Supporting Middle Grades Learning: The Talent Development Approach
How a whole-school reform model addresses the needs of both staff and students in high-poverty urban schools.

by Maria Garriott

Administrators seeking to turn around a struggling school need only talk to Gerald Branch, principal of Jay Cooke Middle School in Philadelphia. When Branch arrived at Cooke in 1979 as a novice art teacher, he saw a school reeling from neighborhood gang activity, poverty, and a variety of other ills.

“The hallways were chaotic, and there was not a whole lot of disciplinary support,” Branch recalls. Test scores were low and the school had difficulty attracting and retaining teachers, few of whom were certified in their subject areas.

Branch persevered at Cooke and was an assistant principal in 1997 when the school, facing the possibility of reconstitution, implemented the Talent Development Middle Grades (TDMG) model, developed by researchers and educators at Johns Hopkins University. According to Branch, who later became principal, the TDMG approach brought about dramatic changes and was instrumental in helping administrators and teachers transform the school.

“We have created a nurturing environment, not only for students but also for staff,” says Branch, who also notes that both staff and student attendance are high, and that the school has a high retention rate for teachers. “We lose one or two teachers a year,” he says, “where some urban middle schools lose teachers in double figures.”

More significantly, TDMG’s comprehensive approach built leadership within the school that sustained reform when, after five years, the program was phased out. “We learned, partially as a result of our relationship with Johns Hopkins, that in order to sustain anything, you have to build leaders within your school,” Branch says. “Teachers overall have taken ownership of school improvement and the administrators have built on their efforts over time.”

A Model of Success
The TDMG model originated in 1995, when the Johns Hopkins University Center for the Social Organization of Schools (CSOS) received a grant to develop whole-school reform models designed to address the needs of high-poverty urban schools like Cooke. The model, which currently operates in 21 middle schools nationwide, aims to improve academic achievement for students by making major changes to both the organizational structure and the educational processes of middle schools. Those changes include personalizing learning environments, implementing curricular changes to improve coursework and raise teachers’ and students’ expectations, and offering professional development opportunities for teachers.

The TDMG model is built on cutting-edge educational research and incorporates standards-based curricula, small learning communities, cooperative learning, and extensive teacher support. The model also offers the use of curriculum coaches to help support teachers on an ongoing basis, and extra help for students struggling in mathematics or reading.

Challenging Curricula for All Students
TDMG has developed strong curricular materials in language arts, history, science, and math, with cooperative team learning methods embedded in each curriculum. According to Douglas MacIver, who has directed the program since its inception, “Cooperative learning provides motivation for students. They are working in the context of interacting with peers.”

Reading. In Student Team Literature, students read and discuss high-quality literature with a
partner and engage in higher-order thinking and writing activities. Teachers can choose from 200 fiction and nonfiction works, based on students’ reading levels and interests. Reading strategies are embedded in the Partner Discussion Guides that accompany each book.

“During middle grades, students are transitioning to more challenging material in terms of text structure, vocabulary, and information in the content areas,” notes Leslie Jones, who directs TDMG’s Reading/English Language Arts program. “It’s very important that reading instruction not end when students leave elementary school.”

The whole-book approach aims to create fluent, lifelong readers. “There are districts in which it’s not unusual for students to graduate from high school without having read a whole book,” Jones says. “We focus on whole books because reading a book is the defining act of a literate person.”

**History.** TDMG has developed extensive curricular materials for U.S. history, based on Joy Hakim’s award-winning series, *A History of US*. The materials, which are published by Oxford University Press, feature extensive primary-source documents, simulations, hands-on activities, and assessments.

**Math.** For math, TDMG supports several research- and standards-based commercial math programs with the goal of eventually offering algebra to every eighth-grade student.

To help students meet the high standards of TDMG curricula in reading/language arts and math, the program helps schools establish 10-week, “double dose” accelerated-learning classes that use cooperative learning and computers to provide intensive learning experiences.

**Extensive Teacher Support**

The TDMG program differs from other reform models in its emphasis on extensive teacher support and targeted professional development. “Our emphasis is on providing curriculum-specific, grade-specific professional development rather than generic training,” Maclver explains. “To ensure that teaching for understanding is happening in every classroom, every day, professional development must target what is being taught in the classroom.”

Monthly professional development sessions model upcoming activities, reinforce content knowledge, and demonstrate instructional approaches. These sessions also address classroom management concerns, providing teachers opportunities to learn from one another.

Curriculum coaches in every subject visit classrooms on a weekly or monthly basis to model instruction, troubleshoot, help customize the curriculum, and ensure that necessary materials are available. “We try to give teachers everything they need so that they can focus on making customizations and adaptations for their classrooms,” Maclver says.

TDMG instructional facilitators work closely with curriculum coaches, trained lead teachers, and principals to design staff development, customize and align instruction with district standards, and keep reform initiatives on track.

TDMG also provides supplemental materials for teachers to use in their efforts to improve student comprehension. For example, to fill instructional gaps in the math curriculum and provide additional teacher support, TDMG supplies a pacing schedule, teacher notes, an extra practice book, and a September introductory unit, designed to prevent lost learning time at the start of the school year.

For science, TDMG helps each school align its curriculum with national standards and implement hands-on science modules developed by the Full Option Science System (FOSS) and the Smithsonian Institution. TDMG also provides instructional support and additional materials, including lesson plans, readings, and strategies to help struggling readers master challenging material.

**A Record of Success**

Several studies have verified the effectiveness of the TDMG approach. In both 2001 and 2002, for example, four Talent Development schools were among the five highest-scoring
high-poverty middle schools on Pennsylvania’s eighth-grade assessment. Another study found that students at TDMG schools were closing achievement gaps at higher rates than those at control schools. An evaluation by an independent, nonprofit research organization found that adoption of the program led to significant gains in achievement and attendance in some of the nation’s most challenged high-poverty middle schools.

Many schools are implementing TDMG in targeted areas, such as reading/English language arts and school climate, with significant results. One school district recently asked TDMG to lead all of its professional development activities and schools across the country are using program curricula in language arts, history, and science.

“In an era that is rightly demanding evidence-based school reforms,” MacIver says, “the results show that when schools implement and sustain comprehensive, research-based reforms, significant progress can be made in reducing some of the nation’s most troubling achievement gaps.”

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