INTERVENE NOW SO THEY WILL GRADUATE LATER

By Maria Garriott

Do you want to prevent high school students from dropping out? The way to do it is to start in middle school. Students who have academic or behavior problems in the middle grades do not grow out of these tendencies once they get to high school. In fact, they are the most likely to drop out.

A recent study conducted by researchers at Johns Hopkins University and the Philadelphia Education Fund found that most dropouts, at least in large cities, can be identified long before they walk the halls of high school. As early as sixth grade, four factors point to those at high risk of falling off the graduation track: poor attendance, poor behavior, or a failing grade in math or English. Students with only one of these “big four” indicators had less than a 30 percent chance of graduating on time or even in one extra year of study. In addition, the researchers found that when whole-school reforms were implemented, students’ odds of earning a diploma on time increased.

Researchers followed more than 12,000 sixth-grade students in Philadelphia schools from 1996 to 2004. “It was our theory that the

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NEW JERSEY SCHOOL COLLABORATES WITH TDMG FOR CURRICULUM, PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

By Maria Garriott

Last year, teachers and staff at McGinnis Middle School in Perth Amboy, New Jersey, voted to collaborate with the Johns Hopkins University Talent Development Middle Grades program for professional development, school climate assistance, and curricular support. Under the direction of Principal Roland Jenkins, teachers and staff have demonstrated a vigorous commitment to reforms by implementing new curricula, attending professional development sessions, enrolling literacy instruction across the curriculum, and improving school climate.

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MCNAIR SCHOOL WARP SPEEDS INTO THE 21ST CENTURY

By Dr. Cathy Sweeney

Ms. Rosie Hidalgo, principal at McNair Middle School in San Antonio, Texas, has made the implementation of technology throughout the school a focus this year. Students visit the computer labs at least twice a week to practice their math and problem-solving skills. The use of computer technology is visible in every math classroom on campus.

Mr. Robert Kelly brings a wealth of experience in math to his sixth grade classes at McNair, but he will be the first to admit that using computer technology is not one of his strong points. Mr. Kelly, however, was willing to bring technology into his classroom with assistance from the Johns Hopkins University Talent Development coach and school-based tech support personnel Daniel Luna and Kasey Beckett. Now his students are benefitting from his effort.

Mr. Kelly and his fellow teachers at McNair are dedicated to improving their pedagogy and preparing their students to be academically successful.

Iris Montoya-Rodriguez and Natalie Kelly study intently during a recent professional development seminar at McNair Middle School.
PARTNER DISCUSSION GUIDE SPOTLIGHT

THE WATSONS GO TO BIRMINGHAM, 1963:
ALWAYS A TRIP WORTH TAKING

By Ann Maouyo

No doubt about it: 1996 Newbery Honor book *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*, by Christopher Paul Curtis, has all the ingredients of an excellent choice for Student Team Literature classes.

Curtis begins with an engaging young narrator, Kenny Watson, an African-American boy growing up in 1960s Detroit. He takes a handful of skillfully characterized family members and places them in a lively, believable plot, then includes enough slapstick humor to draw in the most reluctant middle-school reader. Next, he adds a bracing dose of history, as the Watsons find their lives indelibly marked by the tragic 1963 church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama. Finally, he stirs in material for thoughtful reflection, when Kenny’s usually irresponsible big brother Byron helps him overcome a frightening period of depression and withdrawal in the aftermath of the tragedy. The result, as many teachers already know, is a small masterpiece, already well on its way to becoming a classic.

The book’s focus on the impact of the civil rights struggle (already, sadly, unfamiliar to many of today’s young readers) on ordinary people will be of value to students of all backgrounds. This novel is especially appropriate for fifth- and sixth-grade students, who will gain crucial practice in making inferences as they learn to read between the lines of its first-person narrative. Plus, this Partner Discussion Guide is now available in our exciting new format, featuring spiral-bound Teacher’s Discussion Guides with wide margins for note-taking and Student’s Discussion Guides with ample space to write answers to questions and activities.


TEACHER’S MATH WORD WALL DOES DOUBLE DUTY

By Dr. Cathy Sweeney

Bryan Anderson, seventh grade math teacher at Cass Lake Middle School in Minnesota, agreed with the JHU coach that mathematics is a language and students needed to see and practice the vocabulary of math daily. Creating a math word wall was a way to help students visualize terminology and practice definitions. Mr. Anderson, however, wanted his math word wall to do double duty.

He recognized that his seventh grade students needed practice using the Cartesian plane. Using a very large empty wall, Mr. Anderson created a coordinate plane to place the math vocabulary words using x and y coordinates. Each word has an x and y coordinate so when Mr. Anderson wants to practice the vocabulary he simply asks his students which word is located on the coordinate and they must find the word and also give the definition. Mr. Anderson incorporates this practice at the beginning and end of classes and when making lesson transitions. The students think it is great fun, and Mr. Anderson has managed to integrate learning in short time intervals.

Mr. Anderson’s word wall “coordinates” math vocabulary and skill!
NEW JERSEY SCHOOL COLLABORATES WITH TDMG FOR CURRICULUM, PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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The school also faces an additional challenge as it was recently restructured to include fifth and sixth grades. But according to TDMG Implementation Director Kathy Nelson, “We appreciate the chance to collaborate with McGinnis during this important transition. Johns Hopkins provides grade and content-specific support and professional development in all the middle school years, so we can help address the needs of fifth and sixth grade students as well.”

Several recent professional development sessions for social studies and science teachers focused on integrating literacy across the curriculum. “Research indicates that seventy percent of students can read, but they don’t understand what they’re reading, so we all have to be reading teachers,” says Johns Hopkins facilitator Carol Williams. She encourages content-area teachers to use reading strategies such as activating prior knowledge, building vocabulary, and helping students make predictions about what they will learn. Williams also works with McGinnis’ bilingual teachers, who address the needs of the school’s sizeable population of English language learners.

TDMG math facilitator Silvia Diaz collaborated with teachers to develop a pacing guide for the seventh and eighth grades. Diaz meets every month with teachers in each grade. Because the school is very committed to addressing students’ diverse learning styles, she suggested multiple activities and strategies for differentiated instruction.

Special education teachers have also found strategies from TDMG Student Team Literature applicable to their students, and have used the program’s Partner Discussion Guide catalogue to select high interest literature with lower readability levels.

Dr. Araminta Coleman-Sorrell, who directs Talent Development’s school climate program, notes that the school’s learning environment continues to improve. “I am finding a strong commitment to academic growth and excellence. Staff are dedicated and motivated to help students achieve.” She has supported the efforts of the positive behavior support committee, and also worked with staff of the Alternative Program. In addition, Coleman-Sorrell helps implement climate initiatives at Perth Amboy High School and Perth Amboy Accelerated High School.

Although adding two additional grades to a school is difficult, McGinnis has made a successful transition thanks to the diligent efforts of teachers and staff. Nelson says, “It’s been a challenge for the school to add two new grades, and they’ve done well making sure all students get what they need.”
D.C. CHARTER SCHOOL MAINTAINS MOMENTUM

By Maria Garriott

Tree of Life Community Charter School, a K-8 public school in Washington, D.C., continues to see positive changes as a result of its multi-year partnership with TDMG. Under the direction of Executive Director Patricia Ngozi Williams-Ofori, the school is implementing the program’s Student Team Literature and math curriculum, opening a new computer math lab, and continuing to improve pedagogy with professional development targeted to the school’s needs.

Tree of Life, a public charter school, features small class sizes, an Afrocentric environment, and strong community connections. “The work they’re doing is amazing,” notes TDMG language arts facilitator Kimberly Ford. Educators at the school have demonstrated a commitment to differentiating instruction to meet students’ diverse learning styles, and have recently attended professional development on this topic. The school is moving towards a full inclusion model for special education students.

TDMG’s Student Team Literature is the primary reading program used in the middle grades at Tree of Life. Teachers are introducing young readers to novels and poetry by critically acclaimed authors, assisted by the Talent Development Partner Discussion Guides. Fifth grade students under the direction of Shawanda Whitfield are reading Bud, Not Buddy by Christopher Paul Curtis and The Skin I’m In by Sharon G. Flake. Ford praises her efforts. “Ms. Whitfield is a hard worker, and is doing a great job. She realizes it’s important that students get a good foundation with this program so they have those strategies to tackle more difficult material as they progress.”

Shawn Toler is introducing young readers to ego tripping by poet Nikki Giovanni, and seventh and eighth graders are reading Langston Hughes’ poetry. “For most of the children, this is their first experience with poetry. Mr. Toler is doing a fabulous job getting them into it,” notes Ford.

Tree of Life is implementing TDMG-recommended math curricula in both elementary and middle grades classrooms. Dr. Cathy Sweeney, the Johns Hopkins facilitator, visits the school monthly to meet with teachers, provide professional development, model lessons, and troubleshoot as needed. “The teachers are eager to improve their pedagogy,” she says. In addition, Cheryl Kanyok, who has spearheaded the development of extra-help math labs across the country, is assisting school personnel in opening the school’s new CATAMA (Computer and Team-Assisted Mathematics Acceleration) lab. In the lab, students will practice math skills with individualized instruction.

Progress at Tree of Life has not gone unnoticed. A recent review by the school’s accreditation board noted many positive developments in middle grades classrooms. Dr. Sweeney is not surprised, and credits teachers and staff. “They’re very positive, are working very hard to bring up test scores. It’s been wonderful to work with them.” ✪
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combination of becoming an adolescent, moving into new organizations of schools with more complex academic demands, and living in a high-poverty area create unique conditions which can push students off the path to high school graduation,” notes Robert Balfanz, a research scientist at the Johns Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools. “Our goal was to quantify the extent to which the seeds of success or failure are present in early middle grades, and examine the research base on possible interventions.”

The Effect of the Big Four

Because the presence of any of the four indicators will identify 60 percent of those who will not graduate on time, researchers point out that early, targeted intervention can significantly improve graduation rates. Instead of hoping that adolescents grow out of negative attitudes toward school, educators must intervene sooner rather than later. “Early manifestation of academic and behavioral problems at the start of the middle grades do not generally self-correct,” Balfanz says. “These students do not recover. They drop out. Early intervention is not only productive, but essential.”

The study also uncovered another reason why early intervention is desirable: Nearly all sixth-grade students identified as in danger of dropping out had only one or two risk factors, whereas many struggling high school students demonstrate three or four risk factors, requiring more interventions.

Poor Attendance. Only 17 percent of sixth graders in the cohort with poor attendance (defined as attending school less than 80 percent of the time) graduated on time or within one year of their expected graduation date. Thus, poor attendance was found to be the greatest portent of eventual failure to graduate.

Failing Grades in Math or English. While poor attendance stymied student chances of graduating, researchers also found that failing either math or English was usually a precursor to failure on a grander scale. Sixth-grade students who received an F in either a math or English/reading course rarely finished high school in the district. In fact, course failure was a more accurate predictor of dropping out than low test scores.

Poor Behavior. In tracking the sixth-grade students, researchers discovered that a poor final behavior mark in any subject, even in the absence of any of the other big four factors, was highly predictive of dropping out. Nearly three-fourths (71 percent) of
Continued from preceding page

students who received one or more poor final behavior grades failed to earn a diploma on time or within one extra year.

Students who received one or more out-of-school suspensions rarely graduated on time; only two in 10 earned a diploma with their peers. Odds of dropping out increased even more for those with more than one suspension. Because nearly all suspended students also received poor final behavior grades, the two groups were statistically similar.

Educators who think poor student behavior that stops short of suspension is little cause for concern should think again. “We found that sustained mild misbehaviors—not paying attention, not completing assignments, or talking back in class—were as significant a predictor of falling off the graduation track as an out-of-school suspension,” says Douglas Mac Iver, co-author of the study and a research scientist at Johns Hopkins University.

In a related study, Mac Iver and Balfanz found that a comprehensive approach was the most effective intervention. They compared students enrolled in schools implementing the Talent Development Middle Grades program to students in comparison schools and found TDMG students had better attendance, lower course failure rates, and higher graduation rates. The combination of effective instruction, extra help, and a more supportive climate addressed all the factors that led to failure.

Early Intervention Important

Providing the appropriate intervention in the vulnerable middle school years ultimately can make the difference between academic success and failure. As 17th century English poet Alexander Pope noted, “’Tis education forms the common mind; just as the twig is bent, the tree’s inclined.” Thus, educators seeking to reverse the nation’s high school dropout rates would do well to implement strategies to support struggling middle school students.

MINNESOTA PRINCIPAL HONORED

By Maria Garriott

Cass Lake-Bena Middle School Principal Steve Novak was chosen Administrator of the Year by the Minnesota Association of Secretaries to the Principal. School secretary Bonnie Loewe, who nominated Mr. Novak for the award, said he is “a great administrator” who frequently expresses appreciation to staff members.

“Mr. Novak cares about the students far above and beyond” the requirements of his job, Ms. Loewe says. “He makes sure our kids are recognized for anything they do that deserves recognition.”

Mr. Novak also works hard to build unity in the school and develop positive relationships with parents and the community. Congratulations to Mr. Novak!
CASS LAKE CONTINUES POSITIVE REFORMS

By Maria Garriott

Cass Lake-Bena Middle School continues to collaborate with Johns Hopkins University for curriculum and professional development in reading and math. The five-year-old school primarily serves students from the Leech Lake Indian Reservation, an area rich in Native American history and culture.

Cass Lake is using TDMG’s Student Team Literature for the second year. In this research-based, standards-based curriculum, students read high-quality, high-interest trade books with the benefit of TDMG Partner Discussion Guides. Fifth and sixth grade classes are enjoying the acclaimed novels Number the Stars and Bridge to Terabithia. The seventh grade will read the historical novel My Brother Sam is Dead to coincide with the social studies unit on the American Revolution. Eighth graders studying Anne Frank: The Diary of A Young Girl will have an opportunity to view postcards provided by JHU facilitator Linda Andersen, who recently toured the attic where Anne and her family hid from the Nazis in Amsterdam.

Cass Lake-Bena is also opening a new extra-help math lab. Selected students will attend the CATAMA (Computer and Team-Assisted Mathematics Acceleration) lab for one elective period for the rest of the school year. The school opened an extra help reading lab last year with help from Johns Hopkins facilitator Fran Sion.

Kudos to hard-working educators at Cass Lake-Bena!