

Lessons Learned: A Report on the Benwood Initiative

In 2000, the Tennessee Institute of Public Policy issued a report that ranked the performance of all 1258 elementary and middle schools in the state. Of the 20 lowest-performing elementary schools, nine were in Hamilton County.¹ No other school district in the state had more than four schools in the bottom 20.

This information spurred a shocked and determined reaction from three key organizations in Hamilton County: the Benwood Foundation, the Public Education Foundation (PEF), and the Hamilton County Department of Education (HCDE). The three forged an alliance that created what would come to be known as the Benwood Initiative. The Benwood Foundation contributed \$5 million, the PEF contributed \$2.5 million, and HCDE contributed a great deal of strong leadership to turn these schools around.

All nine of these low-performing schools were urban, poor, and largely minority. Teacher turnover rates were high; the faculties were made up of young, inexperienced, and, in some cases, marginal teachers. The first day of school often found numerous classrooms with no teacher at all, with staffing sometimes incomplete until 2-3 weeks into the school year.



Student performance was abysmal. On average, only 12% of third-graders in these schools could read at or above grade level.

The partners of the Benwood Initiative decided to focus their efforts on student literacy, with a primary strategy of building knowledge and skills among educators. They tackled district-level structures and policies that impeded reform and crafted a reform framework that continues to provide effective professional development for teachers and principals. The overarching goal was to have every third grader reading at or above grade level within five years.

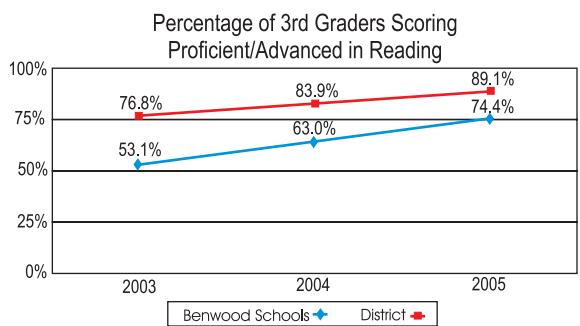
Their efforts are paying off. Students in the Benwood schools are making significant gains in achievement. The schools have become dynamic institutions whose teachers report high levels of job satisfaction. Teacher turnover rates have dropped, and principals receive many applicants for every job opening.

The story is remarkable. The road has not been straight or smooth, and the journey is not complete, but much has been – and continues to be – accomplished. Here are some of the lessons learned from the Benwood Initiative.

¹ The original ranking included: Barger Elementary, Calvin Donaldson Elementary, Clifton Hills Elementary, East Lake Elementary, East Side Elementary, Hardy Elementary, Howard Elementary, Orchard Knob Elementary and Woodmore Elementary. As the program began, however, Barger became a magnet school, and Hillcrest Elementary, a school in similar circumstances, was added to the list.

1. In spite of hurdles, low-income minority children can attain high levels of academic achievement.

Children in Benwood schools are poor, urban, and largely minority, and face very real hurdles to learning and academic success. Nonetheless, students in the Benwood schools have made significant strides in achievement, with the percentage of third graders scoring proficient or advanced in reading jumping from 53% in 2003 to 74% in 2005. One school's third-grade reading scores rose from 41% proficient or advanced in 2003 to 84% in 2005. Another's rose from 54% to 88% during the same period. The district average rose from 77% in 2003 to 89% in 2005.



Benwood schools are steadily closing the achievement gap. Two of the eight schools are within a point or two of the district average.

Even more significant are the gains revealed in Tennessee's value-added scores (TVAAS), where Benwood schools "outgained" 90% of all schools in Tennessee and made straight 'A's on the state report card. These scores measure the achievement *gains* of students in a given year. An 'A' indicates that students have made "exceptional" gains in student achievement, a 'B' indicates that student achievement gains "exceed the state growth standard" and a 'C' indicates that student achievement gains "maintain the state growth standard."

Value-Added Scores for Benwood Grades 4 & 5

	2003	2004	2005
Reading-Language Arts	A	B	A
Math	A	A	A
Science	A	B	A
Social Studies	A	A	A

2. Teacher learning Is the key to significant improvements in student learning.

Emphasis has been placed on research and best practices in designing professional development for teachers. All Benwood schools have benefited from training provided by external national consultants and visits to other, successful school districts.

Along with these targeted professional development opportunities, a significant key to the success of the Benwood Initiative has been "embedded professional development." Instead of half-day or one-day seminars on topics chosen by administrators disconnected from the needs of the school, embedded professional development occurs in schools, during the school day and targets the needs that have been identified by that particular school.

Embedded professional development is centered around a "master" teacher – a teacher with demonstrated expertise, experience and effectiveness with students – who works one-on-one or with small groups of teachers. Known as Consulting Teachers (CTs) in Hamilton County, these master teachers serve as resources for teachers, providing support, offering information on best practices and current research, modeling instructional strategies, observing teachers as they implement these strategies, and providing feedback on ways to strengthen them.

3. Principals must become instructional leaders; they must have training and support.

Traditionally, principals focused on building management – hiring and firing teachers, teacher evaluation, student discipline, student safety, lunchrooms, transportation, and general day-to-day processes. They rarely entered a classroom. Among Benwood schools, principals have become instructional leaders, able to provide sound guidance and advice on content and methods to teachers, able to identify teachers' strengths and weaknesses, and able to foster teachers' professional growth. They are in classrooms every day.

For this task they need a team of leaders, sharing duties with assistant principals, consulting teachers and other school leaders to provide guidance and feedback so that every teacher receives the attention he or she needs.

These efforts have required principals, assistant principals and other members of the leadership teams to assume roles and tasks they were not trained to do. The leadership teams needed training in leadership. They needed to understand how to teach literacy, and how to help other adults understand how to teach literacy. They needed to understand the change process and how to foster a cooperative school culture and facilitate teamwork. To help gain these skills, the Benwood leaders were able to take advantage of the Leadership Institute already developed by the Public Education Foundation, which tailored programs to the specific needs of the Benwood program. In addition, PEF provided leadership coaches to lend a critical ear to principals as they moved forward with their plans.

4. Teachers must collaborate.

Teachers have traditionally worked in isolation, each one developing and pursuing her own plans and strategies for achieving shared goals. Now, a commitment to collaboration has infused the

Benwood Initiative. Each year, every Benwood school develops a plan for its reform work, including principals, assistant principals, teachers, CTs and, in some schools, parents or other community members in the development of the plans. In each school, all teachers of the



same grade level meet together several times per week to make shared plans, and the same type of planning is beginning to occur vertically, between grades. These planning activities allow teachers to develop common learning activities and share feedback on what worked and what did not, and help ensure that the learning activities students participate in and the knowledge and skills they are required to master during one year are aligned with those of subsequent years.

5. Real reform requires both bottom-up ideas and top-down direction and insight.

Benwood reform efforts have relied on shared leadership – decision-making authority placed at multiple levels. This approach combines the broad view of central office administrators, the school-wide view of principals, and the nuts-

and-bolts insight of teachers who are directly working with students, and fosters a sense of ownership and enthusiasm at all levels.

At the beginning of the Initiative, teams of school administrators, teachers and others created plans that identified specific strategies for their schools. These plans were informed by intensive learning sessions on issues critical to urban school reform and by visits to other schools where low-income and minority students were thriving. The plans then went through a rigorous review process where they were challenged and refined, and are updated annually with new plans and strategies for implementation.

6. Bonuses are nice, but not enough to attract and hold good teachers.

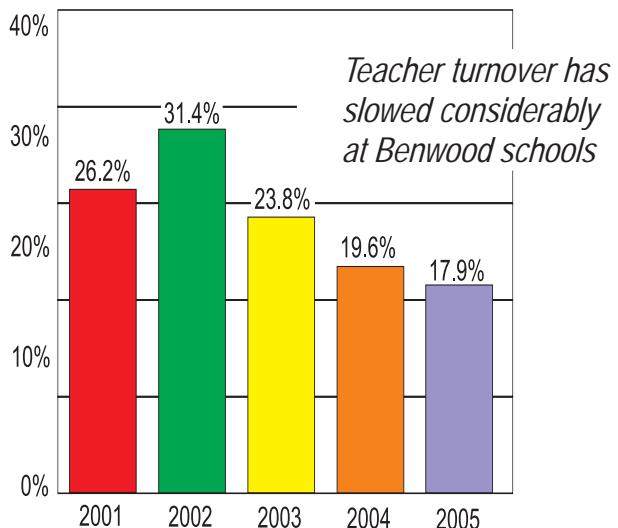
In an effort to attract good teachers to Benwood schools, teachers were offered an opportunity to receive financial bonuses for their work in improving student achievement. Benwood teachers appreciate bonuses as much as anyone would, but they report that bonuses are not the primary motivation for them to seek or retain employment at a struggling school. Instead, they are drawn by:

- personal commitment to traditionally disadvantaged students
- opportunity to work with a visionary principal
- collegial professional community that fosters learning

7. Teachers' unions can be strong collaborators in reform.

Teachers' unions must ensure that teachers are paid fairly, that they cannot be terminated without just cause, and that their seniority in the district is respected so that they – not a human resources manager – determine in which school they will teach. However, teachers are also

Percentage of Benwood teachers who are new to their school



motivated by a commitment to their work. Approached collegially and with data about the impact of personnel policies on student achievement, the Hamilton County Education Association (HCEA) developed an understanding of the challenges low-performing schools faced, which led to the creation of a strategic plan to improve student learning and achievement. The HCEA was an active participant in creating this plan, and did much to engage and educate its members about the changes being contemplated. Ultimately, the HCEA went against typical union positions and agreed to allow faculty at struggling schools to be reconstituted, and bonuses to be paid to teachers to attract and retain teachers at those schools.

Most importantly, however, the union agreed to change the hiring process to eliminate a seniority-driven domino effect which often left the urban schools with un-staffed classrooms on the first day of school – a situation which did not get resolved until 10 or 15 days into the school year. Now, teachers are asked to declare their desire to leave their positions in February.

Bonuses are not the primary attraction for teachers

Each teacher may state only 5 choices of schools to which they would like to transfer. The criteria for selection of teachers have expanded to include other factors besides seniority. The end result: the whole district is more stable, and urban principals are able to ensure that their schools are fully staffed and ready to go by the first day of school.

8. School districts can display sustained creativity and flexibility and can cultivate dynamic schools.

Today, leaders on the Hamilton County Department of Education staff see reform as their work, and are constantly seeking ways to foster excellence in classrooms and in schools. This is a dramatic shift from the long-held perception that their role is to monitor schools' compliance with regulations.

The Superintendent reorganized his staff to include a Director of Urban Education. Instead of sitting at a desk at the central office, this Director is in the schools every day, evaluating



needs and progress and offering help and encouragement to principals and teachers alike. Other central office leaders have adopted the same practice, and now visit schools often.

One of the most remarkable outcomes of this shift in roles resulted in an extraordinarily tough decision to reconstitute faculty at the Benwood schools. Teachers were required to re-apply for their jobs, and a third of them chose to seek employment at other schools. Of these, 28 were tenured, low-performing teachers who could not find other positions. These 28 were placed at other elementary schools, and principals stepped up to help them either learn how to become effective teachers or understand that they needed to find other employment. While this created a challenge for these suburban principals and a great deal of political controversy, it was this reconstitution that allowed the development of the dynamic leadership teams and faculty that have been key to turning around the downward spiral of the Benwood schools.

9. School reform requires active partnership with diverse elements of the community.

The Benwood Foundation and the Public Education Foundation (PEF) have been key partners to HCDE in these reform efforts. Beyond the \$5 million provided by the Benwood Foundation and \$2.5 million provided by PEF, these organizations have provided research on best practices, helped design the goals and strategies of reform, provided usable data, led discussions, reviewed plans, and have generally facilitated the reform effort.

Additional partners have contributed funding, expertise, energy, and goodwill to the process. Such partners include:

- the Weldon F. Osborne Foundation, which has funded the Osborne Fellows program to provide a Master's Degree in Urban Education to selected Benwood teachers;
- the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, which has broken new ground in developing, supporting and implementing the Osborne Fellows program;
- the Urban League and Community Impact, which together created a program to allow students from four Benwood schools to participate in an array of academic and cultural activities and which help fund Family Partnership Specialists to help parents learn how to enhance their children's education;
- the Community Education Alliance, formed by former Chattanooga Mayor Bob Corker to provide bonuses to Benwood teachers and principals who met specific student achievement goals;

- the Annenberg Foundation, which provided additional funding for consulting teachers and Family Partnership Specialists.

10. Reform is arduous and time-consuming.

The Benwood reform effort is not a new phonics or creative writing program educators can simply add to their curriculum. The goals of the Initiative and the strategies used to meet them shape everything that educators do, from how they read stories with students to how they develop lesson plans and assign and evaluate homework. These goals set far higher expectations for teachers, principals and other educators than they have faced before; they are now striving to gain the knowledge and skills essential to meeting those expectations.

Such changes take time because:

- There is no agreed-upon recipe for successful reform. Reform is a process of cultivating and testing ideas and refining them, of educators becoming students of the learning process and the change process, and of ongoing reflection and continuous improvement.
- Even though broad reform must have multiple goals, those goals must be prioritized. Everything cannot change at once; the implementation of reform strategies should be staggered.
- Some changes must occur in stages. For instance, it would have been best had strong leadership teams been in place before teacher reconstitution occurred.
- Mistakes are inevitable, and they will slow the process down.



11. Effective teaching draws on data.

One core component of the Benwood success has been data - data on student performance that are accessible, accurate, current and relevant so that teachers can correctly and quickly identify students' learning needs and make the best instructional decisions for them. Standardized tests that are administered when the school year is almost over cannot serve this purpose. Such tests must be supplemented by student assessments that are given at regular intervals throughout the year and administered by teachers one-on-one with each student.

Examples of such assessments include:

- DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills), a measure of early literacy development;
- Running Records, which provides a structured way for teachers to track and record students' reading skills and the strategies that students have mastered;
- ThinkLink, a formative assessment that measures students' progress toward meeting state achievement goals;

- TCAP Coach, which provides students with concrete examples of how their annual state standardized test will be set up.

12. Communicating is a critical element of implementing and sustaining reform.

Communication with the broader community has been the great weakness of the Benwood reform effort. Sensitive decisions such as reconstitution of the schools have been poorly explained and thus misunderstood, and have led to demands for the retirement of the very Superintendent who has led and overseen such remarkable achievements in education reform. The hard lesson here is that the political and business communities must be informed about reform and offered opportunities to be engaged in the process. Communications must be a focus – otherwise comprehensive reform efforts such as the Benwood Initiative become mired in misperceptions that can undermine their long-term success and sustainability.



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A supplement to "Challenging Myths: The Benwood Initiative and Education Reform in Hamilton County" by Claire Handley and Robert A. Kronley, Kronley & Associates.

