

School within a school

High schools let teachers take chances

The ideas behind philanthropist Walter Annenberg's \$500 million gift to improve U.S. schools are playing out in two Tar Heel schools.

By TODD COHEN

Risk-taking in the schools received a high-energy jolt in December, when philanthropist Walter Annenberg announced a \$500 million "challenge" gift to the nation's schools.

That gift includes \$50 million each to the Annenberg National Institute for School Reform at Brown University and to the New American Schools Development Corp. in Arlington, Va.

The remaining \$400 million will be divided up among schools and communities that the Annenberg Institute invites to take part.

A handful of Tar Heel schools already are working with organizations funded by Annenberg, and others are expected to apply for Annenberg funding.

"I'm sure that not only will there be individual school systems and schools going after it, but the state will be going with a grant proposal as well," says Tom Houlihan, education adviser to Gov. Jim Hunt.

Spread among schools throughout the U.S., the Annenberg gift may not change the world, but it will give some educators the luxury of time to experiment, says John Dornan, executive director of the Public School

Forum of North Carolina.

And time can be critical in testing new ways of teaching.

Terri McMurray, a teacher at a pilot "school within a school" at South Stokes High School north of Winston-Salem, says the one-year-old experimental program hinges on patience and grit.

"It's much more difficult to teach this way," she says.

Although it is part of South Stokes High, the school within a school — known as South Stokes Essential School — has its own teachers, students and building. The four teachers decide how they want to teach. Some courses, for example, are taught in blocks of 110 minutes, rather than the traditional 55.

Each teacher is responsible for one of four academic disciplines — science, math, English and social studies — but tries to incorporate the other three as much as possible.

Another goal is to teach the 80 students how to work in teams.

Data are not available on the effectiveness of the experiment, but McMurray says student attitudes and enthusiasm have improved. That's particularly encouraging, she says, because grasping how to really think and reason can be daunting.

South Stokes is one of two North Carolina schools working with the Coalition of Essential Schools at Brown. The Coalition was founded by Theodore Sizer, an education professor at Brown who also founded the Annenberg Institute there.



Students at South Stokes High School's pilot program work in teams on math problems. From left, Mitchel Allen, Anna Kirby, Amy Tuttle and Aaron Burkey.

Photo by Marc J. Kawaishi

The Coalition is a network of 700 schools that subscribe to nine "common principles" designed to help teenagers "learn to use their minds well" and be able to demonstrate what they've learned.

Chapel Hill High School also has begun a "school within a school" and is working with Sizer's Coalition. The Chapel Hill pilot program includes 300 ninth and 10th graders who are organized into three houses, each of which has a team of four teachers.

As at South Stokes, teachers design their own schedules, carving

out longer blocks of time for some courses. Interdisciplinary courses have been designed that cover several academic subjects.

Charles Pattenon, principal of Chapel Hill High, expects the pilot program to grow next year. And Pattenon is working to create a network of Tar Heel schools that apply Sizer's methods.

"It's a little too early to judge how successful it will or will not be and how much it will spread," Pattenon says of the pilot program at his school. "We feel fairly comfortable now with what we've got."

Community solutions

School performance keyed to race, poverty

The serious problems faced by public schools are intertwined with those of their communities, and fixing the schools will hinge on marshaling community resources.

Those are the preliminary conclusions of a study being conducted by the Public School Forum of North Carolina for the U.S. Department of Education.

The profile of a poorly performing school is "rural, poor and disproportionately minority," says John Dornan, executive director of the Public School Forum. "The politics of poverty and race have everything to do with the quality of education."

But sending in curriculum experts — a typical tactic — won't work, he says.

The study, to be completed soon, will recommend that achieving dramatic improvement in the schools will require tapping "all of government's resources, not just education," Dornan says.

"It really cries out for a team of social workers, psychologists, gang specialists or crime specialists, and economic development specialists that can help bridge the gap between the business community and the schools."

Todd Cohen

SCHOOL

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"Modern Red Schoolhouse," that is funded by the New American Schools Development Corp. in Arlington, Va.

The "Modern Red Schoolhouse" team, which is headed by the Hudson Institute in Indianapolis, is one of a handful being funded by New American Schools. The Hudson team aims to raise the standards by which children are taught, and to give schools autonomy in financing, curriculum and staffing.

Its underlying strategy is to identify traditional teaching techniques that helped children succeed in the past, and combine those with modern technology and knowledge about how children learn.

Murphy, Charlotte-Mecklenburg superintendent, says the approach has allowed the schools to shrink the gap between black and white student achievement.

Murphy says that when he took the Charlotte job in 1990, he inherited a "dual school system even if it was integrated."

For example, he says, Charlotte in 1990 had about 55 black teenagers enrolled in advanced placement courses. In the past two years, that number has increased to more than 350. What's more, Scholastic Aptitude Test scores for black and white students in the entire system have risen by 32 points and 27 points, respectively, and now are at the national average.

And by the spring of 1998, Murphy hopes to have all graduating

seniors who plan to attend college performing at an advanced-placement level.

"Many poor black youngsters walk into our schools and the decision is made the day they walk in that they're not going to be successful," he says. "Those are the types of attitudes we have to change."

To turn the system around, Murphy has asked principals to restructure their schools, allowing each school flexibility in scheduling classes, teaching and using resources.

Change, he believes, requires direction from the top, but it must be brought about by people throughout the system. It also requires using resources as efficiently as possible.

Two years ago, the Charlotte Chamber of Commerce sponsored a year-long study, funded by the county, that concluded the school system could shift \$3 million from administrative spending into the classrooms. Murphy, by supporting programs such as the one at Lake Wylie, is trying to do just that.

Stone, the Lake Wylie principal, wanted his school to serve its students, rather than forcing them to follow rules established simply for the convenience of teachers or administrators. Putting that philosophy into practice has included some changes that might seem unrelated to the job of teaching but are in fact designed to help children learn for themselves by making decisions about simple matters.

To give them the sense of freedom that goes with responsibility, for example, students are permitted during class to chew gum and listen to music on headphones. If simply chewing gum or listening to music improves student attitudes, and doesn't interfere with their work, Stone says, why prohibit such practices?

Stone also hired a professional chef for the cafeteria, and students have a choice of menus, and also can choose where they want to sit during meals.

Not only is the cafeteria turning a profit, but the cuisine and environment are attracting 80 to 90 parents

a day for lunch. Stone has worked to convert those diners into school volunteers: Last year, Lake Wylie boasted 250 parent volunteers.

Stone also found ways to shift resources so he could increase his teaching staff, and thus reduce the number of students assigned to each teacher. First, he told Murphy he wanted to take money targeted for teaching assistants and hire teachers instead. With lobbying by Murphy, state lawmakers voted to allow that exception to state law, and Stone hired six teachers instead of 12 assistants.

He also swapped art and Spanish teaching positions for other teaching positions. Regular classroom teachers picked up the task of teaching art, and Spanish now is taught by interactive video that originates in Arizona.

Unlike many elementary schools, which may assign a teacher to teach numerous academic disciplines, teachers at Lake Wylie teach what they're best at, Stone says. And their teaching methods differ with individual children, geared to the ways each child learns best. One child, for example, may learn more easily through hands-on activities, while another may learn better by listening to a lecture.

"Learning style has nothing to do with intelligence," Stone says. "It's how you process and retain new and difficult information."

Students also are grouped and taught based on how well they are performing, not on their ability. Students are tested periodically, and are advanced as they demonstrate they have mastered a subject. And parents are kept up to date on what's expected of their children.

Many schools require failing students to take courses over from the very beginning even if they have mastered some of the subject. Lake Wylie School, however, allows students to pick up subjects at the point they left off the year before.

Lake Wylie also works to teach students to be responsible members of a community. Instead of filling a custodian position, Stone bought vacuum cleaners and fourth-, fifth- and

sixth-graders volunteered to vacuum their classrooms.

Next year Stone will have saved enough in custodial salaries to hire a technology teacher.

Lake Wylie School is in only its second year, and it's too early to assess the overall effectiveness of the risks Stone is taking.

One measure cited by Stone is the virtual elimination of any gap between black and white kindergarten students in their readiness to advance to the next grade level. Based on a scale that is measured systemwide, that gap is less than four-tenths of one percentage point at Lake Wylie, compared with 21 points for Charlotte-Mecklenburg as a whole.

Stone emphasizes that the risks he's taken have been possible only because of strong leadership from Murphy.

While Murphy's strategy of encouraging innovations such as those adopted at Lake Wylie has won support from parents and community leaders, some public school advocates say it will be important to do more than simply test new theories.

John Dornan, executive director of the Public School Forum of North Carolina, says a critical challenge for school reform efforts will be to publicize what works and to make those strategies work on a broader scale.

Murphy agrees. In fact, at his urging, the Hudson Institute agreed to fund a pilot program that included 17 schools, compared with three schools for each of the other systems on the "Modern Red Schoolhouse" team.

Those pilot schools serve as "mold-breakers" for the rest of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg system, which incorporates tactics and strategies found to work in the pilot schools.

With the carrot of freedom that Murphy has handed out goes the stick of accountability. Murphy makes it clear he will judge the risk-takers by the "outcomes" they produce. And the risks, he says, are worth taking if schools truly are going to improve.

Job Opportunities

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

VIRGINIA LIVING MUSEUM
NEWPORT NEWS

Natural science museum seeks dynamic leader to guide the institution into the 21st Century with plans for a \$15-25M expansion. Collections include live native animals and plants in indoor and outdoor naturalistic habitats and non-live natural science specimens.

Exemplary science education program; contracts with eight area school systems. Attendance 250,000; budget \$2M, 60% earned revenue, remainder government and private support.

As CEO, has overall responsibility for business and collection management, also programmatic design of school and public programs.

Includes fund raising, financial controls and planning, exhibitions, staff training and motivation, and public representation of the institution.

ESSENTIAL QUALIFICATIONS: Leadership ability to inspire confidence in Board of Trustees, professional and volunteer staff, community leaders and public. Entrepreneurial management style, sound fiscal sense; familiarity with financial accounting and reporting principles; experience in development activities related to annual, long-term and capital support. Salary highly competitive; excellent benefits; EOE.

Send resume and cover letter by February 15, 1994 to:

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