SCIP: A New Orleans Solution to a National Problem

Gene Geisert



Photo: Joe Di Dio, NEA.

Historically ranked low on student performance, the New Orleans schools are fighting back with a new program called SCIP.

In 1971, the New Orleans press highlighted my selection as superintendent of schools with two editorial page cartoons. One paper depicted me as the skipper of a storm-buffeted dinghy named "Orleans Schools." The other paper's drawing was simply a desk marked with my name on which sat an oversized apple tagged "old problems." A worm was poking its head out of the apple.

The cartoons were appropriate. Seven years later, they still are, although there are more reasons now to be optimistic than there were in 1971.

I became superintendent toward the middle of the 1971-72 school year. There were 108,000 students in the New Orleans public schools, 70 percent of whom were black. An additional 42,000 elementary and secondary students, among whom were numbered the children of most of the city's leadership, attended parochial and private schools.

Downward Spiral of Pupil Performance

For over a decade, first graders tested at about the twenty-fifth percentile on the Metropolitan Readiness Test and on other standardized tests. Analysis of progressive pupil performance showed that test scores began around the twenty-fifth percentile in kindergarten and deteriorated one or two percentage points with each succeeding grade. Thus twelfth graders were functioning somewhere around the tenth or twelfth percentile.

At meetings of the school district's top management, talk about potential strategies to reverse the downward spiral of student achievement kept returning to the problem of funding. Neither the city of New Orleans nor the State of Louisiana has historically given high priority to the support of public

education. During the 1978-79 school year, the New Orleans Public Schools ranked third-to-last in per-pupil expenditure among the 50 largest school systems in the country. The funding situation in 1971 was similar.

Improve the Early Grades

Top management concluded that the initial emphasis had to be on improving the quality of instruction in the early grades. Upgrading elementary education became the top priority of the school system, and funds were raided accordingly from the administrative, maintenance, and custodial services budgets.

In 1973, the kindergarten program was expanded from a half to a full day. At the same time, the kindergarten program was restructured, giving greater emphasis to pupil motivation and academic readiness.

In 1974, the school system began Project REAL (Reading for Enjoyment and Learning), a massive staff development program for elementary teachers. Each center has a team of three staff members, veteran teachers who possess a history of effective classroom teaching and who are also very knowledgeable in the areas of language development, learning psychology, and diagnostic-prescriptive teaching methods. Each team conducts three-day sessions for 15 teachers at a time, and every elementary teacher takes part in the REAL workshops.

In addition to locally funded programs designed to improve elementary education, New Orleans has had a number of federally funded programs. One of the most successful of these has been Title I Homestart. For the past five years, Homestart has been sending specially trained tutors into homes to help parents prepare pre-schoolers for entrance into school.

The efforts to upgrade the elementary program are having the desired outcome. Beginning with the 1975-76 school year, scores on the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills have shown that our kindergarten and elementary students are now achieving scores equal to the national average in reading and mathematics.

A Push for Secondary Schools

Those same CTBS scores also demonstrated that, despite some increase in student achievement at grades seven through 12, the overall performance of our secondary students remained poor. Parents, community leaders, and business people expressed concern about the poor performance.



That is not to say that there had been no efforts by the school system to improve secondary education. In 1957, the School Board authorized the establishment of Benjamin Franklin Senior High School, a citywide alternative magnet school which each year produces more National Merit Scholars than practically any other high school—public or private—in the United States.

In addition to Franklin, the school system has established 14 other alternative magnet schools and programs within schools, about half of which serve secondary students. Two of these citywide schools and alternative magnet programs in two other secondary schools meet the needs of above-average, college-bound students.

For the above-average youngster, the citywide alternative magnet schools perform an extremely valuable service. At the same time, a large proportion of students require another form of assistance.

It became increasingly clear during the last several years that the same push for excellence that was made at the elementary level would have to be undertaken in our secondary schools. A piecemeal approach to solving the problem would no longer be appropriate. We had to completely overhaul our secondary program.

SCIP

Toward the end of the 1976-77 school year, top management made a commitment to do whatever would be necessary to develop a program that would guarantee mastery of the basics to *all* New Orleans secondary students. At that time it was not clear what form such a program would take or how much it would cost. It was clear, however, that a great deal of preparation would be required to get the program established throughout the school system, and that it would almost certainly make a tremendous demand on an already strained budget.

A management task force was organized and a philosophical statement incorporating much of Benjamin Bloom's mastery learning theory was drawn up and presented to the School Board for consideration and adoption. With the Board's endorsement, we were on our way. The new program was designated SCIP (Secondary Curriculum Improvement Program).

SCIP officially began in the summer of 1977 with the establishment of a reading/language arts resource and training center housed at the John F. Kennedy Senior High School. Curriculum bulletins and a catalogue of courses were evaluated and updated by committees chaired by subject-matter supervisors.

Principals and teachers reacted to these administration actions with suspicion. Many feared that programs being prepared by the central office would be forced on them against their will. Therefore, as soon as we completed the broad outline of SCIP, we brought together all of the secondary principals and teachers to explain the program and dispel concerns. These sessions took place in October of 1977.

The first SCIP statement contained the following points:

1. SCIP is not a specific kind of program, but rather *an approach to learning* based largely on Bloom's theory that, with few exceptions, youngsters can learn the skills, concepts, and attitudes traditionally expected of elementary and secondary students if they are provided with favorable learning conditions and are given sufficient time to learn the material that is presented.

2. Each secondary school is to develop its own SCIP instructional model or models. Each school family (administrators, counselors, teachers, parents, and students) is immediately to undertake a complete needs assessment and develop an action plan that indicates possible strategies to meet identified student needs. The school is then to submit a planning proposal that explains how the school will go about preparing its five-year SCIP proposal specifically tailored to meet the needs of students in the areas of reading/language arts, mathematics, and home study. SCIP is initially to focus on reading/language arts and mathematics. The other subject areas, of course, are eventually to be fully integrated into the program.

The office of curriculum and SCIP Center personnel will be available to assist the school at every stage of the development of its final SCIP proposal as well as in its implementation. The major decisions, as well as most of the work, however, will take place at the school level.

3. The SCIP model adopted by a school must be in accordance with the concept of mastery learning; that is, students must master each segment of the subject matter before advancing to the next level of objective mastery.

4. Schools are encouraged to experiment with instructional SCIP models to obtain data as to which techniques achieve desired outcomes.

The needs assessments began in all high schools in the fall of 1977.

Outside Consultants

One of our earliest realizations was that the school system would need outside help to carry out the ambitious undertaking that SCIP promised to become. The board, therefore, authorized contracts for consultant assistance with the Westinghouse Learning Corporation and Innovative Sciences, Inc. These con-

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sultants became onsite members of the Orleans Parish team and worked jointly with us in the development of SCIP. The Board was paying for experts whom we recognized as having been in the forefront of the development of mastery learning materials and techniques.

We were also fortunate to receive the assistance of a number of other outside experts including Benjamin Bloom, James Block, and Lorin Anderson. As we listened to our visitors and worked with them, more pieces of the mosaic that is SCIP began to fall into place.

Objectives Outlined

The Office of Curriculum began to develop minimum performance objectives and test items in order to diagnose student needs and progress as a consequence of instructional programming. Thus teachers now have assessment techniques for determining where students are in mastering objectives and what progress they are experiencing. In addition, a computerized management information system has been developed and piloted to provide feedback to teachers, parents, and administrators regarding pupil status in mastering objectives and progress as it relates to instruction. The information reporting system provides individual pupil diagnosis as well as the grouping of pupils based upon similar needs. In addition to the individual and group diagnosis, the system provides teachers with prescriptions, that is, currently available materials and activities in the inventory of the school, which may be used to assist pupils in achieving mastery of each objective.

Since the students involved are at the secondary level and are used to a traditional learning environment, they should learn how to operate within a system of diagnosis, prescription, and individualized instructional plans. We firmly believe that our secondary pupils should play a major role in determining

The New Orleans Public School System's Department of Research and Evaluation has begun gathering data on SCIP to the extent that the newness of the program permits. The data bank will be a cumulative source for further evaluation in future years.

From the beginning, the school system has insisted that SCIP is not "just another program." SCIP is the logical culmination of the commitment made in the early 1970s to improve student achievement *on all levels:* in 1973 the focus was on kindergarten; the following year it was expanded to the primary grades and so on. Consequently, any evaluation of SCIP must be viewed as part of the school system's entire push for increased skill mastery.

The results of the 1978-79 testing program are now available (Figure 1). Scores in reading and mathematics show marked improvement in every grade over those of the previous year. Gains made in the elementary grades were most substantial, but there is every reason to expect similar achievement on the senior high level as SCIP becomes more fully implemented. It is significant that all high schools already report a more academic atmosphere.

Figure 1. Summary of Scores of Students in the New Orleans Public Schools on the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills*

	Percentile			
	Reading		Mathematics	
Grade	1978	1979	1978	1979
K	40	47	45	54
1	33	42	37	49
2	43	51	49	60
3	48	54	43	49
4	37	45	45	52
5	37	45	44	51
6	41	46	49	56
7	38	46	34	41
8	37	42	39	46
9	35	41	32	37
10	28	32	22	26
11	25	29	24	29
12	21	22	18	21

* All percentiles except K and 1 are based on large city norms. K and 1 are based on national norms.

their own educational outcomes and hope to have them intimately involved in the current program as active participants rather than passive recipients.

Getting the Funding

Shortly after the preparations for SCIP got underway, we made a plea to Title I to use some of its funds to develop some SCIP models in Title I schools. We pointed out that, while our elementary schools were making gains in student achievement, secondary students were still lacking many of the skills necessary to compete in society. We indicated that because the majority of these students were from disadvantaged backgrounds, it would be appropriate that Title I funds be used to help bring them up to acceptable levels of achievement.

The Title I Citywide Advisory Committee agreed. After negotiations with the State Department of Education, we were able by March 1978, to inaugurate SCIP pilot management systems, some of them computerized, in eight Title I secondary schools. This piloting, which some might consider premature, contributed valuable concrete data to the systemwide planning of SCIP.

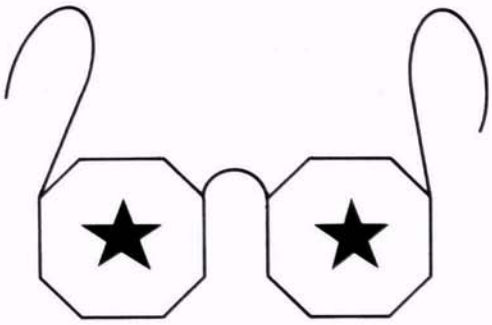
Two months later I saw that the collection of some additional unanticipated tax revenues would result in a budget surplus. I asked the Board to allow me to provide each of the high schools with a grant that would enable it to work during the summer drawing up its five-year SCIP proposal. The Board agreed.

The grants ranged from $500 for some of the small alternative schools to $20,000 for our largest senior high school. With this money, principals and staff were able to work with parents and students preparing their five-year proposals. The schools even had the option of piloting a summer program, and one senior high school did.

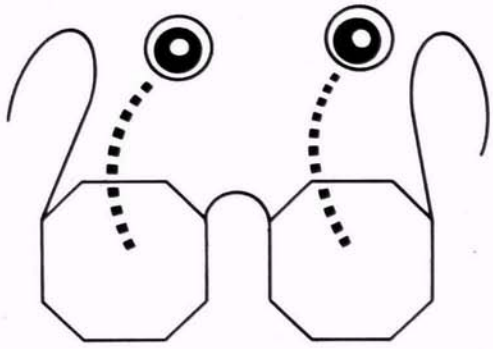
Prior to the end of the 1977-78 school year, each school submitted a planning proposal stating how it would go about preparing the actual five-year intervention strategies for SCIP. The planning proposals were reviewed by a committee composed of curriculum personnel, a district superintendent, principals and staff members of the Departments of Research and Evaluation and Computer Services.

On obtaining approval of their planning proposal, the schools were then able to begin preparing the five-year SCIP proposal. Some of the schools had their proposals approved before the end of the summer with the intention of beginning SCIP the first day of the school year. Other schools had opted to begin SCIP in January, and so there was less urgency to get their proposals approved.

Early in the summer, when the school system's top-management team set out to draft the 1978-79



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budget, we realized that funds had to be set aside to begin implementation of the SCIP proposals. The board eventually approved $1.4 million for SCIP. The major portion of these funds was to be prorated among the 13 senior high schools and the 21 middle and junior high schools. The remainder of the SCIP funds would be used for support services from the Office of Curriculum and for other expenses to be incurred for the program systemwide (for example, the criterion-referenced tests).

SCIP funds allocated to the schools would be used as each school saw fit: for additional teachers or paraprofessionals; testing materials; staff development, instructional materials and equipment; or for any other purpose judged necessary by the drafters of the five-year plan and approved by the review committee.



Gene Geisert is Superintendent, New Orleans Public Schools, New Orleans, Louisiana.

Besides the school board funds allocated to SCIP, $2.5 million of additional Title I funds were earmarked to supplement SCIP in the eight eligible senior high schools and the 14 eligible middle and junior high schools.

A Temporary Halt

When students reported to their first day of class on August 30, they were met by striking teachers. Although we managed to keep all of our schools open during the eight days of the strike, the momentum of getting SCIP proposals approved and implemented unfortunately came to a temporary halt. Moreover, the settlement with the teachers' union necessitated the Board's slashing $1.95 million from its $108 million budget. Twenty-two budget items were affected. SCIP's budget was cut $400,000.

During the strike and immediately prior to it, the board was criticized by various segments of the community for allocating $1.4 million for SCIP. "Use that money to pay teachers," the argument went, "and they won't strike." This position reflects what will surely be one of the greatest obstacles to SCIP: to convince the community (including, unfortunately, some of our own teachers and principals) that it is not simply another educational fad that will come and go like a toadstool after a thunderstorm.

Another problem is getting teachers and principals to alter their educational philosophy to conform with that of SCIP. No longer can subject matter be presented on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. SCIP also implies that many teachers will have to change their teaching methods. Their courses will have to be highly individualized, and the involvement of parents in the tasks that the students are expected to perform is essential.

Office of Curriculum staff, principals, teachers, parents, and students have developed "The New Orleans Public Schools Objectives." This will be the SCIP bible as each school sets out to follow its students' rate of achievement. "The New Orleans Public Schools Minimum Competencies," including life skills, have been extracted from "The Objectives." With board approval, this latter document will spell out exactly which objectives a student must meet before he or she graduates.

Unlike some school districts, which make the student responsible for mastering objectives or not graduating, New Orleans will place most of the responsibility on the school system itself. SCIP prescribes that the school system develop early information concerning the student's degree of competency and mastery of objectives. Then we will plan individualized programs to ensure that, by the time the student reaches the twelfth grade, he or she will have mastered all of the minimum competencies deemed essential in the areas of mathematics and reading/language arts.

With periodic testing and feedback information, the teacher will be able to plan new and individualized "correctives" for students who are not progressing at an acceptable rate. Students who exhibit mastery in the initial testing will be re-tested periodically to make sure that they continue to make progress and do not forget skills already learned.

A Necessary First Step

None of us who are connected with SCIP see it as a miraculous panacea for all of the academic shortcomings of our high schools and of the students who pass through them. We do see it as that necessary first step toward producing graduates equipped academically to compete in the world that greets them as they step down from the stage with a diploma.

We realize that the eyes of the city are watching us closely as SCIP gets underway. Last year someone in the local media referred to SCIP as "Geisert's Gamble." Frankly, I do not see SCIP as a gamble at all. The program as developed so far makes sense educationally, and we hope it will achieve its anticipated results. There is a sign in the Office of Curriculum that says. "SCIP is an Attitude." For those of us who helped give SCIP birth, the attitude is one of long-awaited hope.

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