NEA brief on union-led school improvement

Union champions Equity Schools for neediest students

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Place: **Evansville, Indiana**

Contact: **Keith Gambill**
President, Evansville Teachers Association
812-426-0998

> *"Freedom is a gift, but it comes at a price." — Keith Gambill, Evansville Teachers Association president*

Smack in the middle of America's heartland, a mid-sized Midwestern city is turning conventional wisdom on its head. Union leaders and district administrators in Evansville, Indiana, are confronting challenges as partners, not adversaries. In 2009, they developed — and are now implementing — a groundbreaking strategy, called Equity Schools, that aims to transform schools through professional development for teachers and extended learning time for kids.

The target is the three worst-performing schools in the 37-school Evansville-Vanderburgh School Corporation: Delaware Elementary School, Howard Roosa Elementary School, and McGary Middle School. Their student population, which totals 1,200, is 60 percent white, 26 percent black, and 3 percent Hispanic. Poverty is so rampant that nearly 90 percent of the students qualify for free- or reduced-price lunch. Even on snow days, students in two of the three schools can get free lunch and adults can buy it for just $2.25.

The Equity Schools strategy is a welcome break with the past. "Just the act of working together is a step forward. Everything was mandated before," said Keith Gambill, president of the Evansville Teachers Association. The new approach has also proved challenging. As Gambill observes, "Freedom is a gift, but it comes at a price."

At the outset, union leaders and district administrators agreed on a general framework for professional development — nothing more. "We ratified the contract with 'to be developed later," said Debbie Hartz, a professional development coach (one of 48 in the district) who taught math and elementary school for more than 30 years before becoming one of two instructors (the other is an administrator) in the newly established Equity Academy, which prepares teachers to meet the special needs of students in Equity Schools.

Equity Academy aims to equip teachers to succeed

The union and the district developed the Equity Academy together, based on input from participating teachers. The resulting program is rigorous: 40 hours on Saturdays and after school on Wednesdays (missed sessions must be made up) culminating in a comprehensive oral examination (138 of the first class of 150 passed). Teachers receive $20 per hour to attend the academy, plus $1,000 upon satisfactory completion of the program.

At the union's insistence, participation in the Equity Academy is voluntary. Union leaders and district administrators have also agreed that, starting in the fall of 2010, successfully completing the academy will become a requirement for teaching in an Equity School — a means of ensuring that teachers are equipped to succeed.

> *"We need to talk, collaborate, and learn from one another." — Debbie Hartz, Equity Academy instructor*

Teachers have responded enthusiastically to the strategy their union crafted. "We thought maybe half the current teachers would participate in the Equity Academy," said Hartz. "Ninety teachers from other schools also wanted to participate. We had to turn more than half of them away because enrollment was capped at 150."

Brett Clark, a math teacher with eight years of experience who currently teaches at Washington Middle School, explains his decision to enroll in the Equity Academy this way: "I live in the McGary district, and I kept thinking, 'That's where my son will be going in five years.'"

The academy was hard on many teachers at first. Hartz said, "We told them, 'Your plate is empty. Fill it with what improves learning for the kids — you decide what that is.' Many found that hard and said, 'Tell us what to do.' They didn't become comfortable with the new approach until halfway through the course."

Hartz continued, "As a profession we've said, 'You can teach or you can't — it's a gift.' Now, we need to figure out what works and why. Attitudes need to change. No more 'I've always done dinosaurs, and I'm going to keep doing them!' No more 'Close the door and just let me teach!' We need to talk, collaborate, and learn from one another. I was naturally good at teaching math, but not reading — I worked at it and learned from other teachers."

Empowering teachers — and teachers taking ownership

In Evansville as elsewhere, educators tend to disparage traditional professional development. Vince Bertram, superintendent of the Evansville-Vanderburgh School Corporation, describes it as "sit and git sessions — a speaker gives you information and

you never see that person again." Teacher Clark compares it to "looking for a needle in a haystack — hunting for something you can pass on and use with your kids.

"This was Evansville teachers helping Evansville teachers and I really liked it," Clark continued. "We learned to think outside the box without a safety net. I'm a techie — I love PowerPoint — not a hands-on, artsy-craftsy type. Then I worked with someone who was good with graphic organizers and foldables. I used what I learned to create a 3-D pamphlet on the Pythagorean Theorem. The principal came to evaluate me the first day I used the new approach and it went wonderfully — for me and the kids."

> *"We learned to think outside the box without a safety net." — Brett Clark, middle school math teacher*

Kristal Dellay, who has been in the profession five years and teaches English, social studies, and reading at McGary Middle School, notes the emphasis on empowering teachers in both the Equity Academy and the Learning Leadership Cadre, a district-wide program with Brown University in which she also participates. "Many schools are striving for teacher empowerment — instead of change from the top down, change from the bottom up."

Dellay, like Hartz, observed that not everyone is comfortable with the new approach. "When we have team meetings at my school, some teachers say, 'Tell me what to do.' Being really engaged entails taking initiative — it's a different hat to wear."

Within a common framework, each school has its say

More learning time — for teachers as well as students — is the linchpin of the Equity Schools strategy. Each school can add up to 20 teaching days for students per year, plus five professional development "data days" during which teachers learn to analyze and use data to enhance student achievement.

The school day will stay at 7 hours, 15 minutes. But how that time is used may change — for example, one Equity School will be serving breakfast in classrooms to increase learning time.

"We didn't lengthen the day because that would disrupt extracurricular schedules throughout the city," said Hartz. "We also looked at research — what's best for kids. Many middle school kids take care of younger siblings, so a longer school day doesn't work for them."

Meeting students where they are

The realities of students' lives and needs have shaped the entire strategy. "When schools are chronically underperforming," says Bertram, "some point to ineffective teachers or leaders. What we've discovered is that these schools have a high percentage of students who start three or four years behind and just can't catch up."

Building students' confidence in their ability to achieve is an important part of the process. "Kids at McGary have a mentality that they're failing — they may not even realize they see themselves that way," says Clark. They don't have tons of parent involvement or support systems — they're caught in a cycle of failure at school and struggle at home. We need to find ways to build connections with parents — to make the school more than a just a place where they send their kids."

> *"Students don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." — Kristal Dellay, middle school language arts teacher*

Clark finds that meeting parents on their home turf is a good way to build connections. "I visit them at home," he explains, "because a phone call, letter or email is making contact the way a bill collector would — and that's not good."

Dellay agrees that personal connections are crucial. "Literacy skills are a challenge for some of our students — they don't grow up in rich environments. So we're focusing on what we can control: making connections and team building. We've added days at the beginning of the year — similar to what many colleges do — where teachers spend time with students, get to know them as people, and encourage them to take pride in their school and their own behavior. There's an old adage: Students don't care how much you know until they know how much you care."

Increased efficiency pays dividends in professional development

The school district is paying for enhanced professional development by cutting costs elsewhere. "We're using targeted cuts, not across-the-board," Bertram said. "Everything is not created equal — we set priorities. Increasing class size or cutting great teachers affects kids, so it's off-limits."

The district saved $8 million by revamping distribution systems and consolidating support services to increase efficiency and eliminate duplication. Administrative staff who had been scattered among four sites now work in the same place. The district put its central office — a historic building in a prime location — on the sale block. The proceeds will be used to remodel a warehouse, which the district already owns. The move will bring long-term savings in utility costs, which are expected to keep rising, along with energy costs, as regulation of carbon emissions and other climate-control measures take hold.

Bertram has also succeeded in doing what Congress has been talking about for years: cutting health care costs. “We did it by going on the open market and getting competitive bids,” he said. “Another company offered to do the job for 22 percent less ($3.7 million) than the vendor we had been using. We’re a big group — 3,300 people — and health insurers want our business.”

Turning Around Schools;
Innovation at Work

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Putnam City West High School, Oklahoma City, OK
Raising Achievement among English Language Learners

Compadres in Education is an ongoing program that demonstrates the power of collaborative action – by teachers, school administrators, parents, and community organizations – to raise the educational aspirations and achievement of low-income Hispanic students from families with limited knowledge of English. The program is teaching entire families of immigrants and their children to navigate the American educational system. This self-sustaining program has yielded hard evidence of gains in student achievement: higher test scores and dramatically better attendance records. The program was initiated by the Oklahoma Education Association with the National Education Association providing support and technical assistance. School and community leaders have been an integral part of the program from the start. Parents, teachers, and students are deeply involved.

NEA and OEA trainers facilitated, structured, and recorded initial community conversations. Participants identified the most important factors contributing to achievement gaps locally and formulated action plans to address them. They also learned to facilitate and record such conversations themselves, building local capacity to sustain the program. In response to concerns expressed during community conversations Putnam County West:

- Hired more bilingual staff members.
- Provided school- and district-wide professional development to enrich teaching and enhance achievement among English language learners.
- Furnishes written descriptions of course offerings in Spanish and in English, with emphasis on college entrance requirements.
- Expanded opportunities for learning through community service, especially for students at risk of dropping out.
- Implemented service-learning/community opportunities for high risk youth, thereby increasing relevance of their academic experience.
- Worked with Francis Tuttle Technology Center and Integris Health Center to create the new and innovative "Club Med" – exposing students to careers in health through real life experiences.

Although evidence of the three-year old program's effectiveness is just beginning to manifest, it is clear that Hispanic students are making impressive gains. The pass rate among Hispanic students on the End-of-Instruction Test in English II, a graduation requirement, rose from 55 percent in 2007 to 77 percent in 2008. Over the same period, Hispanic students' Academic Performance Index, a broader measure that reflects test scores as well as attendance and other factors, rose from 839 in 2006 to 1,065 in 2007 to 1,152 in 2008 on a scale of 1,500. Between 2008 and 2009, the number of Hispanic students who graduated from Putnam City West rose by nearly 70 percent. In addition, over the past two years, the school's Hispanic students have met the Oklahoma Annual Measurable Achievement Objectives requirement, progressing in English language learning development to become proficient in English.

Denver Collaborative Model, Denver Public School System
Collaborating to Improve Teaching and Learning Outcomes for All

In Denver, some of the challenges in the turnaround schools were related to the lack of systematic organization, which did not create an efficient academic environment. Leadership capacity, instructional programs that were not well monitored, and the lack of consistent collaborative communication were all issues.

To effect change, Denver Public Schools (DPS) and Denver Classroom Teachers Association (DCTA) worked together to determine the level of support needed at identified schools. Conversations were held with the stakeholders – including community members -- to identify the best approach to improve schools. DPS and DCTA collaborated with a purpose statement that turnaround should mean dramatic school improvement and swift action. To accomplish this goal they jointly developed strategic goals, including that results should show better student outcomes and focus on student intervention and achievement, there should be transparency with all stakeholders and include all stakeholders in design and implementation, and focus on resource sustainability.

The Denver partners emphasized the importance of the process and focused on the intent to enact change with a school and community not **to** a school. Of paramount importance was making sure that teachers were included in developing the mission of the project and their role within it. This included "staff selection" training for principals and interview teams regarding finding "right fit" and understanding individual effectiveness vs. conditions of past school, as well as working to determine how to create the teaching/learning conditions necessary to attract teachers to low performing schools.

Moving forward, DPS and DCTA will monitor the improvement of the total process – starting with the first year of School Improvement – jointly facilitate discussion and "build the container" for Transformation Schools between all stakeholders, and monitor the equitable placement of displaced teachers.

So far, the results have been strong. DCTA and DPS have worked closely to ensure that the staffing process was fair to all employees. They will continue to work to improve the process and make sure that all students and staff experience improved working and learning conditions in priority schools.

Hamilton County, Tennessee
Closing the Achievement Gap through Community-Wide Efforts

In Hamilton County, Tennessee, principals, assistant principals, instructional coaches, lead math teachers, and lead literacy teachers across the district are working and learning together through networks focused on attaining high levels of student achievement. In network meetings, schools are able to share best practices, strategies, and intervention that worked for them, and they have data to prove it. Middle schools have begun to open their doors and their classrooms to teachers who want to see, firsthand, stellar lessons. Goals of the initiative have focused on creating a more rigorous learning environment where more students score "advanced" on state exams while, at the same time, the achievement gap between low-income and middle-income students is narrowed.

Professional development for teachers and school leaders has been a major focus of *Middle Schools for a New Society*, including semi-annual planning retreats that allow leadership teams of students, parents, teachers and administrators at each school to study effective methods for school improvement and develop plans focused on the unique needs of their own schools. Further, the most effective professional development is available when it is needed and where it is needed. Middle schools have been provided with expert teachers to serve as coaches offering support to other teachers. These coaches receive training in best practices and working with adults, participate in network meetings, and bring information and effective teaching strategies back to their schools. They encourage collaboration and sharing of great ideas, provide model lessons, and offer help and support to teachers who are working to improve their craft.

The project also uses data to set goals, measure progress, and perhaps most importantly, improve instruction. Participants have examined data down to the level of individual questions on exams so teachers know what students "get" and what they don't, allowing them to re-visit and re-teach the missing elements.

The results are impressive. In reading/language arts, the percentage of middle school students scoring advanced increased from 30 percent in 2005 to 40 percent in 2009. The achievement gap has narrowed from 24 percentage points in 2004 to 14 in 2009 and all students are achieving at higher levels than the 2004 baseline.

In math, the percentage of middle school students scoring advanced increased from 30 percent in 2005 to 45 percent in 2009. The achievement gap has narrowed from 23 percentage points in 2004 to 15 in 2009 and all students are achieving at higher levels than the 2004 baseline.

There have been profound changes in Hamilton County middle schools. Work toward redesigning these schools is substantive, data-driven and on-going. Networks have been formed to work collaboratively and share best practices. Teachers have gained an arsenal of new instructional strategies and use them in classrooms every day and in all content areas. Students are better readers and writers and are entering high school ready to learn.