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Successful Programs, Policies, and Practices Employed at Corliss High School

Edith R. Sims, *Principal, George Henry Corliss High School, Chicago*

There is considerable evidence¹ that effective schools for low-income minority students do exist, but that few schools which serve minority students have effective learning climates. Brookover and associates found that "the schools for the disadvantaged are beset with discipline problems, violence, poor attendance, and, most of all, low achievement and failure to attain basic literacy skills."² Unfortunately, that statement accurately described George Henry Corliss High School before the development and implementation of its present school improvement plan. The purpose of this article is to review practices, programs, and strategies used at Corliss High School in Chicago, Illinois, to improve student achievement and other desired behavior within the school through modification of the learning environment.

Initiatives designed to address those aspects of the learning environment which have impact on student achievement had the following objectives: to improve instruction, to increase the amount of time for teaching, to bolster staff morale, to improve student and teacher attendance, to build and develop character, to improve the conduct and discipline of students, and to reduce vandalism.

The strategies, practices, and policies suggested in this article are by no means definitive or all inclusive and do not necessarily guarantee success in other schools that are experiencing similar kinds of problems. School improvement does not take place overnight.

¹Wilbur Brookover et al., *Creating Effective Schools: An Inservice Program for Enhancing School Learning Climate and Achievement* (Holmes Beach, Fla.: Learning Publications, Inc., 1982); and Ronald R. Edmonds, "Effective Schools for the Urban Poor," *Educational Leadership*, October 1982, pp. 4-10.

²Brookover et al., *Creating Effective Schools*, p. 23.

It requires long-range planning and a commitment from all who directly or indirectly affect the learning process: parents, community, professional and paraprofessional staffs, and students. Many practitioners suggest that it takes at least two years for minimum change to occur and from four to five years for a school to experience its maximum potential.

SELECTED FACTS AND PERTINENT INFORMATION

George Henry Corliss High School is an inner-city school located on the far south side of Chicago in the Pullman Community. The diversity of the area's population may be seen in the variety of occupations held, ranging from professional to semi-skilled and unskilled workers as well as unemployed and welfare recipients. According to the 1980 census, the district's annual median family income was \$21,000.

A professional staff of one principal, three assistant principals, five counselors, and one hundred sixteen teachers work cooperatively with a career service staff of five clerks and eleven teacher aides to provide quality services to a population of 1,907 minority students. Their services are supported by maintenance and food service staffs and the school district's ancillary staff of a school nurse, social worker, psychologist, speech therapist, and truant officer, each of whom is available in the school two days each week. The student population is 99.5 percent Black and 0.5 percent Hispanic; 44.5 percent are from low-income families; 588 are eligible for free and reduced-priced lunches; the stability rate is 97.1 percent.

The school's philosophy is that all children can learn regardless of their race, family background, or socioeconomic conditions. The mission of the school is to prepare students for citizenship and to graduate them with the academic, social, and employable skills which will enable them to become productive and responsible members of society. Based upon research about effective schools and on seventeen years of experience in the principalship (twelve at the elementary school level and five at the secondary school level), the principal organizes and manages the school to reflect that philosophy and mission. Students are expected to demonstrate minimum mastery at all levels, attend classes regularly and promptly, be prepared for work, and conduct themselves with respect and dignity at all times. Teachers are well prepared and routinely exhibit effective teaching behaviors in their classrooms. They also use a variety of strategies and instructional materials to cover curriculum content and to meet the diverse needs of their students. Student progress is monitored and assessed; praise and corrective feedback are given; there is a built-in incentive awards program to recognize students

for achievement, good attendance, and good citizenship. Teachers are also recognized for good attendance and achievement.

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PLAN

In December, 1984, the school formed a school improvement committee to develop a school plan to eliminate from the school environment negative factors which impeded teaching and learning. The committee, composed of representatives from the administrative, professional, and career service staffs; the local school advisory council; and volunteer teachers used a survey to identify major factors which negatively affected school improvement and student achievement. Factors included: too little time to teach because of too much paperwork, gang activity and vandalism in and around the school, low teacher morale, lack of administrative support of teachers, disrespectful attitude and behavior of students, teachers not involved in decisions which affect them, failure of administration to seek ideas from teachers before establishing policies, excessive class "cutting" and tardiness, and student apathy and high failure rate.

These factors, along with deterrents to student achievement documented by research, were included in the school improvement plan. Under the leadership of the principal, the school improvement committee, over a three-month period, finalized a plan that included, to the extent possible, the recommendations from all staffs involved in the improvement process.

Cognizant of its overall objectives, three initiatives—a closed campus policy, a code of conduct, and an incentive and rewards program—were instituted to eliminate the major factors from the learning environment which negatively affected student achievement.

Closed-Campus Policy

Through collaborative efforts, a policy of closed campus was agreed upon and implemented to reduce gang activity and vandalism in and around the school. Under the closed-campus policy, students arrive at school in the morning and remain in the school building for all lunch periods, as well as for all other school-related activities, until the end of the school day. Hence, students no longer have an opportunity to congregate in large groups or interact with outsiders and nonattending individuals from the community and other schools.

In order for the closed-campus policy to be effective, it is crucial that adequate resources and staff are available to check the identification badges of students when they enter in the morning and to take the appropriate disciplinary action when necessary. All staff

members must report to their duty assignments promptly, supervise students closely, and carefully monitor student behavior in the lunchrooms and study halls to prevent disruptions which may result from increased tension.

During the initial stages of implementation of the closed-campus policy, many students complained about the newly created, "prison-like conditions" at the school. Within a few weeks, students were no longer being harassed or intimidated by gangs during their lunch periods, and the number of gang-related incidents drastically decreased. Students and teachers were generally pleased with the policy. Unexpected outcomes of the closed-campus policy were (1) a significant reduction in the amount of paperwork related to disruptive behavior and (2) an improvement in punctuality to classes immediately following the lunch periods.

Corliss Code of Conduct

Encouraged by the positive outcomes of the closed-campus policy, a code of conduct was established to sustain the progress made in the area of student conduct and discipline and to foster good character and citizenship. The Corliss Code of Conduct not only prohibits wrongdoing, but also rewards students for positive behavior and achievement. The school rules, along with the penalties for each infraction, are written with clarity and firmness. All staff members agreed to enforce them consistently and expeditiously. The rules are published in a student handbook and reviewed with all students in grade level assemblies each semester to ensure that students understand them and the corresponding penalty for each infraction. Unlike the school district's uniformed discipline code, the Corliss Code of Conduct specifically defines those infractions which frequently occurred at the school. For example, in the school district's uniformed discipline code, there is a broad, vague heading, "Failing to Abide by Rules and Regulations." Infractions under this heading, e.g., "leaving trays on the lunchroom table," and "in the building without an identification card," carry a maximum suspension of one to five days out of school. Because students understand the Corliss Code of Conduct, there are fewer incidents of disruptive behavior in and around the school.

Notable Outcomes

There were many tangible and long-lasting rewards from the implementation of the Corliss Code of Conduct. For example,

- Corliss was the only Chicago public high school to receive the 1984-85 "For Character Award, for Enhancing Student Character

Development and Academic Learning'' presented by the University of Illinois at Chicago. The award, attractively framed and prominently displayed in the school's main corridor, serves as a visual reminder to students of their responsibilities and accomplishments.

- The general appearance of the building improved. The school grounds are kept clean and attractive. As a result, the school was the recipient of its district's "Best Kept Award" for the 1985-86 school year.
- The school was also awarded the District's Beautification Award for the 1984-85 school year. Because all staffs, both maintenance and career service, are involved in the improvement process, special efforts are made to keep the modern, spacious, glass-enclosed breezeways attractive, clean and free from graffiti. The students and staffs are proud of their school.
- For the past three years, the school has been the recipient of the "Reduction of Vandalism" award presented by the general superintendent of schools to secondary school principals for their efforts to reduce vandalism.

Incentives and Rewards

Incentives and rewards based upon objective, explicit criteria and standards allow all students an opportunity to work for them. A variety of incentives are used to motivate students to achieve success. Students who maintain a perfect attendance record for each month (no tardiness, cuts or absences) are eligible to participate in a Monthly Attendance Lotto for cash awards of \$50, \$25, and \$15 for first, second, and third prizes, respectively. While cash prizes may not be appropriate for younger children, they appeal to inner-city high school students for several reasons: daily carfare, necessary personal needs, school fees, extra money for sports events, and desired material possessions. Students regularly and publicly receive awards for attendance, citizenship, and achievement.

Rewards which cultivate character, bolster self-esteem, and instill school pride are essential in any long-term improvement plan. Students who have no discipline referrals each month, provide exemplary service to the school, or make outstanding contributions to special clubs, events, or activities are eligible for good citizenship awards. Rewards in this category, highly visible and long lasting, include plaques, certificates, ribbons, key chains, and school pins.

Built-in rewards for achievement (grade for class performance and success on standardized tests) are enhanced when students are frequently and publicly recognized for their accomplishments. Academic achievement awards are presented each semester to

students who distinguish themselves by qualifying for the Regular Honor Roll or the Principal's Honor Roll when they earn a grade point average of 3.0 and 3.5 or above on a 4.0 scale. Academic awards in this category include achievement plaques, trophies, free tickets to all school activities, and achievement buttons. Awards in each category are listed in Chart 1.

Results from the implementation of the incentive and awards program are encouraging:

- Class tardiness and cutting are gradually decreasing.
- The proportion of students who failed one or more courses declined from 54 percent to 47 percent during the first semester of the 1987-88 school year.
- Student attendance increased 1.2 percent from 88.2 percent to 89.4 percent in the 1986-87 school year.
- The number of students inducted into the National Honor Society increased 45 percent.
- The academic achievement of students is gradually improving. Each semester more achievement awards are presented to different students.

The programs described in this section, along with the Closed-Campus Policy, the Corliss Code of Conduct, and the Incentive Awards Program, were successful over a three-year period in eliminating from the learning environment major factors which negatively affected student achievement. Attention was then focused upon the improvement of instruction through staff development.

Staff Development

Although staff development is essential to the improvement process, little time is allocated for it by the school district. Only two full days (one for opening school and one for closing school) and three half-days are allocated for staff development during the school year. To obtain additional time, eight forty-minute class periods are reduced by four minutes. Operating on a Friday Faculty Meeting Schedule, the educational staff participates in bi-weekly thirty-two-minute sessions to review research about effective teaching behaviors, classroom management, and successful strategies for teaching inner-city secondary students. Because of the scarcity of time available for staff development and the magnitude of the tasks, only those factors (as identified by Squires, Huitt, and Segars³) which have had an impact on student achievement, are discussed in local schoolwide staff development sessions.

³David Squires, William G. Huitt, and John K. Segars, "Effective Schools and Classrooms—A Research Based Perspective" (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1983).

Chart 1. Incentive Awards for Attendance, Citizenship, and Achievement

Attendance Lotto

1st Prize \$ 50.00 2nd Prize \$ 25.00 3rd Prize \$ 15.00

Lotto Tickets will be issued monthly to students who—

1. Have not cut any class or division during the month
2. Have not been tardy to their first period class
(second period if that is their starting time)
3. Have perfect attendance in division for the month

Good Citizenship

Plaques, School Letter, Pins, Key Chains, Certificates

- One free ticket to a school activity of his/her choice
(basketball, football game, school dance, etc.)
- Certificates to obtain free tickets to a Chicago White Sox baseball game

Students who exhibit the following traits will be nominated by their division teacher each month for good citizenship awards:

(1) Dependability, (2) Courtesy, (3) Service to School, (4) Participation in clubs and/or activities. To be eligible, a student must have no discipline referrals.

Academic

- | | | |
|------------------------|-----|--------------|
| PRINCIPAL'S HONOR ROLL | GPA | 3.5 or above |
| HONOR ROLL | GPA | 3.0 or above |
- Trophy at end of each marking period
 - Free tickets to all school activities
 - Certificate to obtain free tickets to a Chicago White Sox baseball game
 - One free theatre ticket
 - End of year pizza party
 - Achievement button

Students who have a cumulative grade point average of 4.0 for four years will be presented a plaque at graduation.

School Climate

Special attention is given to the school-learning environment. The environment is always safe, orderly, clean, and conducive to teaching and learning. All staffs, including maintenance and career service, work cooperatively to maintain an attractive school building and a healthy school climate.

Organization for Effectiveness

The physical plant, modern and spacious, consists of three mini-schools (houses), a fine arts building, and an athletic building joined together by plexiglass-enclosed breezeways. Each house has its own lunchroom, locker area, guidance offices, assistant principal's office, and faculty lounge. There are at least thirteen regular classrooms in each house. In addition to the six well-equipped science and food laboratories, the other facilities include an electric shop, print shop, woodshop, media center, computer resource room, language lab, reading lab, professional radio-television studio, child development center, and an athletic building which houses two gymnasiums and an olympic-size swimming pool.

The school is organized to support classroom teachers. Counselors and administrators are placed in each house to provide services to students and to keep the learning environment free from major distractions. Since classroom teachers are not burdened with paperwork and disciplinary problems, they have more time to plan and teach.

Curriculum Content

Curriculum committees developed units, unit tests, and final examinations for the core areas of English, mathematics, science, and social studies. The content is aligned with the skills and knowledge required on the standardized Test of Achievement and Proficiency (TAP).

Curriculum Coverage

A supervisory process of classroom observations and a weekly review of lesson plans help department chairmen and administrators monitor the amount of material covered in each discipline during the semester. Teachers are encouraged to cover a broad range of material and to teach, test, and reteach to ensure a minimum level of mastery before introducing new concepts and material.

Student Involvement

The amount of time students spend actually working on curriculum content is extremely important. Methods to enhance the involvement of assistant principals in the monitoring of student

behavior are frequently discussed. Distractions, class tardiness, and problems related to classroom management are minimized.

Expectations for Success

Because class periods are only forty minutes, time is a precious commodity. Hence, teachers spend most of the time planning organized-learning activities. Students are praised and rewarded for demonstrated achievement instead of mediocre or poor performance. Homework is required, collected, and graded.

Incentive Rewards for Teachers and Staff

Effective teaching behaviors, based on well-documented research, are thoroughly and frequently presented by the principal. In addition to providing the resources needed for teaching, the principal supervises and evaluates teachers and rewards them for good work and attendance.

To help bolster staff morale, the principal invites staff members to a birthday celebration during the month of their birthday. Summer birthday months are observed during the last and first months of school. While staff members enjoy cookies, coffee, or punch, a drawing for the birthday prize, a cache of school supplies, is conducted by the principal. Staff members who have perfect attendance each month are invited to a continental breakfast. The principal also presents perfect attendance plaques to staff members who maintain a perfect attendance record for the year.

To the extent possible, teachers are given release time to attend seminars, professional meetings, and workshops. Upon their return, they are encouraged to share their experiences in staff development sessions. When teachers plan and conduct in-service meetings, they are rewarded with a certificate from the principal which entitles them to a forty-minute early dismissal or late arrival.

Staff development activities have greatly enhanced collegiality among the staff. There is a significant increase in the number of teachers who exhibit effective teaching behaviors in their classrooms. At the time of this writing, it is too early to document the effectiveness of the staff development program and its impact on student achievement.

STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

When Corliss opened its doors to the first freshman class in 1974, its motto was, "In Pursuit of Excellence." Since that time, that motto has been posted throughout the building to remind students that excellence in education is a never-ending process. The curriculum, comprehensive in scope, is designed to challenge students as they obtain marketable skills for employment and success in postsecon-

dary education. Therefore, programs and courses which help students acquire the basic skills which will prepare them to function in a pluralistic society take precedence over all other activities. Priority is given to the teaching of comprehension and using sources of information in all disciplines. A great deal of instructional time and emphasis is placed on the everyday skills of generalization, inference, map and chart reading, determining direction and distance, and interpreting data.

Parent Involvement

Research findings indicate that a strong partnership between the school, the parents, and the community enhances student achievement and increases the effectiveness of the educational program.⁴ Hence, the parents of students at Corliss High School were encouraged to exercise their rights and responsibilities to become involved in the education of their children. A variety of avenues, including parent letters, school newsletters, and Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) meetings was used to recruit parents as well as keep them informed about the school's programs, procedures, and activities. Parent volunteers are used for corridor and lunchroom supervision, fund-raising endeavors, planning school programs, seeking community support for local improvement initiatives and to serve as role models for students who reside in single-parent homes.

The high visibility of parents in and around the school has had a positive impact on student attitudes. Students are more respectful, polite, and courteous. Because many of the parents who actively participate in the volunteer program are not parents of students who are currently attending the school, it is difficult to evaluate the impact their participation has on student achievement. After one year of concentration, student achievement test scores, however, have improved.

The preliminary results of the fall, 1987, TAP indicate an average increase of approximately six percentage points in all of the areas tested. The average reading percentile for grade twelve increased ten percentage points to the thirty-fifth percentile, one percentage point above the 1986 city average of the thirty-fourth percentile. Given the fact that the city average of the thirty-fourth percentile includes the test scores of the students enrolled in magnet schools, technical schools, and career academies, this increase is significant.

When the official results of the tests are made available in the spring of 1988, a longitudinal study will be made to determine the amount of increase each grade has made in the following areas:

⁴Kathy H. Dulney, "A Comprehensive Approach for Parent; and Community Involvement," *Illinois School Journal*, 67 (Spring 1987), 42-48.

Reading Comprehension, Mathematics, Written Expression, Using Sources of Information, Social Studies, and Science.

Eighty-one percent of the 485 students enrolled in the Integrated Humanities Program for Gifted and Talented Students scored at or above national norms in most of the areas tested in the fall 1987 term.

SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY PROGRAMS

Strict budgetary constraints and cutbacks in funds limited the resources available for basic skills and literacy programs in the school. Therefore, the principal utilized existing community and school programs to enhance student achievement and character development. Exemplary programs briefly described in this section were very successful and are highly recommended.

Youth Motivation

A youth motivation program, under the auspices of the Merit Employment Division of the Chicago Commerce and Industry Department, is available to all Chicago public high schools that have a significant number of minority students. Two major objectives of the program are (1) to motivate young people to stay in school and acquire skills which will prepare them for the future and (2) to provide an opportunity for face-to-face relationships with success models in various fields of work.

Chicago Youth Centers

Chicago Youth Centers offer several programs designed to enhance the social needs of inner-city students. Two of them, *Reaching Into Successful Employment (RISE)* and *Fresh Start*, were made available to students in October, 1987. The *RISE* program helps non-productive students improve their attendance, build self-esteem, and acquire coping skills to deal with problems related to their home and environment. The *Fresh Start* program is designed to enhance the affective skills of overage, low-achieving freshmen students by assisting them with goal setting, decision making, and problem solving.

Peer Tutoring

Peer-tutoring programs are beneficial to both the tutors and students being tutored. Students who excel academically in vocational classes and students who have a composite of 20 or above on the American College Test (ACT) are eligible to become tutors in vocational and academic areas, respectively. The tutors are paid minimum wages from funds generated through local fund-raising endeavors. Because of the peer tutoring programs, the failure rate declined 7.6 percent in January, 1988, and the number of students

who earned a composite of 20 or above on the ACT in April, 1987 increased 300 percent.

Career and Skill Development

The Career and Skill Development program answers the needs for vocational development. The idea of learning new skills related to business, such as resume writing, job application procedures, and interviewing techniques, are fully covered in the Career and Skill Development program with all participating students. By giving the students various approaches and alternatives in regard to careers and colleges, the center supplies background experience for their effective career search.

Child Development

The Child Development program is unique to the public schools by having an onsite preschool room that sees seventy-five three- and four-year-old children each week. The high school child development students act as tutors, giving the preschool child individualized instruction. The child development program, now in its ninth year, is growing and improving each year. It is a program where everyone is a winner.

Television Studio

Fortunately, the school is equipped with a modern, bi-level television studio that is unrivaled by any high school in Chicago today. The studio facilities include a professional "state of the art" television lighting system, special effects switching system, dural format, portable televisions system. This system can facilitate live programming to the entire school through a closed circuit interlink. The switcher can also provide special effects for the three-phase editing system and the film slide and tape chain through which students can integrate 16 millimeter film and slides into live or prerecorded productions. After two years of television production, Corliss students are able to demonstrate the knowledge and skills that can lead to a successful television career.

Adopt-A-School Program

Corliss High School has two adopters: WBBM-TV and St. Paul Federal Bank. While the focus of the WBBM-TV adoption is on television talent and technicians, it is not confined to the television department. A court artist has demonstrated sketching in the art laboratory, a television reporter has lectured English classes on how to research news stories, a television technical director has shown students how to edit video tape. In the television classes, WBBM-TV artists have helped students build sets, producers have given lectures on news

production techniques, and writers have talked to classes about news writing.

St. Paul Federal Bank adopted Corliss and Pullman Elementary School. As an outgrowth of its Thrift Education Program, St. Paul provided the resources and equipment for the production of professional quality video tapes to teach elementary school students the basics of spending and saving money and high school students about preparing for careers. Education took place at many levels. The Pullman Elementary students prepared to "teach" other students about money and banking, while the Corliss television students were given the opportunity to work under real world working conditions. They were introduced to the production process on a step-by-step, hands-on basis by professionals who expected an excellent product and within specified deadlines.

The script was written and developed by students at Corliss. Through the generosity of St. Paul Federal, the tapes will be made available to other elementary schools in the Chicago metropolitan area. As an adoptive parent, St. Paul Federal Bank is committed to employing graduates of Corliss and helping them to become productive members of society.

Options for Knowledge

A federally-funded Options for Knowledge, Integrated Humanities Program for Talented and Gifted Students enables gifted and talented students to concentrate on areas of interest in the humanities, develop leadership skills, prepare for college entrance examinations, and receive in-depth study in science and mathematics with special emphasis on Health Science Career Exploration. The program maintains an enrollment of 485 students who consistently achieve at or above national norms.

GED Collegiate Scholarship Program

Despite the alarming statistics concerning the high drop-out rate of at-risk students nationwide, few alternative programs are available to high school dropouts eighteen years of age and older. The General Educational Development (GED) Collegiate Scholarship Program for Chicago Public School Dropouts Residing in Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) Communities is an exemplary program available to high school dropouts who reside in the CHA communities.

The program is specifically designed to meet the academic, social, and economic needs of high school dropouts. It offers hope and a second chance to eligible persons who reside in these communities. The objective of the program is to recruit eligible candidates and prepare them for success when taking the GED Examination. Successful candidates are given an opportunity to enroll in a college

or university of their choice. Selected dropouts from Corliss High School are eligible to participate in this program.

Although many of the school and community programs are still in their infant stage, teachers and parents are overwhelmed with the motivation and enthusiasm of their students. In time, they will have a significant impact on student achievement and performance.

NOTABLE RESULTS

Corliss High School, in its continuing pursuit of excellence, is successfully meeting the challenge of educating Black and poor children today. Since 1984 it has been turned into an effective school for inner-city students. Some notable results are as follows:

- Corliss High School was recognized nationally for school improvement in 1987. From over eighty school improvement plans submitted by schools in forty-three major cities, Corliss was one of six schools selected for national recognition by The Council of The Great City Schools.
- Corliss High School is recognized as an outstanding school in Chicago for inner-city students. Educators throughout the nation frequently visit the building to observe effective teaching, programs, and practices.
- Corliss High School was identified as an effective school by the Mayor's Educational Summit on Education Reform in 1987. Its exemplary programs, practices, and policies were recommended for inclusion in the Parent-Community Council Report on Education Reform.
- In 1986, the principal of Corliss High School was the recipient of the Outstanding Principal Award in High School District 33 presented by the general superintendent of schools.

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