

CRESPAR

Research & Development Report

Talent Development Middle School “Removed from the List”

ONE PHILADELPHIA MIDDLE SCHOOL’S SUCCESS at improving its students’ attendance, achievement, and promotion rates holds wide-ranging implications for other low-performing schools and the impact of comprehensive reforms.

Jay Cooke Middle School had such low test scores and so many students scoring below basic on state tests that it was flagged as failing and almost ready for state takeover in 1997. Three years later it was removed from the list of underachieving schools because of consistent and substantial achievement gains. Even before the state warned Cooke, it had voted to adopt the Talent Development Middle School (TDMS) reform model developed at Johns Hopkins University. With the great commitment of Cooke’s faculty and administration and a comprehensive reform adapted to the school’s needs, the high-poverty school assessed its problems and began to improve teaching, raise test scores, cut absenteeism, and promote more, and better-prepared, students.

Although these are significant accomplishments, Cooke plays a larger role in school reform, especially with the sanctions for schools that do not meet the standards for annual progress prescribed by the *No Child Left Behind* Act. “The gains in student achievement...show that schools of this type can substantially improve over a relatively short period of time,” according to an article in this spring’s issue of the *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision* telling Cooke’s success story. “Removed from the List: A Comparative Longitudinal Case Study of a Reconstitution-Eligible School” was the work of CRESPAR researchers Douglas MacIver, Allen Ruby, Robert Balfanz, and Vaughan Byrnes, all of Hopkins.

They used a quasi-experimental design, with a highly similar comparison school, to evaluate their middle-school model. TDMS began at Cooke in 1997 with full implementation of the language arts program, Student Team Literature, and a phase-in of the mathematics and science curricula. Other innovations included small learning communities, consistent and relevant professional development, and efforts to improve student behavior and attitudes.

The comparison school had a similar student population with slightly higher test scores in the two years immediately before Talent Development began. That changed as the reform took hold. From 1997 to 2001, the two groups of students that went through Cooke closed this achievement gap by the spring of seventh grade and students in the first cohort outscored students in the comparison school by 50 scale score points on the state reading tests for fifth- and eighth-graders. They also showed significant gains on the state math tests.

The authors stress that Cooke’s accomplishments can be replicated. For schools attempting reform, “Cooke’s results show that these efforts can lead to major improvements in student achievement... The Cooke case stresses focusing on the key functions of teaching and learning, using evidence-based ways of reform, and on making a strong commitment at

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both the leadership and
classroom levels....”

*(See more about TDMS success
in Philadelphia on page 2.)* G