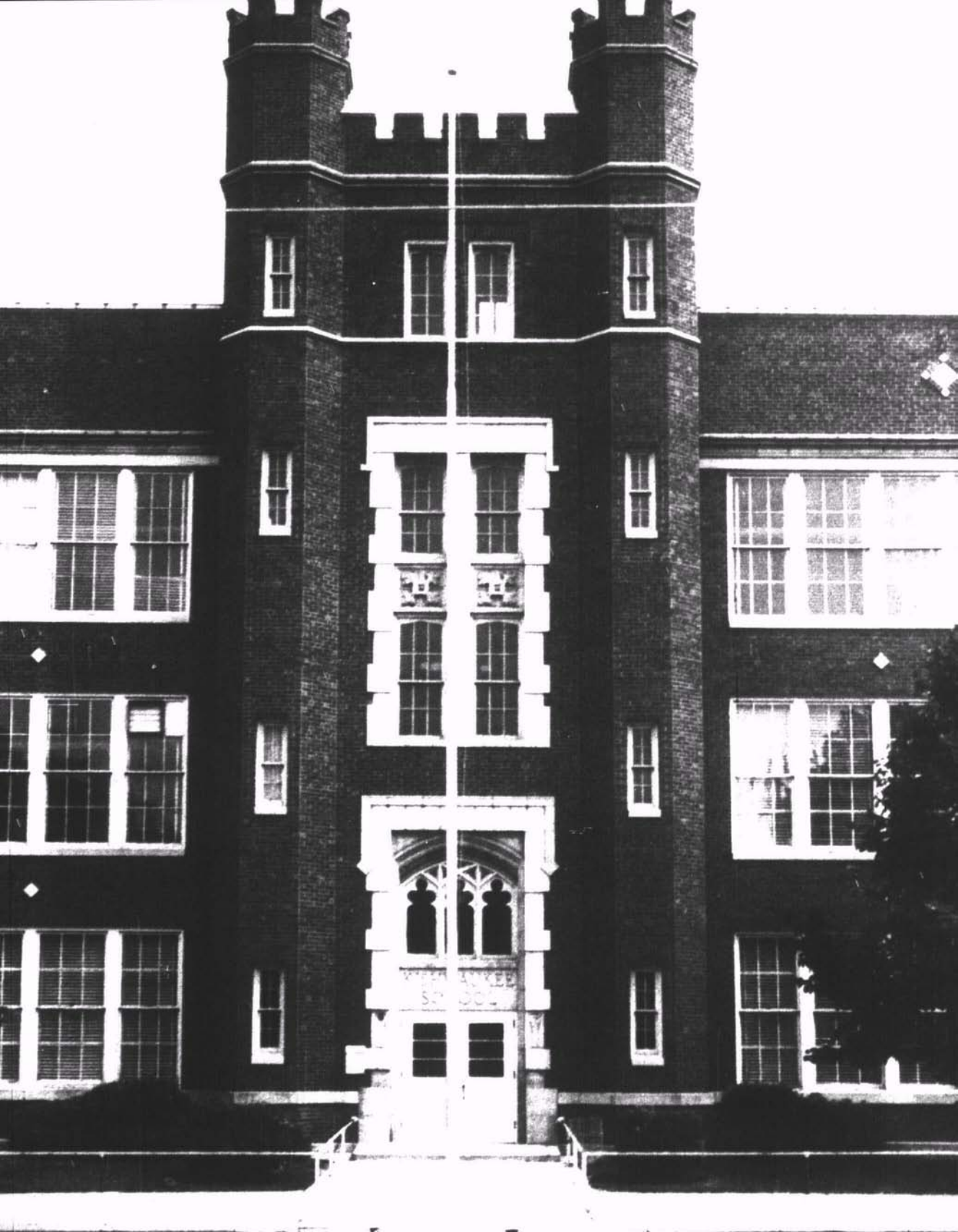




Welcome to the Learning Castle

Building an effective school is a challenge, and it's a challenge again each September.

SARA INGRASSIA

What if you're an elementary teacher, and a second-year principal challenges you to join the staff of a school smirkingly referred to as the armpit of the district? You could smile, say "No, thank you," and opt to stay in your pleasant position as teacher of gifted students. Or you could get caught up in his energy, his enthusiasm, his plans—and accept the challenge.

So, challenge it was: become involved in improving the effectiveness of an inner-city school that suffered from sagging plaster and sagging spirit. Kishwaukee, in Rockford, Illinois, serves about 500 K-6 students, mostly poor, many transient, and approximately 50 percent minority (Spanish-speaking, black, Laotian, Native American).

A master plan began to take shape in the first weeks of the fall of 1980 as the strengths and weaknesses of the physical plant, the staff, the student body, and the community were inventoried. It looked simple enough on paper:

1. Administrative leadership: show it
2. Climate: improve it
3. Building philosophy: clarify it
4. Curriculum: teach it—to every student in the school.

Administrative Leadership

From day one it was clear that the principal was an instructional leader as well as a building manager. The monthly staff meeting became an inservice session with content decided by the principal working with the Staff Development Committee. Money was earmarked for expanding the professional

library and for sending staff members to workshops and seminars that seemed helpful to the implementation of the master plan. Informal and voluntary "donut-hole" meetings were held before school once each week, giving an opportunity for staff and principal to discuss building concerns. A weekly memo to the staff noted workshops and suggested readings, often with a pertinent article attached. An attempt to get materials out of closets, storerooms, and remote shelves and into the classrooms was fairly successful.

Early in the school year, each staff member wrote out goals for the year and outlined a month-by-month instructional plan for each major discipline. These were used as part of the classroom evaluation.

Responding to the many cries for help in solving severe behavioral and learning problems faced by teachers, the principal encouraged training in and adoption of the Teacher Assistance Team program (TAT).¹ Using the process outlined in TAT an elected team of

three teachers works with any staff member who requests aid in dealing with a student-centered problem. The teacher and the team brainstorm strategies that may help. The teacher then selects some and establishes short- and long-range goals. The team follows up in two to three weeks, noting progress (in which case congratulations are in order) or lack of progress (in which case they usually give it a second try). In this way, teachers at Kishwaukee now offer immediate help to their colleagues.

Climate

Also from day one it was obvious that both the physical and the educational atmosphere of the building needed revitalization. The physical plant—an old three-story building with leaking roof, damp walls, ill-fitting windows, limited display space—seemed beyond help. The principal started by rearranging the faculty workroom-lounge and brightening it up with plants, attractively arranged bulletin boards, mobiles made up of all the certificates available to



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teachers who wanted to reward and reinforce student behavior and achievement. The Building Committee (an elected representation of staff members) assigned teachers to change the hall bulletin board displays on a rotating basis. Tack strips were nailed up in and outside of classrooms to aid in displaying student work, which wouldn't stay taped to the damp, cracked walls.

The educational atmosphere was tackled with even more vigor. The first staff meeting and the early donut-hole get-togethers emphasized the need for a consistent discipline program, one accepted by administration, staff, and parents. Assertive Discipline² was the plan favored by most, and an opportunity was set up for all staff members to take the training. Five school rules were agreed upon and letters were sent to parents explaining the details. In addition teachers posted their classroom rules, with copies to the office and to parents. Positive reinforcement of successful or improved behavior was emphasized in addition to punishment for disruptiveness. Many reward programs were established, some building-wide, some in

individual classrooms. The staff was encouraged to be friendly, firm, and consistent; to increase their level of expectations for both behavioral and academic success; and to reward that success enthusiastically and visibly.

Working with the Building Committee, the principal mounted several campaigns slated to improve school spirit: Pick a Name for Our School (The Learning Castle); Pick a Name for Our Students (The Kishwaukee Kings); Pick a Name for Our Student Newspaper (*News from the Castle*); Pick a Mascot (a lion with a crown cocked on his curly mane). Ski caps were available in the school colors and T-shirts have been promised, bearing the lion's likeness.

Building Philosophy

A philosophy for educators must come from the educators themselves if it is to have any practical value. From the first it was intended by the principal, the Building Committee, and the Staff Development Committee that the school philosophy would be the basis for all policy decisions. Now, nailing down a

school philosophy is considerably more complex than nailing up a tack strip. Mustering its best research techniques, the Staff Development Committee presented a survey to the staff with everything they thought might apply to discovering what our teachers thought were the priorities for elementary schools in general and for our school in particular. They were asked to rate, rank, check off, and/or comment on 55 separate items designed to clarify their ideas on teaching basic skills, values, and duty to society; promoting equal opportunity for the poor and for the bilingual; and considering the needs of the state, the staff, and the children enrolled. The Committee collated the information and gave it back to the staff for further consideration and comments. Several rewritings followed and the result was our school philosophy (see Figure 1).

Curriculum

The principal and the staff were committed to the idea that all students can master the basic skills if expected to, encouraged to, and actively taught with whatever strategies and materials proved most effective. They came to believe that the school controls the conditions that lead to success. The old cop-outs about family background and environment and heredity and so on began to lose ground.

Clearly stated competencies and objectives for each major discipline will be developed, not to be in conflict with district guidelines, but to supplement, clarify, and prioritize them in light of our unique student population. A Reading Committee is already at work on a two-year plan involving the entire school in designing the best reading program for our students.





garet Pysh, Director of Programs, North Suburban Special Education District, Highland Park, Illinois, TAT developers.

²Lee Canter, *Assertive Discipline: A Take Charge Approach for Today's Educator* (Los Angeles: Lee Canter and Associates, 1976).

Evaluation

At this point in our attempt to upgrade the effectiveness of our school, we offer no statistics. We don't know if achievement scores have improved; we have no scores to compare. Our school district's testing program is minimal: a standardized test is given only to third and sixth graders annually. If an individual school wants to consistently measure the progress of its students, it must develop its own testing program. We are in the process of doing that, starting with reading. We will use a combination of standardized reading tests and the tests available to us through our basal series.

We can't demonstrate that student motivation has improved or that attitudes have changed. Many teachers "feel" that there has been an improvement, others are noncommittal, a few are skeptical.

The plaster still sags, but the spirit and enthusiasm of the staff seem to me revitalized. Yes, it's easy to backslide, or get too satisfied with what's already been accomplished. The administration and the staff have discovered there is no end to building an effective school. Each year is a new beginning. One thing only is certain: No school has to live with the "armpit of the district" label. The ability to work successfully with all children is there. □

References

¹James Chalfant, Professor of Special Education, University of Arizona, and Mar-

SUCCESS
IS THE KEY
TO LEARNING

SUPPORT: Parents are partners in the educational process.

UNIQUENESS: Each student's maximum progress is important.

COMPETENCIES: Goals for each basic skill are clearly stated at the beginning of each year.

CLIMATE: A staff that is firm, fair, and friendly works to create a positive attitude toward school.

EXPECTATIONS: Achievement takes place when teachers and parents expect and encourage excellence.

SELF-DISCIPLINE: Responsibility for one's actions is as important to teach as the other R's.

SATISFACTION: Progress — carefully measured, clearly reported, and joyfully rewarded — leads to feelings of self-worth for students and teachers.

**KISHWAUKEE
SCHOOL**

THE
LEARNING
CASTLE

KEY

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