
HOW EFFECTIVE IS OUR SCHOOL?

by KIMBROUGH MARSHALL

I have spent the last 11 years — my entire professional career — working in the same inner city middle school in Boston. While my experience is narrow, I have played a number of different roles in a school which has undergone a gradual transformation from a violent ghetto school to a successfully integrated magnet school. It has been intriguing to look back over the last 11 years and ask myself how we defined an effective school at different points and what strategies we used, with varying degrees of success, to make our school work better. It also has been enlightening to compare our ideas on school effectiveness with those that have emerged from the new wave of educational research, in particular *Fifteen Thousand Hours*.

I have had two problems analysing efforts to improve our school: first, we have never had a single definition of effectiveness against which we measured our policies; and second, we have never systematically gathered and analysed data on student achievement, attendance, behavior, and long-range success. In fact, we had shifting, *ad hoc* definitions of what made our school better, and operated from gut level feelings of what seemed to be working and what fit our preconceived notions. So what follows is necessarily a personal and unscientific account of the journey of one school towards effectiveness.

Law and order

In the late sixties, the all-poor, all-black Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School in Roxbury was considered one of the worst schools in the city of Boston. For years it had been plagued by violence, intermittent closings, false fire alarms, vandalism, and so forth. Parents and community leaders pushed for black administrators and community control. After a particularly disastrous year in 1968-9, the Boston School Committee gave in to one demand and appointed a dynamic young black principal, Rollins Griffith, and gave him *carte blanche* to straighten out the King School. I was one of a number of new teachers he brought into the school with him in the fall of 1969, and during my first year of teaching I watched Griffith crack down on disruption, motivate teachers, build a library and a guidance area, and bring the school to the point where learning could take place. One of the most obvious measures of ineffectiveness in those days was the number of false fire alarms, and we



didn't have one that year. But on a scale where the perfectly effective school rates a 10, we were now at stage 1.

A rookie teacher's ideals

I came into teaching with all the foolhardy idealism of a '60s liberal. Urban teaching seemed a responsible alternative to the draft and an important form of national service. The fact that the school was in crisis only made the challenge more exciting. I saw my role as nothing less than turning around the lives of my underprivileged sixth graders and giving them the kind of superb teaching that the Boston schools (according to Jonathan Kozol and Peter Schrag) had been denying them for so long. I was sold on the anecdotal evidence that great teachers can have an enormous impact on people's lives, and I planned to be that kind of teacher. Although I was not thinking in terms of school effects at this point, if anyone had asked me to define an effective school in my first two weeks of teaching, I would have said it was a school staffed entirely by bright, idealistic Harvard graduates like me who, together, would sweep away the mustiness and mediocrity of the system and really change the kids' lives for the better.

Unfortunately I did not have the proper training or temperament to work in an urban school, and gave all the wrong signals to my students. The honeymoon ended, and my class proceeded to eat me alive. Room 326 became one of the most noisy, chaotic places in the King School, and other teachers tried to convert *me* to some elementary techniques of classroom control and management. But by then it was too late to "start tough", and I was not listening to other advice; I still hoped that if the curriculum was interesting enough the discipline problems would take care of themselves. That did not work, and I am a living, breathing argument for more effective teacher training, more careful teacher hiring, and more meaningful supervision and support of first-year teachers. But at that point in the school's history other things came first, and it was sink or swim for teachers in their classrooms.

More delusions

By February of my first year, things had calmed down enough in my classroom for me to think about school-wide issues, and I began to focus on solutions to the on-going tension and conflict that existed around the school. (Sometimes it seemed that the absence of false fire alarms and the relative calm in the corridors had squeezed all the problems into the classrooms, where they were taking their toll on teachers.) I spent my winter vacation writing a long proposal to the principal which I hoped he would implement *in toto*. My starting assumption was that class size (then 20-25) was responsible for our discipline problems, and if we just used our large staff to reduce class size, we would be able to attack the roots of our students' behavior problems and create a proper learning atmosphere.

The basic proposal was to break the school into 65 "family groups" of 10 students each and have the entire staff work virtually full-time to keep class size to 10 throughout the day. Every adult in the building would run a family group (after the proper training), and each family group would meet at the beginning and end of every day to discuss personal and academic problems and plans. I also proposed breaking the school into houses, buying a minibus for continual small-group field trips around the city, using the roof

of the school as a fenced-in playground, giving teachers more freedom with their curriculum, getting rid of ability tracking, and more.

The proposal was hopelessly naive, especially on the union contract's provision that teachers could not teach more than 25 periods a week, and the principal did us all a favor by turning it down cold. In retrospect, some of the suggestions would have made the school more effective — small classes, field trips, closer student-teacher relationships — but others would not have helped. *Fifteen Thousand Hours* is explicit on the need for close teacher cooperation on curriculum and the problems that come from too much freedom to do your own thing in the classroom. Besides this, the proposal had no political support around the school, and would have been a scheduling nightmare. What the school needed at that point was something much more straightforward and conventional. What it also needed was for me to do my job and get my classroom together.

The inkblot idea

For the next five years, I closed my classroom door to all intruders, official and otherwise, and concentrated on my students. Outside my room, the school gradually improved by dint of the efforts of many dedicated teachers and administrators and the gradual swing away from the violence of the 60s.

I developed a successful compromise between traditional and open education which I called "learning stations," wrote my own curriculum based on Boston's expectations, and began to feel really successful both in building skills and in reaching my students as people. As I gained confidence in what I was doing in my classroom, I came to believe in another model of school change. It seemed to me that an exemplary classroom using innovative methods could gradually effect the classrooms around it, and that superior teaching practice would spread outwards like an inkblot in porous paper. I knew that students from other classes were peering into our room and asking their teachers why they could not have their desks in groups, work with typewriters, Soma cubes, and jazzier worksheets, and go on Saturday field trips, and I hoped this would prod my colleagues into opening up their classrooms and getting closer to their students. I also proselytized in the teachers' room and shared worksheets, typewriters, and International Paper cylinders.

Although I ended up working in a two-room team-teaching arrangement with one colleague I "converted" to learning stations, he was my only convert. Mostly I generated jealousy and resentment and not a little scorn. Seen from a different perspective, my classroom seemed disorderly, my worksheets amateurish, and my closeness to students the result of an insecure desire to be liked. The inkblot theory of school change does not work because teachers have to work with their own styles and follow their own instincts, and learning stations were just my personal way of working with kids and would not work for most others. Besides, teachers are suspicious of superstars in their midst and possessive of their own methods and materials. Looking back, I do not blame them for their reticence, and my contribution to the school's effectiveness during those years was confined to my own classroom, where I did a good job.

Fifteen Thousand Hours does have something to say about the impact of isolated teachers and the phenomenon of

teachers writing their own curriculum, and it is not very positive. When I discussed my classroom outside the King School, I was frequently asked, "What happens to your students when they leave your class?" I never had a very good answer to that question, but felt helpless to affect a flow of skills and materials from grade to grade — and unwilling to become part of the flow of boring, dry textbooks that so many other teachers before and after me were using. In retrospect, it is clear that we all needed much more structure and direction from school administrators in the area of curriculum, and much more help in locating and buying good materials and sharing the good materials we wrote. All over Boston, teachers were reinventing the wheel, and there was no overall plan of when kids would learn which skills and how.

But for five years I was much too wrapped up in making my classroom better to think about taking on a broader administrative role in the King School. Indeed, until very recently I have thought of the role of school administrators in negative terms, and have tried to have an impact through my classroom, through talks to teachers in other schools and graduate courses, and through articles and books for a national audience. I don't regret a minute of these years, but if my goal was to influence a single school, the new research suggests that I was on the wrong track.

Desegregation

In 1974, the Boston public schools were desegregated by Federal court order, and my colleagues and I taught white students, in many cases for the first time. The legal rationale for desegregation in Boston was the School Committee's deliberate creation of a dual school system; but the black parents and their white liberal allies who pushed the lawsuit also believed that if the Boston schools were desegregated, they would be forced by white parents to do a better job for black students. And, indeed, I think desegregation made the King School more effective, although not for these reasons. The national attention and the effect of a dramatic change got us talking more to one another, working harder, and thinking more carefully about what we were doing, as well as bringing more equity to the distribution of services and supplies. Some feared that racial warfare would break out between our neighborhood black and bused white students, but nothing like that happened. The King School drew rave reviews for a peaceful year and a solid program. But this record of effectiveness was based on a new *ad hoc* definition: achieving racial peace and surviving the crisis of desegregation.

Beyond the short-term Hawthorne effect, desegregation is not in itself a strategy for making schools more effective. To the degree that changing the racial composition changes the ability to mix in the right direction, there may be an effect; but according to *Fifteen Thousand Hours*, this is only one of many important factors, and seems to bear mainly on postgraduate delinquency. The arrival of white students in our school made it more balanced and nationally representative, and righted a wrong perpetrated by the Boston School Committees of the 1960s; but it would take more than that to get us focused on other reforms that needed to be made. There continued to be curriculum anarchy, no useful testing program, widespread teacher isolation, poor morale, and an archaic, rigid schedule, to name just a few problems and shortcomings. At that point we were consid-

ered a good school, but I am sure that a careful analysis of student data would have shown that we were not a very effective school. We might have been doing better than many other urban schools, but that was no excuse for not doing better still.

A magnet school in the marketplace

Then, in the spring of 1975, Judge W. Arthur Garrity Jr. made the King School into a magnet school. We now had to *attract* a racially balanced student body on the basis of our magnet theme, language arts, and could no longer rely on forced assignments and busing to fill our seats. In the first round of parent selection, the previous reputation of the school and the present street crime in the school's neighborhood kept many white parents from choosing the King School, and our enrollment plunged from 922 to 298. We were in immediate danger of being closed down or at least losing a good part of our staff, starting with the more innovative younger teachers with less seniority.

The pressure of the marketplace — competing for students with other magnet and district schools — turned out to be a powerful catalyst for change. It would take a very convincing educational program to attract white students to the school, and to prevent many parents, black and white, from deserting the troubled Boston system entirely, so the pressures of the marketplace got us thinking in terms of fundamental reform. A group of teachers who had been meeting informally for years to talk about how to improve the school formed ourselves into the August Planning Group, got a grant from the state, hired a consultant, drew up a plan, got the principal's approval, and proceeded to use a write-up of the new improved King School to recruit students by direct mail and door-to-door visits. Parents were impressed, and within a month we had doubled our enrollment and managed to persuade Judge Garrity to retain the staff and give us more time to build our enrollment. Since then, we have continued to get state money, linked up with a local college, dramatically upgraded the educational program, and succeeded in filling the school with a racially balanced student population drawn from every part of Boston. We now have 750 students and an excellent reputation around the city.

It is interesting to look back at the changes we thought would make our school more effective and more attractive to parents and students (effectiveness and pulling power had come to be more or less synonymous — a dangerous state of affairs if we ever drifted from substantive educational change to slick advertising techniques). Urged on by our consultant, we developed a three-point philosophy of what a middle school should do for its students:

- Continue to teach and reinforce basic skills
- Expose students to a broad range of options
- Surround students with a caring, supportive group of adults

Here are the main reforms we stressed in our original recruiting letter in 1975:

1. An intensive reading program taught in the stability of homerooms with small-group remedial attention for students with special needs.
2. A program of minimum standards for core subjects.
3. A cycle of intensive courses in art, science, music, shop, and home economics.

4. A weekly minicourse, each student having a choice between 45 high-interest, seven-week courses ranging from chess to street hockey.
5. An elective program for seventh and eighth graders with a range of choices.
6. The abolition of tracking.
7. A cluster system with localized groupings of classes taught by teams of teachers with a coordinated strategy.
8. Five-minute breaks between classes in place of one recess.
9. An end to boy-girl segregation in gym, shop, and home economics.
10. Constant attention to safety and security.

Most of this actually happened that fall and continued with some modifications in subsequent years. But some changes met with subtle and effective resistance from parts of the staff who had not been involved in the frantic summer planning and recruiting process, and were not as seized by the urgency of changing the school as were the members of the August Planning Group. The areas in which we made the least progress with the rest of the staff were those that *Fifteen Thousand Hours* says are among the most important: clear academic expectations for each grade, a testing program geared to them, and teacher coordination on curriculum and discipline. These all improved, but a really crisp, clear, uniformly implemented program of minimum standards and curriculum expectations continues to elude us. Too many of our teachers had been left to their own devices for too long, and were unwilling to make changes and compromises in what they taught. We had administrative support for these changes, but not enough active leadership in making them happen on a day-to-day basis. Here lay the basic weakness of this reform effort: teachers could go only so far in bringing about change; our group could make some important reforms, perform summer recruiting heroics, and point the way for the rest of the staff, but we were in no position to tell anyone what to do or resolve some of the difficult conflicts that arose. The pressures of the marketplace got us all thinking in terms of attracting and holding onto students, brought about some marked improvements in the program, and brought out the best in nearly everyone; but this was not enough to insure an effective school. At this point we were at stage 3 on the 10-point scale, beginning to ask who was teaching what to whom at what point and in what way. But further progress would require clear answers to these questions backed by a staff consensus, and there we were stymied by a lack of educational leadership. This was not a problem unique to our school and our principal; the incredible management, discipline, and bureaucratic demands of running an urban middle school make it virtually impossible to be an educational leader on top of everything else — and yet according to the new research, nothing is more important to school effectiveness.

Education coordinator

This problem — along with the increasing strains that many extra activities were putting on my teaching — led me to develop and get state funding for a new role in the school, that of Education Coordinator. I was to work closely with the principal and staff on curriculum and staff development, minimum standards, scheduling, and program develop-



ordering — not the district administration or the downtown administration, which are far too remote, but the principal and assistant principals at the school building level. I don't think that a nonadministrative parallel structure is effective without a stronger administrative role, perhaps a one-two, Mutt and Jeff dynamic, between the two. Otherwise, I now favor a different role — an assistant principal for curriculum and staff support. This person would be part of the chain of command, but would be protected from routine discipline and management work and required to work only on long-range educational matters and direct classroom observation and support. Such a role might have been more effective than the two we tried; although ours did have a significant impact on the school, I do not think they really got to the nitty-gritty of school effectiveness.

Conclusion

Reading *Fifteen Thousand Hours* and other new research has made me take a new look at the King School. We are touted as one of the best middle schools in the city, have successfully recruited hundreds of students from all over Boston, and seem to have a positive school climate, but how many of the key variables do we have? Have we been pushing the right buttons? Are our efforts really paying off for our students?

I think most of what we have been doing is pointed in the right direction, and we have avoided things that the research has found to be the most negative, such as corporal punishment and low expectations of students. In addition, I think there are three areas in which our school helps students in ways that probably would not show up in a conventional analysis:

1. *Multicultural experience*: having positive experiences with peers of other racial, ethnic, and economic groups may not show up in test scores, but is immensely important in getting along in a multicultural society.

2. *Sports Programs*: a very active intramural and interscholastic sports program run by a few super-dedicated teachers undoubtedly makes a big difference to the attendance, attitude, and perhaps the academic work of many marginal students.

3. *Sex education*: our program, the first allowed in the Boston public schools, is taught to all students who get written permission from their parents, which is usually about 94 percent of the student body. Although the knowledge and attitudes will not show up on any standardized tests, I think it is one of the most important contributions we are making to the lives of our kids.

Clearly, though, we have a long way to go before we rate a perfect 10 (perhaps we are a 4 now). Here is my personal list of some of the steps I think need to be taken, many of which may apply to other schools as well:

1. We need to use the new research to spell out the key components in our school that will make the most difference to our students.
2. We have to use attendance, discipline, and academic data to measure progress and identify problem areas.
3. We need much more active supervision and support of teachers in their classrooms.

4. We need more staff communication and cooperation on curriculum and materials to avoid gaps and overlap and build a real three-year flow.
5. We need clearer curriculum goals, and a testing program geared to them.
6. We need a school-wide stress on the crucial classroom variables, such as a businesslike approach, displaying student work, frequent praise, and others.
7. We should take another look at the issue of ability grouping, which was decided on a rather emotional basis several years ago and may not be matched to the strengths of our staff.
8. Teachers need to be more involved in decision making, either in a faculty council or a leadership group.
9. We need to extend and expand the informal counseling that is happening now between students and teachers, perhaps by setting up an advisory group program.
10. We need to develop a systematic program to catch and help failing students before they are caught in a spiral of failure and poor self-esteem; mastery learning seems the most promising approach, and we need to give it careful consideration.

My central conclusion from my years at the school and my reading of the new research is that the principal's role is central to almost everything. For teachers to be optimally productive and feel part of an effective school team, there must be dynamic, omnipresent, humane educational leadership at the school building level. After many years of resisting this move, I have decided to leave the classroom, go to graduate school, and work towards becoming a principal of an urban school. If I do become a principal, my years at the King School will stand me in good stead, but the new research will be a valuable starting point. In a few years, the degree of uncertainty about which school variables really make a difference, should have been reduced considerably. My ambition is to be the kind of principal who can translate this kind of theory into action.

