

HIGHER

EXPECTATIONS CHALLENGE TEACHERS AND STUDENTS TO SUCCEED

BY PRISCILLA PARDINI

Ten years ago, Atlanta's Henry W. Grady High School evoked dual, conflicting images.

"If you were a student in the communications magnet program, you got a pretty good high school education," recalled Gene Bottoms, executive director of High Schools That Work (HSTW). "But if you were one of the other students, you didn't get much."

After almost a decade as an HSTW site, Grady is recognized not only as Atlanta's most successful public high school, but also as a Title I Distinguished School, a Southern Regional Education Board Gold Award winner, and a Georgia School of Excellence. What's more, the school now offers a second magnet program through its Health Science Career Academy.

"They've made some nice improvements," said Bottoms. "They're on a nice journey."



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Improvements at Grady High School

Considered an inner-city high school, Grady has made significant improvements through sustained professional learning.

- The attendance rate increased from 83% in 1996 to 93% in 2002, the last year for which data are available.
- The 9th-grade retention rate dropped from 35% in 1996 to 11% in 2006.
- Between 2000 and 2004, the percentage of 12th-grade students completing the HSTW-recommended curriculum in English, math, and science increased from 41% to 88%. And by 2004, all students were completing college-preparatory English and algebra courses.
- The percentage of Grady 11th-grade students passing the Georgia High School Graduation Test on their first attempt increased in all five subject areas between 1998 and 2005. The percent passing grew from 73% to 90% in social studies, from 62% to 74% in science, from 84% to 92% in math, from 85% to 92% in writing, and from 93% to 97% in English.
- The number of Grady students taking Advanced Placement exams increased from 48 in 1998 to 177 in 2006. The number of tests taken jumped from 77 to 274.
- Mean SAT scores for Grady students increased from a combined verbal and math score of 905 in 1998 to 1100 in 2005. The increase is particularly significant given that the number of students taking the test grew from 77 to 141.
- The high school graduation rate between 2001-02 and 2004-05 increased from 56% to 89%.
- A total of 194 of the 212 students who graduated from Grady in 2006 entered college. Three students entered the armed forces.
- The percentage of Grady students entering public colleges in Georgia in need of remediation decreased from 25% in 1998 to 18% in 2002, the last year for which data are available.

HSTW STAFF DEVELOPMENT

Grady is one of 1,200 high schools and 300 middle schools that have adopted the HSTW school improvement design. HSTW is based on two principles: that students “get smart through effort,” and that they’re more likely to make that effort “if we get the conditions for learning right,” Bottoms said. Those conditions, he said, include a rigorous curriculum that makes sense to students and convincing students that their teachers believe they are capable of performing at high levels.

Staff development is key to getting staff members at HSTW sites to integrate high expectations into classroom practices and encourage students to apply academic content and skills to real-world problems, Bottoms said.

HSTW staff development, while often site-specific and based on a school’s individual needs, also includes a number of common components. The initial step is usually a two-day retreat at which a school’s administrators and teachers look critically at the extent to which their practices are aligned with HSTW prac-

tices. If necessary, they then decide together on action steps to ensure that the HSTW practices are put into place. HSTW also offers a summer conference to encourage schools to learn from each other and a series of smaller follow-up workshops that focus on shared problems among several HSTW schools.

A SCHOOL THAT WORKS

Grady’s path to success, said Principal Vincent Murray, began with raising academic standards for all students and answering the question, “What can we do to make every student successful?” The expectation today, he said, is “that we will not lose a single one.” Key to getting there: professional development opportunities that refocused the myriad and typically disparate attitudes and goals of a large high school faculty into a common vision of school improvement and gave teachers the knowledge and strategies they needed to improve teaching and learning.

Grady’s faculty meetings and planning periods often are devoted to staff development. Murray arranges for substitute teachers to cover classes for teachers to attend HSTW workshops or national conferences, and he earmarked a \$5,000 school improvement award from Fordham University for summer staff development. He’s also used Title I funds to pay overtime to teachers for working on staff development projects.

The school’s staff has a lot to be proud of. Test scores, attendance and graduation rates, and the number of students in AP classes and going on to college have all increased. In fact, a 2004 Southern Regional Education Board case study highlighting the school’s improvement efforts describes Grady as “an inner-city school that works for all its constituents.”

Grady’s accomplishments are all the more significant given the well-

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documented challenge of improving high schools in general, not to mention those plagued with the problems of large, inner-city schools that enroll substantial numbers of students at risk of doing poorly in school.

Bottoms said high school reform is particularly tough because of the “deep-seated belief in the psyche of high school teachers and leaders that a lot of their students cannot learn very much.” As a result, he said, high schools have traditionally exhibited a “sorting mentality” that led to placing students into different levels of courses.

Beyond that, there’s the fragmented, departmentalized structure of secondary schools. “There’s no synergism, nothing that binds individual faculty members together,” he said. “You have 90 people going in 90 different directions.”

Leadership at the secondary level is more often about “control and management and keeping order” than curriculum and instruction.

But at Grady, Bottoms said, Murray was able to unify the faculty around a single mission: setting high expectations for every student. As a result, Bottoms said, Grady wiped out the whole range of low-level courses. “Teachers changed their belief structure and began to act as if more kids could learn

more than they previously had,” he said. “And they found out they could.”

FOCUSED STAFF DEVELOPMENT

Serious school reform at Grady began with the school’s response to a 1997 HSTW curriculum and instruction review that spelled out the school’s strengths and weaknesses.

Henry W. Grady High School Atlanta, Ga.

Grades: 9-12
Enrollment: 1,245
Staff: 77 teachers
Racial/ethnic mix:
White: 27%
Black: 66%
Hispanic: 3%
Asian/Pacific Islander: 2%
Native American: 0%
Other: 2%
Limited English proficient: 1.6%
Languages spoken: 8
Free/reduced lunch: 44%
Special education: 12%
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“We laid out a series of challenges,” recalled Bottoms. Among them: “If a small learning community built around a theme was good for some students, might not such an approach be good for all?”

With an HSTW staff member acting as a facilitator, about a third of the Grady faculty participated in an end-of-the-year, off-campus, two-day retreat aimed at “getting everyone on the same track regarding student achievement,” Murray said.

From that first retreat came a decision to focus on 9th graders. “If they got off to a good start, we figured they’d be more likely to have a good finish in 12th grade,” said Murray. The school created small homerooms, called advisories, for incoming freshmen. Each advisory was led by a certified staff member trained to assume responsibility for formally monitoring, guiding, and nurturing his or her advisees. Faculty also developed new 9th-grade classes in public speaking and research skills. All three programs are still in place, and the advisement program now reaches students at all grade levels.

Murray, who has been principal at

Grady for 16 years, considered the first faculty retreat so successful that he’s held one every year since, often designed and run with help from HSTW staffers. Participants review student achievement data and then, based on what they’ve learned, determine future staff development needs. “It’s been a great way of engaging our faculty in the process of continuous improvement,” said Murray. “We come out of the retreat with a few things in mind to work on the following year.”

Over time, the exercise has led to schoolwide staff development on standards-based, differentiated, and student-centered instruction; literacy training; higher-level thinking skills; diversity; motivating students; teaching in a block schedule, and the transition to 9th grade. Teachers learn in year-long focus groups about issues such as research-based, multicultural, and gender-specific instructional strategies; the inclusion of special education students in regular classes; and the use of data to differentiate teaching. The work, which occurs during planning periods, released time, and sometimes faculty meetings, culminates in presentations to the entire faculty. The work focuses, Murray said, both on strategies that reflect best practices and on “what is practical here at Grady.”

For example, the school introduced block scheduling in 2001 in an effort to motivate more students to undertake and complete challenging assignments. That change required teachers to learn specific strategies — such as project-based instruction and cooperative learning — that are better-suited to longer class periods. A desire to give more students a way to focus their high school studies on something relevant to their future led to the development of the Health Science Career Magnet Program.

Grady developed an honors program for 9th- and 10th-graders as a

High Schools That Work

This school improvement initiative aims to prepare students for careers and further education by improving curriculum and instruction in high schools and the middle grades.

For more information, visit www.sreb.org/Programs/hstw/hstwindex.asp

way to motivate more students to achieve at a high level. “The goal is to get them to experience what an honors class is like so they’ll be more likely to take Advanced Placement classes in 11th grade,” Murray said. Counselors encourage underclassmen with mediocre grades but strong test scores and writing skills to take the classes.

Murray said staff development helped those teaching the new honors courses learn practical ways to differentiate instruction and assessment to reach more students. But they also learned, he said, “Kids will rise to the occasion for teachers with a ‘you can do it’ kind of attitude.

“It’s part of our culture,” he added.

Marian Kelly, who chairs Grady’s language arts department and the school leadership team, points to the

proliferation of honors courses as an example of how that culture — one that values collaboration, an interdisciplinary curriculum, and innovation — led to higher achievement for all students.

“Because the culture at Grady is directed toward trying to provide a successful experience for all children, we find people step up to the plate,” Kelly said. “We had many teachers willing to take on new AP and honors classes, and those who had experience with advanced classes supported them and advised them on what worked.” Kelly said teachers collected data on which honors classes were most successful. “We have teachers who do this extremely well,” she said. “And if someone needs to take a day and observe those teachers’ classes, we make that opportunity available.”

Kelly said most Grady teachers feel safe trying innovative practices and suggesting new programs. “They’re told, ‘Be creative, and if you can demonstrate that something works, share it with someone else,’” she said.

Murray believes that because so much of the work on school improvement is teacher-led, it’s “owned by the faculty,” and ultimately more likely to be put in place.

Joyce McCloud, executive director of high schools for the Atlanta Public Schools, credits Murray with finding innovative ways to give Grady teachers the time and support they need to pursue professional learning. “They do a really good job of leveraging all the resources the school has,” McCloud said. ■