

Transformation of a Middle School

Thomas Harrison Junior High School moved into a new building and became Thomas Harrison Middle School. This metamorphosis inspired some "house cleaning" that resulted in a fresher educational environment for teachers and students.

The decade of the 1990s is an exciting time to be an educator. We are witnessing substantive, research-based changes in many programs nationwide. We need these changes. We need growth. But we do not need "reform." This tired, negative word is rarely used to denote the natural changes in other professions. Instead, we see this word *reform* juxtaposed with *prison*, with *character*, or even with *school*, which may be a prison for those in need of character reform. There's a better word. I would substitute the word and the concept of *transformation* for *reformation*, because it is far more positive and far more descriptive of the changes we need in schools and society in the 1990s.¹

Pragmatic Idealism

In creating genuine teaching/learning environments, the educator must constantly weigh the theoretical and the practical, the ideal and the real. Unfortunately, we often fail to obtain a balance, a synthesis of these two complementary elements, and one has usually been sacrificed for the other.

To resolve this either/or syndrome,

we need "pragmatic idealism" so that we can balance and synthesize these disparate elements in education. We need tradition *and* innovation, freedom *and* discipline, basic skills *and* high level thinking, autonomy *and* teamwork, strong central leadership *and* decentralized quality circles, joy *and* rigor—all thriving simultaneously. This means a dynamic teaching/learning atmosphere of risk taking, high tolerance

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for ambiguity, and growing interpersonal trust. At Thomas Harrison Middle School, we are co-creating just such an atmosphere, as we leave behind our old junior high building, move to a new building, and transform ourselves into a middle school.

The Easy Part

Nationally, we are making great progress in the current effective schools movement, but we may be confusing the means with the ends. Yes, we need safe, orderly schools. Yes, we need teachers and students focused on the tasks before them. Yes, we like increases in test scores. And accountability. And parent involvement. And so on. Accomplishing these things is an awesome undertaking. But it's just part of the story.

The Beginning

We began our transformation two years before our new building was to be completed. We made our 61-year-old lame-duck edifice into a warm and wholesome place to be: clean and shining, pretty and bright, with plants everywhere, and students' murals

throughout. Teachers painted their own rooms; the teachers' lounge was completely refurbished; the office spaces were rearranged, redecorated, and refurbished so that the whole school functioned smoothly and pleasantly for students, staff, and visitors. We placed a freshly painted blue-and-gold school sign on the front lawn; we even got a new and higher flagpole.

All this energy invested before moving into the new space sent a powerful message: we were in a fresh, new phase, not a holding pattern. Since everything was being examined anew, we decided to transform our somewhat stale secondary program. We did not wish to take everything with us. We needed a new vision and new vitality to accompany us.

So, before we officially became Thomas Harrison Middle School, the Thomas Harrison Junior High staff transformed the way we deal with our young people. We have learned a great deal from the growth and change of the past two years, and our new practices reflect those lessons:

- *We open the entrance doors as the buses arrive.* Ten minutes before the first class, the staff welcomes all the students as they come in and asks them to go directly to their homerooms. The day begins in an orderly and pleasant manner.

- *We've eliminated bells.* It's up to the teachers to end classes, not bells. We allow five minutes between classes; no one is late; no teacher's closure is cut short artificially. The three grades move independently most of the day at staggered release times and intervals. There are no log-jams in the halls, and the quiet and calm are often amazing for a school of 680 students. We feed them all in one hour, during three self-service hifts.

- *We use a team-teaching approach.* Students and their teachers are grouped into teams. The teams cluster in "houses" situated in close proximity. This greatly increases teacher-teacher and student-teacher communication and reduces travel, noise, and congestion throughout the building as well.

- *We have four awards assemblies each year.* One is a traditional, upbeat,



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rah-rah awards assembly for the various academic and extracurricular areas. Fully 20 percent of our students are recognized at this May assembly by peers, parents, and staff. Several teachers are recognized as well. Our three other assemblies bestow 180 different awards to students nominated by their peers and teachers—the I Learn, I Care, I Grow, I Share Awards. Prizes include public recognition, letters to parents, certificates, T-shirts, and pizza lunches.

- *We are establishing a "success breeds success" scenario for all students.* We gave one F out of a total of 2,600 grades in the first marking period this past year. This year we changed our F to U (unacceptable). We try to give Incompletes and Conditional Passes instead of U's, whenever possible. A, A-B, B, and Improvement honor rolls are posted. At the conclusion of our last grading period, approximately 62 percent of our students were recognized in this way, and the total is higher still for the entire year. This has not led to lower standards or performance; our test scores are 6th in the state, of 134 middle school districts.

- *We have a Wonderful Box.* The Wonderful Box is in the main office. In it, we place the names and accomplishments of anyone, staff or student,

who has done something special. Students in our media club then post those names and achievements in a display case.

- *We have plenty of action.* There are outdoor recesses after lunch, daily activity periods, meaningful assemblies, field trips, lots of concerts, shows, dances, exhibits, and student-teacher competition days.

Fostering New Expectations

We have eliminated strict tracking by modifying ability grouping to include a broader range of levels in many classes, and we are continually analyzing the way we group students. We do not have typical remedial or "slow" classes, but we do have a Learning Lab where students receive one-on-one and small group tutoring in language arts and mathematics. Our "school disabled" (SD) students (who are not labeled learning disabled) have access to this lab.

For those who need help, we provide tutors, fewer academic classes, physical education, and a hands-on exploratory arts class or two each day. We tailor as many individualized schedules as we need in order to support our diverse student body. We do not isolate students in remedial "leper colonies" throughout the day.

Promoting Social Harmony

We have two simple, yet inclusive school rules: RESPECT PEOPLE, RESPECT PROPERTY. We post these in every room and we enforce them.

Everyone on the staff, including the custodians, assumes responsibility for discipline. Our crisis team members are in every area of the school, where other staff can call on them in emergencies. The assistant principal's suite includes a waiting/time-out room, student telephone, clinic, bathroom, and an office. Students may be sent there to sit, to make up missed assignments, to think about their actions, and/or to confer with an administrator.

Detention is a thing of the past. It wasn't working for us anyway. We believe that teachers should try to resolve the problem at the teacher-student interaction level. Detention merely postpones this resolution and

then often makes it more difficult. Now we provide an Alternative Learning Center where a student discipline coordinator (who is also a certified counselor) provides close supervision in a work environment to students with difficult problems. We expect students to make appropriate choices, yet we listen to them and assist them when they are unable to. We are flexible, yet we are also firm when we have to be: there is a bottom line.

What's more, Thomas Harrison Middle School has a CARE (Children At Risk in Education) committee. The committee meets every two weeks to identify and assist our at-risk population. By communicating with the elementary school, we now know who our CARE kids are before they come to us. This enables us to accomplish Creative Scheduling: we can split classes between the two grades so the student who shows sufficient social and academic progress can move to the higher grade during the year.

We sometimes even "skip" previously retained students a full grade. This practice correlates with the substantial evidence against virtually all academic retention.² This program is new, perhaps original, and it requires careful monitoring and evaluation. Thus far our results in terms of improved behavior and heightened self-esteem have been powerful.

Building Professionalism

We offer our teachers substantial, relevant inservice on the most up-to-date topics. This includes summer workshops and a very popular five-day summer retreat. We establish a few goals and stick to them.

Some teachers are now team leaders responsible for monitoring and coordinating the teaching/learning experience in their teams. All teachers have daily team planning time and daily individual planning. A member of each team serves on one of several of the vital and active committees that effect and determine school policy. These are the previously mentioned CARE Committee, the Teaching/Learning Committee (composed of the team

leaders and principal) and the Child Study Committee.

We did not build a climate that is positive for students at the expense of the teachers. This is a great place for teachers. We have fun parties and we joke a lot on the job. Teachers have continual access to the copiers and keys to the building so that they can come in on their off-hours whenever they wish. We provide them with ample travel and conference monies.

This lengthy listing is meant for sharing, not for bravado. It doesn't cover all of our accomplishments, and it neatly leaves out our mistakes, misperceptions, and shortcomings. Yet it demonstrates that we are on the cutting edge of meaningful change, that we have worked hard and accomplished much. And *that's* the easy part.

The Hard Part

Looking at systems and operations to see if things are being done the "best possible way" is exciting. Cleaning things up and getting things running right is a great accomplishment. Fewer discipline problems, stronger attendance, less frustration and failure, better climate, higher morale—these are fine things. But none of it has any meaning whatsoever in isolation from the larger picture.

Looking at that big picture is the hard part. Why are we doing this thing called school? What do we expect to teach and learn? How are we to thrive as a culture in the 21st Century, rather than simply survive? What kind of person are we attempting to mold, stimulate, and nurture in the teaching/learning environment?

If any of this reformation is to become transformation, educators, parents, and students need to examine the very nature of the school experience as we have known it, with an eye toward reconstructing the entire process. The standard classroom with the desks and the 26 kids and the teacher talk and the textbook-homework-worksheet-quiz-test-report card-A-B-C-D-F syndrome is not cutting it—it's obsolete to all who study it, yet so resistant to all who attempt to change it.³

Maybe we still believe that learning

is painful, that laughter means disorder, that rows and bells and grades and groups and quantifiable *this* and certifiable *that* really represent humanity's best attempt to grow spiritual, sensitive, whole, and vital beings. But I think not. I think we can respond to our deeper, less fearful nature and admit that something new, something fresh, is required. Then we can find all sorts of ways to agree, to grow, to reexamine, to become transformed. And then more schools will try the kind of co-creating we are trying at Thomas Harrison.

Magical Possibilities

Within an emergent school there are a range of possibilities, of perspectives:

- *Classrooms are windows to the world.* Students are in and out of classrooms regularly. The earth is the laboratory, the schoolroom an adjunct.

- *Teachers are co-learners and facilitators as much as lecturers and experts.* Technology abounds, and so does laughter. Instruction is never "delivered" as if knowledge came by UPS. Rather, knowledge is acquired, grasped, played with, modified, questioned, challenged, used, discarded, and reacquired. Knowledge is a teaching/learning process—not something static in a book. Wisdom is something far less quantifiable still.

- *There are many ways to learn.* Students work individually, in pairs, in small groups and in large groups, depending on the action. Sometimes there is competition, sometimes autonomy, sometimes cooperation. Often the students teach each other—and even the teacher. There is much to be learned from young people when we allow it to come forth. We do not "instruct," we do not "motivate" students. We do not modify their behavior as if they were laboratory animals.

- *Students should be treated with respect.* We treat our students as we ourselves would like to be treated, in an atmosphere of wholeness, freshness, interdisciplinary exploration, joy, risk taking, color, variety, light, sound, art, music, movement, creativity, intensity, challenge—and the firm belief in everyone's always doing one's best.

The Transformation

Those who live in the moment, those who savor the memories of the teacher who encouraged them, the concert in which everyone somehow played magnificently, the children's spontaneous ballet in the living room after supper, a little one's late night request for one more drink of water and one final hug and kiss—these are the people who will make the difference in education, and in life. These are the ones who lead us in transformation. For them teaching and learning are a lifetime process. For them, for us, education must become, must somehow be, what Emerson called "participation in divinity." Through just such a process we are all transformed. This is what we hope is happening at our school. Come and see us. Bring a notebook, a smile, and an open mind. We provide the pencils and the magic. □

¹See B.S. Raebeck, (Summer 1987), "Secondary School Reform: Tinkering With an Obsolete Engine," *Contemporary Education*, 53(4): 186-191.

²See J. Frymier (December 6, 1989), "Retention in Grade is 'Harmful' to Students," *Education Week*, p. 32.

³The obsolescence of the traditional classroom process is substantiated over and over again by those who have studied it most seriously. See references.

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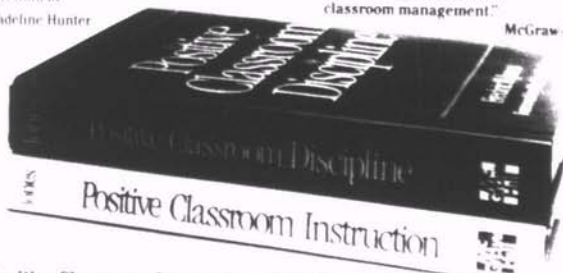
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