

This article was downloaded by: [Canadian Research Knowledge Network]

On: 8 May 2010

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 783016864]

Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR)

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t775653666>

Maintaining Excellence While Managing Transitions: Norman S. Weir Revisited

Christine L. Emmons ^a; Ruth Baskerville ^b

^a Yale University Child Study Center. ^b Norman S. Weir Elementary School, Paterson, New Jersey.

Online publication date: 16 November 2009

To cite this Article Emmons, Christine L. and Baskerville, Ruth (2005) 'Maintaining Excellence While Managing Transitions: Norman S. Weir Revisited', Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR), 10: 2, 199 – 207

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1207/s15327671espr1002_6

URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1207/s15327671espr1002_6

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf>

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

Maintaining Excellence While Managing Transitions: Norman S. Weir Revisited

Christine L. Emmons
Yale University Child Study Center

Ruth Baskerville
Norman S. Weir Elementary School
Paterson, New Jersey

In a national education climate where change is the only constant, Norman S. Weir Elementary School has maintained and expanded the reform efforts that have resulted in striking academic achievement and improved school climate. Despite changes in administration and staffing, a highly professional and committed staff has continued the implementation of the Comer School Development Program and sustained Weir as an outstanding intellectual and social development learning community.

NORMAN S. WEIR TODAY

The story of Norman S. Weir's [NSW] rise from one of the lowest performing to one of the highest performing schools in Paterson School District in New Jersey was told in a 1998 issue of the *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*. That article (Emmons, Efimba, & Hagopian, 1998) covered the period from 1991 to 1996 and described the transformation of the school with the help of the Comer School Development Program. This article deals with 1998–2004, mainly from the point of view of the principal and members of the School Leadership Team. In the previous article (Emmons et al., 1998), we described the rise of Norman S. Weir from one of the lowest to one of the highest achieving schools in Paterson. In 1991, as one of the four lowest performing schools in Paterson, Norman S. Weir was directed by the superintendent to restructure to improve climate and student achieve-

Requests for reprints should be sent to Christine L. Emmons, School Development Program, Yale University Child Study Center, 55 College Street, New Haven, CT 06510–3208. E-mail: christine.emmons@yale.edu

ment. To comply with the directive, Norman S. Weir chose to work with the Advocacy Design Center Schools out of Columbia University Teachers College, through which they chose the Comer School Development Program (SDP) as the means of improving climate and student achievement.

By 1996, Norman S. Weir was one of the highest achieving schools in the district and the school climate had improved significantly. In 1994, when implementation of the Comer SDP began in earnest, no eighth grader at Norman S. Weir was at the highest level (Level 1) of competence in reading on New Jersey's Early Warning Tests. In 1996, 45.5% of Norman S. Weir's eighth graders attained Level 1 competence in reading. Similarly for mathematics, in 1994 no eighth grader at Weir was at Level 1 competence. In 1996, 18.2% of eighth graders at Weir attained Level 1 competence in mathematics, surpassing the district average of 10.3%.

The school climate improved from one of low staff morale and student disaffection with the learning process to one where staff members were "enthusiastic about their work, eager to collaborate with one another for the purpose of the development of their students, and willing to engage parents in partnership in the education process" (Emmons et al., 1998, p. 39). Students displayed higher self-esteem, greater belief in themselves, and an eagerness to learn. Both students and staff experienced a greater sense of belonging in an environment where staff worked collaboratively as they focused on fostering a climate defined by caring and strong academics.

This article describes the current reality of Norman S. Weir Elementary School. The consensus of the principal and 15 staff who responded to the *Norman S. Weir Elementary School Questionnaire* is that life at Norman S. Weir has been enjoyable and productive, even "wonderful." The student population has remained more or less the same in terms of demographics, but it has grown in size. Academic achievement remains high. The greatest change noted from the 1998 to 2004 period has been in staffing. There have been several retirements and new hires, as well as some transfers. Through all of the staff changes, the school has maintained its focus on the well-being of its students. The Comer facilitator writes,

Norman S. Weir's school climate is continuously reviewed and remediated. Teachers continually assess their delivery of instruction and adapt accordingly. The beauty of this building is that it is always striving for excellence.

Norman S. Weir, which includes Grades 1 through 8, has 300 students who are 46% Black, 48% Latino, 1% Asian, 4% White, and 1% "Other." There is still one general education class per grade. The student body is composed of general education students, cognitively impaired students, multiply disabled, language learning disabled, and deaf students. Some 90% of students receive free or reduced-price lunch. The average class size is 24 for general education and 11 for special education. The length of the school day is 6 hr 35 min with 5 hr 50 min spent in instructional time. The teacher-student ratio is 1:25 for general education, with the ex-

ception of reading and math. The special education population has a ratio of 1:12. The average attendance rate over the past 5 years has been 94%. The school's 2002–2003 report card (New Jersey Department of Education, 2003) lists English as the first language spoken in the home of all of Weir's students, and the overall faculty–student ratio as 1:6.7. In this report, 45% of Weir students are classified as Students with Disabilities requiring Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).

The general education student population continues to be drawn from a waiting list on a first-come, first-served basis. However, students with siblings already in the school are selected first. Students must apply for entry into the school, and the District Central Office assigns special education students to the school. Because Norman S. Weir is located in downtown Paterson, it has no neighborhood from which to draw students. The consensus is that there has been no significant change in the physical community in which the school is located, but one person pointed out that there has been growth in the downtown areas, with several new buildings, overcrowded parking, and a new preschool. The school is also surrounded by a community college.

Generally, the Comer Process is working well at Norman S. Weir. There is a sense of ownership of both successes and failures and a realization that the school community itself must make change happen. The Comer Process has helped staff to work better together and to view themselves as a cohesive group. As with all organic processes, continued vigilance is needed for progress to continue.

DATA SOURCES

The major sources of information for this article are the responses to the *Norman S. Weir Elementary School Questionnaire*, completed by the principal and about 15 staff members in September 2004, the Norman S. Weir 2002–2003 School Report Card, and the School Development Program (SDP) database of Leadership Academy Attendees. Six-year (1998–1999 to 2003–2004) attendance and achievement trend data were obtained from Principal Baskerville. Notes from a June 2004 site visit of an implementation coordinator provided additional information.

MANAGING TRANSITIONS

Staff Development and Support

In 1997, Dr. Hagopian¹ was assigned to the New Jersey Department of Education and Dr. Ruth Baskerville was appointed principal of Norman S. Weir. Unlike what

¹Dr. Hagopian died in 2001. We honor her for her dedication to children.

many principals do on assuming command, Principal Baskerville decided to continue processes that were working well in the school. As such, she continued the use of the Comer SDP and deepened implementation by embarking on a program of staff development in the Comer Process. In October 1998, Principal Baskerville and a team of nine staff members from Norman S. Weir attended the Comer SDP 101 Leadership Academy. This team included the chairpersons of the School Leadership Council, the Student and Staff Support Team, the Parent Team, the Comer facilitator, a social worker, and teachers. In January 1999, Principal Baskerville returned with this team to attend the Comer SDP 102 Leadership Academy. This action ensured that key people involved in the implementation of the Comer Process would have the knowledge and skills to further enhance the process.

Staff development in the Comer Process has continued over the years with additional staff (as well as members of the original team), parents, and students attending various Comer SDP Leadership Academies. For example, Principal Baskerville and five staff members (four from the original group of nine) participated in the Comer SDP Summer Policy Institute in Washington, DC, in July 1999; 10 students, 3 parents, and 1 staff member attended the Comer Kids' Academy in July 2002. (The Comer Kids' Academy takes place in conjunction with the Principals' Academy.) Principal Baskerville served as one of the Principals in Residence at the Principals' Academy in 2002.

As with all schools implementing the Comer SDP, an Implementation Coordinator was assigned to Norman S. Weir to help shepherd the process. The Implementation Coordinator is a Comer SDP staff member who visits the school several times a year to work with the Comer School Facilitator and the School Leadership Council, providing on-site consultation and staff development as needed.

Implementation of the Comer Process

As a result of continuous staff development and support, the Comer Process is working well at Norman S. Weir. According to Principal Baskerville, the School Planning and Management Team, now called the School Leadership Council (SLC), "has worked exceptionally well, meeting regularly [twice a month] to manage every aspect of school life." Staff feel that the SLC is "very efficient and runs effectively," "has been a driving force in making improvements," and is a "model for shared decision making." One staff member shared the opinion that the SLC may need to make a greater effort to involve staff who are not SLC members or who do not regularly attend SLC meetings.

The SLC maintains ongoing minutes, agendas, and Process Observer's comments. Some of the major issues addressed have been staffing, school repairs, special events, and budgets. Due to the effectiveness of the SLC, the school got new air conditioning and heating units after much discussion with the Central Office. The school was able to keep its carnival when the budget became too small to sustain it throughout the district. The SLC has also helped the school to get grants for vari-

ous activities and programs, worked to get the building upgraded to state standards, addressed class size, and suggested workshops to be presented. The SLC is spearheading the drive for Norman S. Weir to become a true community school with medical, dental, and health services on site. The SLC has developed new community liaisons that are helping the school to meet this goal.

The Student and Staff Support Team (SSST), which has addressed a range of issues dealing with students' academic and social needs, student attendance, tardiness, and discipline, has functioned well and been effective. The SSST has maintained minutes, agendas, and Process Observer's comments for each meeting. The SSST organizes an annual Health Fair with much joint parent and staff participation. Other major issues addressed are "the need for more involvement with the community via a community resource fair" and "fire drill procedures." One area for improvement identified by a staff member is dissemination of information regarding their activities.

Although the Parent Team has contributed to the improvement of the school community by helping with the development of the Comprehensive School Plan that addresses all school issues, holding successful fundraisers, purchasing and distributing planners, and assisting in other ways, the adequate functioning of the Parent Team appears to be a challenge. Staff members do not perceive it as functioning as well or as consistently as the SLC and SSST, although Principal Baskerville views the Parent Team as having functioned satisfactorily until the 2003–2004 school year. Personal problems of three of the four officers during the 2003–2004 school year affected the functioning of the Team. In the summer of 2004, those three officers resigned.

In addition to the three Comer Teams, Norman S. Weir has several committees: Fundraising, Public Relations, Curriculum and Grant, School Climate, and Staff Development.

The Comer SDP guiding principles of collaboration, consensus decision making, and no-fault problem solving continue to be practiced at Norman S. Weir. These principles are used at all meetings. Collaboration is practiced daily at all levels, including general education classes. Decisions are reached through consensus at all meetings and no-fault problem solving is routinely practiced, but this does not mean that the principal does not hold everyone accountable.

Staff development over the past 5 years has focused on collaborative teaching, inclusion, and student management. These staff development activities have resulted in better behaved students with better time-on-task instruction.

Academic Programs

The two major staff development initiatives implemented in the school during the principalship of Dr. Hagopian (1994–1995 to 1996–1997)—the collaborative in-class model and the computer and Internet competency training—have remained in place and expanded with visible results. New staff members are trained

in the collaborative in-class model as they come on board. All students have computer classes weekly and staff competency in computer use has grown to such an extent that they have created their plan book and gradebook formats from the Internet. The Norman S. Weir 2002–2003 School Report Card shows that the computer–student ratio has improved from 1:8.7 in 2000–2001 to 1:3.6 in 2002–2003, surpassing the state average of 1:4.4. The state average in 2000–2001 was 1: 5.2. The 2002–2003 also shows that 100% of Weir’s classrooms and library–media centers have been wired for Internet connectivity since 2000–2001.

The practice of having students remain with the same math teacher, reading teacher, and language teacher for 3 years from sixth to eighth grade is still in place and is working very well. Principal Baskerville credits it as one of the strongest reasons for the academic success of their students. She emphasizes that teachers get to know the students and their parents very well. Algebra I continues to be offered to students for credit. It is taught from 7:15 to 8:00 a.m. daily.

Additional activities that directly target the improvement of academic achievement are cluster meetings, after-school programs, and the pacing of the curricula.

STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Over the years, Weir has maintained high academic achievement even through changes in administration and tests. As noted earlier, in 1997, Dr. Hagopian was assigned to the New Jersey Department of Education Office and Dr. Ruth Baskerville was appointed principal of Norman S. Weir. In the 2002–2003 school year, the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJASK4) for fourth graders replaced the Elementary School Proficiency Assessment (ESPA). In that year, 95.9% of Weir fourth graders achieved full or advanced proficiency on the NJASK4 Language Arts Literacy as compared to 52.9% of fourth graders for the Paterson District and 77.6% of fourth graders statewide. Similarly, 95.9% of Weir fourth graders achieved full or advanced proficiency on NJASK4 Mathematics as compared to 43.2% the Paterson District fourth graders and 68.0% of New Jersey fourth graders.

In the past school year, 2003–2004, 100% of Norman S. Weir fourth graders achieved full or advanced proficiency on the NJASK4 Mathematics and on the NJASK4 Language Arts Proficiency. Among the eighth graders at Weir, 76.9% achieved full or advanced proficiency in Language Arts, 53.8% achieved full or advanced proficiency in Mathematics, and 80.8% achieved full or advanced proficiency in Science on the Grade Eight Proficiency Assessment.

SCHOOL CLIMATE

The consensus is that school climate remains positive and spirited, with high academic achievement for students. Staff members describe the social climate as “re-

laxed and professional,” “very good,” “terrific,” and “great.” Only one person wrote, “needs to be worked on.” The quality of the interpersonal relationships was emphasized. One person writes, “The relationship among teachers is fantastic even though there’s been a large number of teachers hired over the past couple of years.” Another states, “I can only tell you about myself. I feel that I have excellent working relationships with other teachers, parents, and students. Personality of staff has a large impact on these relationships.” A final quote sums up the feeling at Norman S. Weir: “At NSW we take relationships seriously. ... Every staff member is valued. Every student is valued. Every parent is valued.”

Principal Baskerville notes that relationships among students, staff, and parents are strong and that she never allows anyone to mistreat another. She requires parents, staff, and students to follow proper department etiquette and expects teachers to share materials freely. General and special education staff are comfortable mainstreaming students. One staff member considers it significant that parents stand in line to apply to get their children into the school.

PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Parents are involved in many ways in the life of the school. In addition to the 24 regular members of the Parent Team, one or two parents sit on each of the other SDP teams and school committees. Parents also participate by getting their children to the school and by ensuring that they do their homework. Parents also help teachers in some of the classrooms, especially the lower grades, and serve as chaperones on field trips. Parents are also very involved in the school carnival. School events are generally well attended by parents.

The school attempts to promote parent involvement through publicity and special evening and weekend programs. Parents are encouraged to serve on committees and each parent signs a contract at the beginning of the school year. There is an open-door policy for parents and surveys are conducted every year to solicit their input. Teachers also call parents at home and send memos in an effort to get parents more involved.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

The school community is looking forward to the school’s becoming a true community school within 5 years, with medical, dental, and health services on site. This is a major goal of the SLC, which is partnering with community organizations to achieve this goal. Staff understand that it will take training, joint fund raising with community organizations, and patience to achieve their goal, but they are excited about the prospect of reaching this level of service to students.

CONCLUSION

When asked what they would like the world to know about their school, staff members wrote the following, a selection of direct quotes taken from their responses to the questionnaire:

[Norman S. Weir Elementary School] is a caring, highly academic institution where [they] carefully monitor progress, disaggregate test data, and have fun while building character! [It] is a wonderful place to work and study. The staff are very well educated and know how to get their students motivated and willing to learn. Dedication is the key at NSW. When new programs are introduced, NSW is among the first to show interest and jump on the bandwagon.

Our school ... is scoring higher than the mean [of] suburban schools on our state tests. [It] has dedicated teachers and follows an excellent whole-school reform model that has made a positive impact on students' academics, as well as their whole psychological beings. This impact applies to staff and parents as well. We believe all children can learn through a disciplined environment full of high expectations and a loving staff to support them. We are doing our best to make this school the best one in Paterson.

Norman is a wonderful school to work for. We have the best staff [who] will go the extra miles to do what is in the best interest of children. Our parents come when called upon. We are a successful school which embraces change.

POSTSCRIPT

In June 2004, seven key staff members retired, and Principal Baskerville retired on November 1, 2004. To ensure continuity, they have already brought new staff into the "Comer fold."

REFERENCES

- Emmons, C. L., Efimba, M. O., & Hagopian, G. (1998). A school transformed: The case of Norman S. Weir. *Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk*, 3, 39–51.
- New Jersey Department of Education. (2003). *Norman S. Weir 2002–2003 school report card*. Retrieved from <http://education.state.nj.us/rc/rc03/letter.html>