunteered to come to the next SLT meeting with a list of ideas for fundraisers.

Poulson concluded the meeting with more questions: “Think about: What is student leadership? Is it by team or council? How are you chosen? What kind of control or power will the team have and how much do you want?”

POULSON EXPERIENCES THE SWEET SMELL OF SUCCESS

Within two weeks of the small schools’ opening day, Poulson said he had witnessed a good omen connected to his teachers’ interest in the transformation effort. It was a mid-September evening, and a Euclid City School District Board of Education meeting had just ended. The six small school leaders persuaded the board members to approve an alteration to the high school schedule that would enhance professional development. That evening, Poulson was lingering in the parking lot just outside the W.G. Fordyce Building, where the meeting was held.

“I guess I’ve had a small success,” he said. “I don’t know if you knew, but I’m a baker—I like to bake cookies, for my kids’ birthdays and so on.”

Poulson’s confession, and his physique, conjured up an image of Rosy Grier, the football player who liked to knit. Well above six feet tall, with silvery white hair, Poulson appears to be in his fifties. His lengthy arms and legs, middle-aged roundness, still unwrinkled suit, and no-nonsense style of speech supported his background as a businessman. Yet his soft, circular hand gestures and body shifts endorsed the image of a magnanimous village baker.

“I’ve gotten a reputation that I bring in stuff for meetings and give something to the staff,” he continued. “Well, yesterday, one of the art teachers led the staff meeting. It was the first one they had this year. And she brought in stuff. Even made some comment to the group that she was ‘doing it like Jim did.’”

Poulson smiled, his face aglow in the parking lot’s darkness. “To think that teachers are taking on the leadership role, getting into the change—,” he said. He shut his eyes and shook his head noncommittally up and down, side-to-side.

POULSON OFFERS SWEET WORDS, TOUGH LOVE

Poulson tries to provoke all BCS students to be leaders, whether in academics, sports, behavior, or business. One way he rouses them is by addressing each grade, discussing the school climate, and giving monetary rewards for that class’s top four point earners in BCS’s Business Simulation, a project that allots points to each student based on certain expectations.

On the Tuesday before Thanksgiving, Poulson announced the first quarter news. He wore a black tie with a Monopoly money print. But he didn’t give the students play money; he divvied out \$2 thousand in cash from his own savings.

“I thought I would be able to use grant money, but I can’t. I promised it to the kids, so I’m doing it. But I can’t do it every time.”

He also tried to encourage students to do the right thing when the opportunity arises. He complimented them for reducing the frequency with which they were tardy to class.

But Poulson is relentless when it comes to driving his students to new successes, and he immediately launched into the next problem he saw in the students’ behavior.

“Good for the tardies. But look at your referral rate,” he said to the seniors, who, as a grade, are getting proportionately more referrals to his office than any other.

“Let’s get it—let’s figure it out. You’re not showing leadership. It’s time to stop and lead, people.”

STUDENTS DEVELOP PASSION FOR SCHOOL

Following the leader to become a leader seems to be working for at least three of the SLT members, including sophomores Cameron, D’Angela (“D.D.”), and Ashley. They’ve received recognition through the Business Simulation, and they take honors courses, participate in sports or cheerleading, and work outside of school. Poulson has been a fixture in their education since he was their middle school principal. They bid into BCS because of him, and participated with him in the Coalition for Essential Schools forum in San Francisco.

One February morning, Cameron, a chiseled-faced, well-mannered 15-year-old, fixed a program on Poulson’s laptop computer while he and his classmates talked about their small school experience.

“We all bid for BCS because of Mr. Poulson. He’s cool,” Cameron said.

“He’s so cool,” Ashley chimed in.

“He’s one of the best principals,” said D’Angela, a diminutive girl with a round face and straight hair pulled into a ponytail. “We can relate to him. You know he wants the students to get somewhere, and you know he doesn’t want people to fail. But he’s tired; he doesn’t want to take it from the other kids [who act up]. He says the same things to them over and over.”

None of these three think other students are “into” their small school the way the BCS students are “into” theirs.

“Other schools are trying to imitate everything we do. But 90% of the sophomores in BCS are into the small schools,” said Ashley, a thin, simply-styled student who finishes her friends’ phrases with a lot of hand flourishes. “Compared to last year, I can’t even remember who was the principal of the school, let alone know him. Now, kids take advantage of Mr. Poulson’s being around. They’re always going into [his office] and the secretaries’ and the guidance counselors’.”

“Think about: What is student leadership, Poulson asked students. Is it by team or council? How are you chosen? What kind of control or power will the team have and how much do you want?”





“Let’s get it—let’s figure it out. You’re not showing leadership. It’s time to stop and lead, people.”

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They feel bad for Poulson when it comes to the teachers. “The teachers act like I felt last year: Small schools? What’s that? Even the seniors say, ‘High school is so corny now,’ because of splitting up.”

D’Angela explained that seniors viewed high school as trite because they see “[b]eing in teams [as] a young students’ thing, because it was done in middle school so much. But in our school, we’re more part of a family because we have a principal who knows everyone by name. He follows up on students who are out sick, he pays for the Business Simulation from his own money, and he wants us to dress right for Professional Attire Day.”

“Mr. Poulson is one of the only people I know who cares,” said Ashley.

D’Angela and Ashley recounted a faculty meeting they attended at which Lavender told the teachers what the students felt, but the teachers didn’t say anything. “I think they get offended,” D’Angela said. “They’re not used to kids taking control of school.”

STUDENTS TAKE CHARGE

By the middle of May, the SLT students had accumulated and polished their leadership skills. They were running the meetings instead of Poulson. They had planned the fundraising from conception to collection for events like next year’s Coalition for Essential School’s forum and Business Simulation program (so that Poulson wouldn’t have to pay for it, and so it wouldn’t be discontinued). They interacted directly with parents and teachers at Parent Leadership Team and board of director meetings. And they candidly voiced their opinions about discipline, relationships, community interaction, and academics.

They wanted to tackle what they perceived as teacher indifference and inaction related to the small schools’ effort. They had planned a staff luncheon, which they organized, financially subsidized, and catered.

“D.D. proposed it and decided to head it up,” Poulson said. “It did come as a surprise, and it was from the kids completely. The kids got the teachers’ food choices and put together the menu. Everything.”

The SLT had gathered nearly every other week for the last nine months in the lab room, which looks oddly unscientific. The staff luncheon event demonstrated how Poulson’s blend of vulnerability and warhorse spirit had stirred the team members into a decision-making unit.

He admitted that such a group could never have existed or impacted the school’s basic operations when Euclid educated almost 2,000 students in one school.

“Student councils in large schools did nothing more than dances. There’d be no ripple effect for an SLT in a large school,” Poulson said.

But here?

“Oh—yes,” he said.

At BCS the ripples had already begun, in preparation for what may one day become a great tidal wave of change.

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