

Experiencing Education, Chapter 9

Preparing For a New Century



In the 1980's the Laboratory Schools better defined their mission, pictured is Peggy Bevington, a Nursery School teacher.

The conflicts of the 1970s were followed by a thoughtful reexamination of the Laboratory Schools structure. In the early 1980s, University leaders, parents, and teachers sought a new arrangement that would strengthen the Schools and make them more independent of the University.

The Schools had been overseen for 30 years by the Precollegiate Board, a group made up entirely of University faculty. This arrangement was fraught with ambiguity, however, as the Director of the Schools was expected to report to the University Provost as well as to the Board. Additionally, the Precollegiate Board was responsible for management of the Sonia Shankman Orthogenic School, a residential school across the Midway. Clearly, it was difficult for the professors on the Board to keep up with the pace of change at the Laboratory Schools; thus Director James Van Amburg suggested in the early 1980s that the situation needed to be studied.

In 1984, the University appointed the Laboratory Schools Commission to examine the mission of the Schools and ways to reorganize their governance. The Commission, chaired by Sidney Davidson, Professor in the Graduate School of Business, included University faculty, Laboratory Schools teachers, and parents. All learned that a wide variety of views about the role of the Schools flourished among the various members of the Laboratory Schools community.

Parents, in particular, held a variety of objectives for the Schools. For instance, some parents wanted the Schools to produce students with independent habits and high motivation while others wanted a carefully structured curriculum.

Tensions also existed between teachers and administrators. Teachers felt they should make major decisions about the curriculum, the use of school time, student admissions, and counseling. Parents held administrators responsible for some of these decisions, including those involving curriculum planning and student supervision. Administrators were coming and going at a fairly rapid rate, making it difficult for them to establish their authority. This turnover was due largely to administrative ambiguities but also by an interest among many of the administrators to secure University faculty appointments rather than continue at the Laboratory Schools.

The Commission recommended a more focused governance for the Laboratory Schools, with a board that would be responsible for the financial and academic oversight of the Schools. The new board should also provide a setting for discussion of the issues that concerned parents and others, the Commission recommended.

Kenneth Rehage, a retired Professor of Education at the University and a former Lab Schools teacher, was named Interim Director of the Schools for the 1984-85 school year as the University worked with the Commission to reorganize the Schools. As this work began, President Hanna Gray appointed a new Laboratory Schools Board, chaired by Harold Richman, a Professor in the University's School of Social Service Administration. This Board included University faculty as well as alumni and parents who had expertise in areas that could be valuable in the operation of the Schools. The University's general counsel and vice president for administration was named ex-officio member of the Board and served as the University's representative. Mary Jane Yurchak was appointed the new Director of the Schools.

The new organization made the Schools' structure similar to the model of organization used in other independent schools unaffiliated with universities. The resulting autonomy facilitated expanded attention to fund-raising and work to develop closer ties with alumni. It required several years for these efforts to become successful, but, when they did, the Schools were able to grow significantly, increasing enrollment and adding much needed space. Enrollment,

which reached a low point of 1,450 during 1987, climbed to 1,600 during the mid-1990s under the leadership of Director Lucinda Lee Katz.

A plan to reorganize the Schools led to the construction of a new Middle School building during the 1992-93 academic year. Fifth-grade classrooms were located in the building's third floor as the Schools were reconfigured. The reorganization was completed in 1994 with the establishment of an early childhood unit—consisting of Nursery School and kindergarten— with its own principal. Under the arrangement, the Lower School was made up of grades one through four; Middle School, grades five through eight; and High School, grades nine through twelve.

The student body of the Laboratory Schools in this period more directly reflected the ethnic, racial, religious, and economic diversity of the Chicago area. Geographic diversity was also encouraged with some students traveling to the Schools from communities in Indiana and the Chicago suburbs some 50 miles away. Such diversity, the Board and the administration believed, provided youngsters an opportunity to learn about other cultures, to interact with people from other backgrounds, and to live in a society that was becoming increasingly heterogeneous.

ACADEMIC PROGRAM KEEPS PACE

The organizational and physical expansions of the 1980s and 1990s were matched by attention to the new educational demands of the era. Manual arts training was dropped in the late 1980s, as computer instruction became a much more important part of the school program. Indeed, teachers at the Schools kept pace with developments nationally by introducing students to computers in second grade and continuing intensive exposure to ever-changing technologies through high school. Students learned computer programming and found ways to use electronic tools in their work in other subjects. Fourth-graders, for instance, participated in national projects to collect data on acid rain as they compared their findings with the results of similar tests throughout the nation.

As the computer became a more familiar companion in learning, students and teachers turned naturally to the Internet as a way, among other things, to increase their learning efficiency. High School and other students gathered information from articles and other sources available through the Internet as they wrote papers. They also used the Internet and electronic mail to communicate with scholars doing field work in the Arctic and in Central America. Teachers and students also created "homepages," a Laboratory Schools site on the Internet, to display their initiatives and to share ideas with teachers and students at other schools.

These efforts helped ensure that the Schools could remain an important resource nationally for educational innovation. For example, Laboratory Schools teachers continued their work with University faculty on the University of Chicago School Mathematics Project, initiated in 1983 with a multi-million dollar grant from the

Amoco Foundation. Lab teachers tested teaching techniques devised by the program, wrote chapters in books, and consulted in other ways with University faculty on what became the largest university-based mathematics curriculum project in the country. Their work was included in the nationally renowned Everyday Mathematics series for elementary school students and in the innovative textbooks of the project's secondary-school component.

CHALLENGES FOR A NEW CENTURY

As the Schools complete their first 100 years and prepare for the next, teachers, parents, administrators, and other members of the community are preparing to face challenges with vision and sense of purpose inspired by their predecessors. Those challenges, and often the dislocations, include ones forced on the Schools by changes in society at large. Families, for instance, often include two working parents or a working single parent, situations which often reduce the amount of time parents have available for their children and increase the responsibility of the Schools to nurture students. Living in families with less leisure time than before, children also are pressured to grow up too fast by changes in the mass culture.

In addition to responding to these external pressures affecting students, the Schools have also dealt effectively and innovatively in the traditional field of education. At the close of the Centennial year, for example, a major curriculum reorganization was under way. Teachers and administrators began intensive work in the mathematics program to establish group and grade norms, to make the program reflect national standards, and to make sure that students learn individually to their fullest potential.

The attention to the individual needs of students, referenced to national goals, has helped secure a leadership role for the Laboratory Schools. Excellent teachers, understanding and utilizing the innate curiosity and talent of their students, are behind new programs of instruction— vital examples of what is possible when educators seek new ways to solve old problems.

Accomplishments are often founded on the heritage of the Laboratory Schools, where truly democratic ideals have inspired many important values of the Schools— from “learning by doing” to a highly diverse student body. For a century, they have underlain some of the nation’s most dynamic innovations in education. With this heritage, which continues to grow, the Schools are destined to remain a lighthouse for other schools throughout the country. As schools everywhere face ever more daunting challenges, teachers at all levels and in many subjects may look to the Laboratory Schools where the lessons of “learning for life” first resonated for American education.