

# Building a School that Works, Brick by Brick

You won't see any cutting-edge pedagogy at the Johnnie L. Cochran, Jr. Academy in East Orange, New Jersey. You won't hear staff talking about or practicing the latest-of-the-latest ideas and innovations. What you will see, if you watch quietly, is the slow but solid construction of a school that works for economically disadvantaged children. You will see how each of the foundation stones is carefully selected for its fundamental effectiveness and solidity.

So, let's take a tour of the "construction site" that is the Cochran Academy.

## The Foundation

"My job?" asks principal Deborah Harvest. "It's very simple: to build a place where everyone wants to be." We all, adults and children alike, want to feel at home. In too many cases, however, school can be a kind of Antarctica, a cold place with a strange and foreign landscape. If education is to be more than just the things-they-want-me-to-do-in-school; if it is to become the quintessential human activity, then it must take place in *the* quintessential human place. It is our first task as principals to build a place where children and adults really, really want to come each morning.

## The Cement

At Cochran, strong beliefs about children, and about adults' responsibility towards them, are the mortar that cements the building blocks. It is a cement made from the following ingredients:

*An appreciation for the way things are, not how we'd like them to be.* "We can't think about what our kids didn't have in their homes," says Harvest. "Now that they're here with us, what are we going to provide for them in order for them to be successful?"

*No excuses.* "We don't accept excuses from teachers. These kids are looking for us to help them," says Harvest, "and that's what we're going to do!"

*The Golden Rule rules.* Harvest asks her teachers to "think that your child, your grandchild, your niece or nephew is sitting in your classroom. If what you're doing isn't acceptable



for your own child, make sure it isn't done here."

*Believe in them.* "My expectation," Harvest says, "is that all our kids will be successful. We're going to treat every one of them as if he or she was the smartest person in the room. They will believe it and they will do what it is they have to do."

## The Building Blocks

Solid pedagogy and good management are the blocks from which Cochran is being built.

*Choosing a proven path to success.* Success for All may not be flashy; it may not be highly creative for teachers, or necessarily fun to use—but it is effective. And at Cochran effective is more important than anything else. As Harvest says, "All the strategies that we know will help children learn to read are incorporated into the program. This is our Bible."

*Adjusting to mistakes.* At Cochran, teachers learn from their mistakes. They ask themselves, "Was it me? Didn't I expose my students to this skill? Didn't I do a good job of teaching

it? What does the data tell me about where I need to go?" Embracing mistakes and finding satisfaction in improvement, whether we're teaching or learning, makes for a far more solid block than the quicksand of excuses.

*The work of the mind.* Too many schools, especially those with poor and minority children, give students

few demonstrations of why they are learning what the school wants them to learn. At Cochran, as befits a school named for a legal icon, each year all students take a legal studies course. Taught by a former prosecutor, the course gives them a chance to exercise their minds and experience what adults do with learning. Why learn about the human genome? "So I can argue for the release of an innocent person." Why learn to do research? "So I can prove to the court that my argument is the better one." This is not a frivolous "extra"; it is one of the school's most fundamental building blocks.

*The work of the heart.* At Cochran, giving well-educated children back to the community is the final building stone—maybe even the keystone—of an effective school.

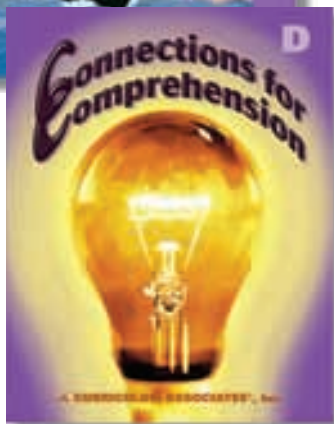
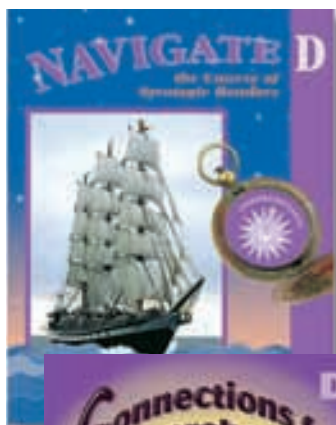
So, let's emulate Cochran and build our schools with stones that will really support the aspirations of parents for their children. Good materials, good workmanship—and patience. That's what it takes to build a school that works. ■

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