

“One high school diploma, one kid going to college can break a family cycle.”

Every Student Deserves a Legacy | 2008 | KnowledgeWorks Foundation



From First Day to First Graduates

Educators fight to keep their dreams alive as they introduce small schools in a hard-hit urban district.

**Brookhaven
High School**

Columbus, Ohio

The Ohio High School Transformation Initiative

Launched in 2002 by KnowledgeWorks Foundation, the Ohio High School Transformation Initiative (OHSTI) is changing high schools across Ohio – moving them from outdated factory-model schools to agile learning organizations for the 21st century.

At the heart of the transformation are small, personal learning environments where students can build close relationships with teachers and where teachers can engage students with demanding, pertinent studies.

A partnership with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and others, OHSTI has divided large, anonymous high schools in some of the state's most challenged urban districts into campuses of small schools with about 400 students each, the number research shows to be most effective. Under the KnowledgeWorks model, each small school has authority for its resources, staffing, curriculum development and instructional strategies and involves staff, students, parents and community members in making decisions about these critical areas.

For the majority of the schools targeted by this reform, long-term economic, social and safety challenges in the communities place added strain on efforts to sustain high school improvement. On average, only 32 percent of their students enter high school on grade level in reading and 24 percent in math.

In the midst of these challenging conditions, however, early signs of success are emerging. The schools are doing a good job of ensuring their students graduate, the first hurdle young people must cross on the way to success in a global economy. When the initiative started, the gap in graduation rates between OHSTI sites and their statewide counterparts was about 20 percentage points. The most recent graduation data shows that the gap has narrowed to about 6 points. Five sites have surpassed the state graduation requirement of 90 percent and one more is within a percentage point of the target.

These new schools – most of which opened their doors in 2004 – also are showing improvement in getting students to school. The gap between the state average for attendance and OHSTI has been reduced by more than half.

With a strong focus on individual student success, the OHSTI schools are using diagnostic data to intensify academic supports and research-based instruction, aiming to increase student knowledge and skills at a rapid pace. Even as they work to close performance gaps, these schools are making strides toward the vision of educating all students so that they graduate ready for success at college or work.

On the cover:

Talisa Dixon, one of the key authors of Brookhaven's original small schools proposal, was the school leader of the Leadership Institute before becoming principal of the campus.

Brookhaven High School

On its face, Brookhaven High School is not unlike a suburban school. A cinder-block and brick building located at the end of a tree-lined drive, it sits in the center of a working- to middle-class neighborhood on the north side of Columbus.

But it has more in common with inner-city schools than suburban ones. Fewer than 30 percent of its students live anywhere near it. They bus in from all over town, many drawn there because of its tradition as a formidable sports power. The student body is nearly 80 percent African-American and 84 percent are economically disadvantaged, according to the Ohio Department of Education.

Of the 18 high schools in the Columbus Public School District, Brookhaven's academic rankings were in the bottom third by the turn of the millennium. A slim percentage of its students were passing Ohio's ninth-grade proficiency test, a requirement for graduation. The school couldn't get many of its students to come through the doors in the morning, let alone stay for the entire day.

When KnowledgeWorks Foundation launched its Ohio High School Transformation Initiative in 2002, Brookhaven decided to apply. A committee of teachers, administrators and even a student or two went to work envisioning a new structure for Brookhaven. They settled on a plan to divide the campus into three new schools, each with its own identity. The new schools would be smaller, allowing teachers to get to know their students and offer instruction that was personalized and relevant to their lives.

And that is where this story begins.



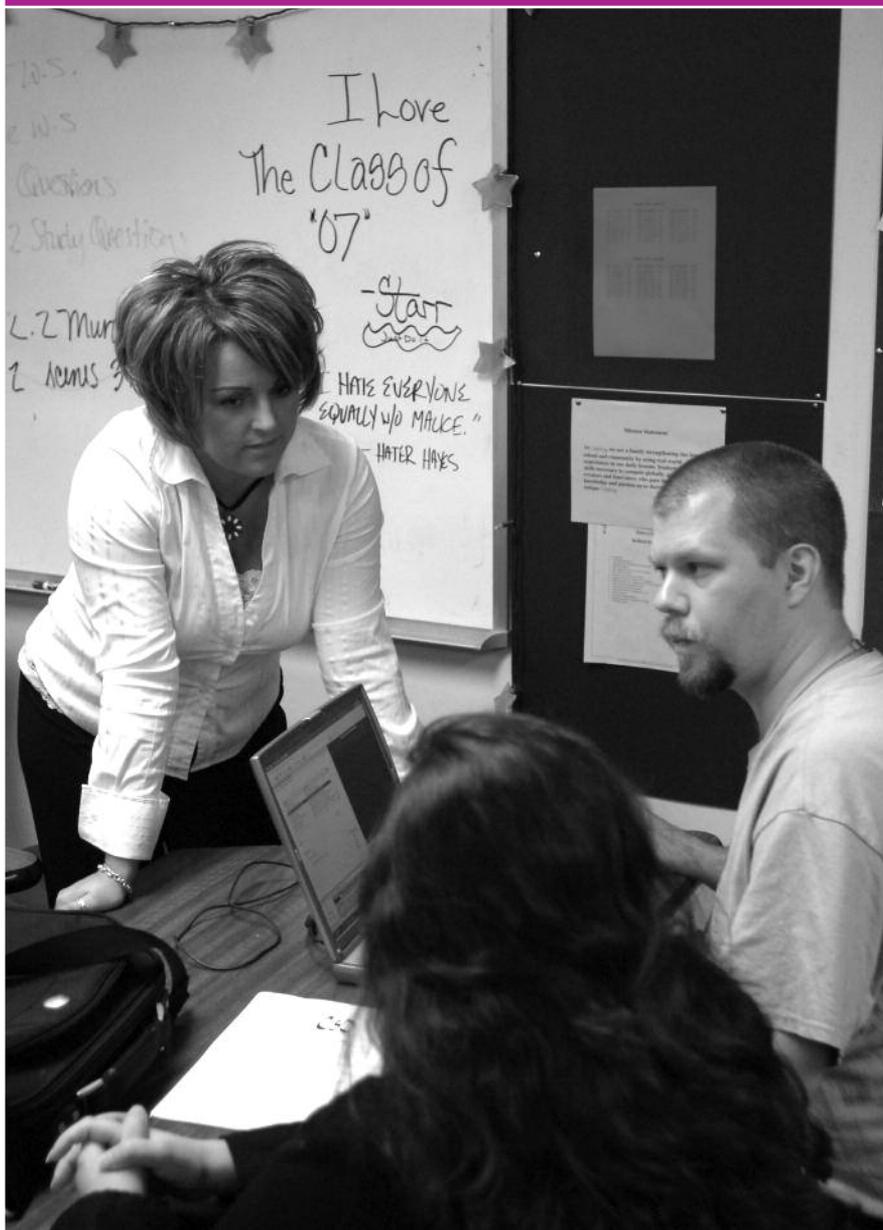
English teacher Carla Hegyi, an advocate of relationship-building, champions her students in Legacy, one of Brookhaven's three small schools. Her classroom always has students in it, even during her free periods.

From First Day to First Graduates

Educators fight to keep their dreams alive as they introduce small schools in a hard-hit urban district.

By Tracy Zollinger Turner

Eleven teachers are collected in the low, orange plastic chairs of a slightly chilly classroom on an early December afternoon in 2004. Phil Hayes, a social studies teacher with a goofy sense of humor and a dynamic style of teaching, has his arms folded and his legs crossed at the ankle, listening to his peers chitchat before their staff meeting.



“These kids are our babies.”

– Teacher Phil Hayes, pictured with colleague Carla Hegyi

A seven-year veteran of the Brookhaven High School staff, he is known to students as “Hater Hayes” because of the things he does to keep them on course. Things like tracking every second it takes them to quiet down during a given week, then holding them after class each Friday to “balance the books.”

He holds students to high standards, but by the end of a year in his classroom, most use his nickname with a sense of affection, a right they have earned.

English teacher Carla Hegyi, with whom Hayes tandem-teaches the humanities, is often at the center of pre-meeting banter, talking to colleagues about how students are faring or relating classroom stories. A relative newcomer to urban teaching, she is in her second year at Brookhaven. Passionate about both the learning capacity and the lives of her students, Hegyi “felt called” to the urban district from the suburbs, particularly into an environment where change was afoot.

Arriving in a rush, her walkie-talkie clipped to the belt of her black suit, Molly Mott quickly calls the meeting to order. Small-framed and soft-spoken, Mott is polite to a fault. Even at full volume, her voice has the creases of a whisper. Mott has taught at Brookhaven for 16 years, one of the longest tenures. Now, after a year of research and preparation, she’s taking on the role of small school leader for Legacy, one of the three housed on Brookhaven’s campus. It’s a school that she hopes will

become a place where student leadership is derived through a sense of community concern, thoughtfulness and compassion.

Hayes, Hegyi and Mott all played a part in developing the guiding principles and curriculum model for Legacy, in promoting the concept of small schools to their peers, in eliciting the input of community members and students, even in interviewing the new staff for the building. All three willingly took on extra work and leadership roles to start pushing

As the meeting begins, Shapiro asks the teachers to rate their feelings about their teaching experience on a scale from one to five – one being “despair” and five being “flying high.” One teacher chooses a four and another a five, but the rest select discouraged twos and tepid threes.

Seeing the disillusionment in the room, he asks the group to share stories about educators who changed the course of their lives.

After listening carefully, Shapiro

just the things that aren’t so pleasant.”

The game calls for teachers to connect with three people over the next seven days – a student, a parent and a peer – in more profound ways than usual.

As an example, Mott brings up a student several teachers know to be difficult and disruptive. Following district policy, after one incident Mott told him to leave school until a hearing could be held.

“I would even remove him from the building and he would not go home,” Mott says. “Then, one day I found him doing something good and when I told him that I recognized that, he was clearly so hungry to hear it that he followed me around all day asking me to call his mother and tell her.

“Now I seek him out when he does something well – that’s the small school way. The large school way would be to keep sending him home.”

The staff doesn’t universally embrace the game. One wonders aloud about the exercise: “You know, we could wind up with one kid being told he’s special by 10 teachers in one week.” Another teacher opts out altogether, noting that it isn’t really consistent with his teaching style and that he isn’t happy enough with any of his students at the moment to participate.

“I know it’s risky. I’m inviting you to take a chance,” says Shapiro. “But I know you guys will do it, and I know you will do it well.”



Students Dairra Bryant and Taylor Williams concentrate in class, against a backdrop of information about transcendentalism. The small schools model incorporates academic rigor along with strong relationships and relevance.

the boulder of school change uphill.

Just more than three months into the first year, Mott wishes that all of her staff were so invested. Many are, but when it comes to fundamentally changing the way they operate – keeping classroom doors open, developing stronger relationships with students and families, sharing leadership responsibilities with their peers – some seem stuck in old habits.

Today, Mott and Steve Shapiro, a coach supplied through KnowledgeWorks Foundation as part of the grant that established small schools, are trying to motivate the staff.

proposes an exercise.

“When I listen to your comments about teachers, I am struck by what an enormous opportunity we have, what an enormous gift we have if we choose to give it away,” says Shapiro. “I came today to invite you to participate in a game called ‘Use my power to inspire.’ It’s very different than ‘get through the day,’ ‘keep a lid on things,’ or ‘try to get kids in the classroom before the bell rings.’

“Why am I asking you to do this? Because ... it’s an opportunity to bring you back to your own purpose – to focus on what that part of our job is, and not

Year One: Struggling with New Roles

No matter how innovative the ideas at hand, transforming a school that is trying to pull itself out of a state rating of academic emergency takes time and effort. That is especially true when the objective is to empower some of the most economically disadvantaged kids in the city.

But that’s exactly the task that the teachers and administrators at Brookhaven High School have taken on.

They have decided to divide the campus into three new schools. Two of these schools are Leadership Institute of Student Development and the North Star School of Exploration. The third is Legacy, which employs the “Habits of Mind” – methods meant to get students to consider not just what they need to learn and think about in school, but how they actually learn and think.

After a year of planning, the small schools opened in fall of 2004, amidst the chaos and confusion that accompanies any change of such scale. Now, a few months into the transformation, students and teachers alike are still coming to terms with their new roles.

For Mott, the job of small school leader proves different than she expected. Ideally, she would spend more time in classrooms, coaching staff on the new instructional model and ways of teaching.



Members of Brookhaven’s literacy team come from all three small schools. The team’s literacy initiative crosses all content areas.

“The high school stayed the same for so long and some of it worked, but most of it didn’t.”

– Molly Mott, small school leader

Brookhaven’s immediate demands put those ideals out of reach.

A few days after the teachers’ meeting, Mott sits at her desk, phone receiver in hand, waiting for one of the building’s three phone lines to open up. Five students wait in the hallway to see her for various infractions, such as arguing with classmates, being late or walking through the hallways without a pass.

Mott makes her best efforts to call parents more often, to talk to them about

skipped classes and disruptive behavior, but often she can’t even get a phone line. Her roles as disciplinarian, hallway monitor, meeting leader, bureaucratic troubleshooter and even grant-writer spare her little time.

Most of her years at Brookhaven have been spent as its “Grads” teacher, a now-defunct program for students who were, or were becoming, parents. Its curriculum included prenatal care, first-year baby care, sound parenting practices and an economic unit to teach new mothers to live independently.

“It was attractive to me because the students are actually so in love with what they’re learning that it’s the perfect gift for a teacher – to have a student who really wants the information,” she says.

The small schools initiative came along just as Columbus Public moved to eliminate most of its home economics positions, spurring Mott to take her career in a new direction.

She knew that Brookhaven had to change.

“The high school stayed the same for so long and some of it worked, but most of it didn’t,” says Mott.

“There were so many issues that were troublesome, but the animal was so large that to address change and make it happen ... I could never see how it could happen, but I knew that it needed to.”

Mott’s strength as a leader largely lies in the fact that she tries to empower her staff to teach and challenge each other. According to the small school model, teachers are meant to share the responsibilities of leadership. But that presents problems, both because teachers can be hesitant to change their approaches and because shared leadership isn’t written into union contracts.

“In order for small schools to be successful, you are going to have to have teachers who are willing to do more than their contract calls for and aren’t going to hide behind it,” says Mott.

That’s why she is working hard to boost morale among the Legacy team.

Without the teachers, she knows, this reform doesn't stand a chance.

'I felt like lead had been pulled off me'

One week after Shapiro's challenge, the Legacy teachers come to another staff meeting, ready to share their results.

Three staff members report that they succeeded in saying something supportive to a student, parent and colleague, while another five managed to address one of the three.

"I had a student last year who had a lot of problems and he has really turned around this year," says Hegyi. "I called his mom, and the mom sighed and said she was 'prepared to take it.' When I told her why I called, she started crying on the phone. She said, 'I've been raising [him] by myself for so long and you are the first person who has ever called me and said something positive.'

"I felt like it was a call I should have made long ago."

Hayes saw a student make a small but noticeable transformation in the classroom.

"I have been working with one of our freshmen who hasn't done anything all year and started to turn around in the last three or four classes," he tells the group. "I said 'Wow – you keep this up and you could pull an A this quarter.'

"A little later on during the class, she told the other kids when they got too loud, 'Shut up, he's talking.'"

If nothing else, the exercise appears to have reminded some of the teachers that they are capable of liking their jobs.

"I felt like lead had been pulled off of me – I just felt lighter," one says.

"I often feel like I put a lot in and don't get anything out of it," says another. "But this exercise reminded me why I decided to become a teacher."

Change fueled by hard work

As the year wears on, Mott finds that being the small school leader is more taxing than she expected. She spends three hours a day standing in the hallway,



After 16 years of teaching at Brookhaven, Molly Mott became school leader at Legacy. In the school's chaotic first year, she was usually so busy she had to eat lunch standing up.



North Star science teacher Linda Duellman helps Bettyna Cheri. Duellman recognizes ways in which the Brookhaven redesign has failed to help students, but says, “I’d rather be in a place where we’re still trying.”

police students to keep them from wandering the halls and using a battery-powered bullhorn to help get their attention. Students call her “Lady Mott,” because of her soft-spoken manner.

As one of the building’s six administrators, she has to stay after school for many sporting events and attend some away games, sometimes putting in 15-hour days.

She’s also working hard on a grant application to Learn and Serve Ohio so that Legacy’s students can receive Community Emergency Response Training (CERT). The program would provide some of the service learning and hands-on training that complement the school’s curriculum model.

The schedule is starting to take its toll. Every Sunday, Mott cooks a dozen pork chops for herself so she can eat them cold, out of plastic baggies, throughout the week. She says the protein helps give her the energy to keep going.

“I have to eat standing up. There is no time,” she says.

A Head Start on Teamwork

Hayes and Hegyi have an advantage as they try to implement the small schools approach. They started teaching together a year earlier, in a Freshman Academy that Brookhaven instituted to help students make the transition to high school. The intimate nature of the academy allowed them to test some concepts of small schools.

When the time came to select small schools, several students from the Freshman Academy picked Legacy – not because they understood its focus on the Habits of Mind, but because they wanted to stay with Hater Hayes and Ms. Hegyi.

Having spent a year building trust and expectations, the two are able to hit the ground running, with students who are genuinely excited about their own roles as small school pioneers.

Hints of Trouble

By the second semester, the pace hasn't slowed for Mott, but she's made a few adjustments. She's managed to break free of one hour of hallway duty on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, which enables her to finally get more time with her teachers.

But in springtime, hints of trouble emerge. The school district sends out a notice of a shortfall in its electrical budget. All schools are to rid their teachers' lounges of coffeemakers, refrigerators and microwaves – or at least unplug them – which leaves teachers confused about what exactly they can bring for lunch, or if they're somehow now expected not to eat at all.



Bob Murphy, Brookhaven's campus principal during the first year of small schools, says, "The change is not about curriculum. It's about instruction – it's about *how we teach what we teach.*"

Mott laughs off yet another inconvenience. "It was just too funny when they told us that," says Mott. "I said, 'Now, how on earth am I gonna keep my pork chops cold?'"

But within a few weeks, she's not laughing.

A scandal within Columbus Public Schools (CPS) sends shockwaves through

"In order for small schools to be successful, you are going to have to have teachers who are willing to do more than their contract calls for."

– Molly Mott

the district. The public learns that administrators at another Columbus high school did not call police after a developmentally disabled 16-year-old student was allegedly assaulted by a group of boys at the school, and the outcry results in the firing of the principal and suspension of three administrators.

As the district begins juggling administrators to fill the gaps, Brookhaven's leadership is culled. An assistant principal is shuffled to the other school. Mott and Tori Parker, the head of North Star, are told they are being released from their positions as small school leaders and won't be able to work as administrators anywhere in the district.

At issue is the certification process for administrators. Mott and Parker have spent a year working toward becoming certified, with the aid of KnowledgeWorks. They had believed the training would qualify them under CPS guidelines. Instead, both are told the training doesn't count toward certification.

Mott is stunned. "I was completely blindsided by this," she says.

"I cannot figure out what the thinking process was behind this. Maybe there are no thinking processes; right now there are just big wounds that are bleeding," she says.

The building principal is recruited to another school. Talisa Dixon, the small school leader of Leadership Institute and a key architect of the KnowledgeWorks grant proposal, is promoted to building principal.

While Parker takes a position in the district office, Dixon works to create a new role for Mott in the building. After all of the time Mott has spent helping to plan

and implement her small school, she isn't ready to walk away.

Mott tries to stay focused on the positive. "The fortunate thing for me is that I'm older. I can retire in a few years if I want to, so it's not like this is this devastating thing that happened to me with my whole career ahead of me."

While teachers are supportive of Dixon's promotion, many are upset about Mott and Parker being removed from their jobs.

They're also upset that district requirements have taken priority over the schools' needs. The model for small schools calls for them to have autonomy to make their own decisions about such issues as school leaders. "It's clear that the KnowledgeWorks view of autonomy and the district's view are two very different things," says Hayes. "This whole situation with Molly has really upset me.

"Molly and Tori are small school leaders. The district sees them as teachers and the staff sees them as administrators."

A Piece of Good News

There's little time for reflection on the first year of small schools. The administrative staff works through the summer months and spends much of its time tackling one of the building's biggest problems: the intricacies of scheduling students in three separate schools.

In late summer, the news breaks: Brookhaven has improved performance enough to pull its rating from academic emergency to continuous improvement. The jump is equivalent to moving from a grade of F to a C.

But when the staff examines and compares each school's results, it's clear that some students still slip through the cracks.

Year Two: More Order – and More Chaos

Even though someone else will soon take over the job, Molly Mott has worked through the summer as Legacy's small school leader, making schedules and communicating with staff about professional development.

She had hoped to become a teacher leader for Legacy, but the position, part of the original plan, didn't materialize. Instead, because she obtained a sizable Learn and Serve grant for Brookhaven, she is hired as the Service Learning coordinator for all three small schools.

She says she will do whatever she can to help the next leader.

"I could see the need for transition, which is why I chose to stay. Maybe I was wrong, we'll see," says Mott. "I looked at all of the jobs in the district and I couldn't see myself walking away from Brookhaven. "Plus, I really think that I did a good job."

But she has doubts about the future of small schools.

"After one year, there should be conversation – there should be really good, honest conversation about where we are and where we are going, and there isn't, at least none that have included me," she says.

She also worries about her new role. "I just hope this year isn't a completely humiliating experience," she says.

The evening before school opens, Legacy still has no small school leader. Filling open positions quickly is a problem throughout the initiative. On this occasion, Mott approaches the building

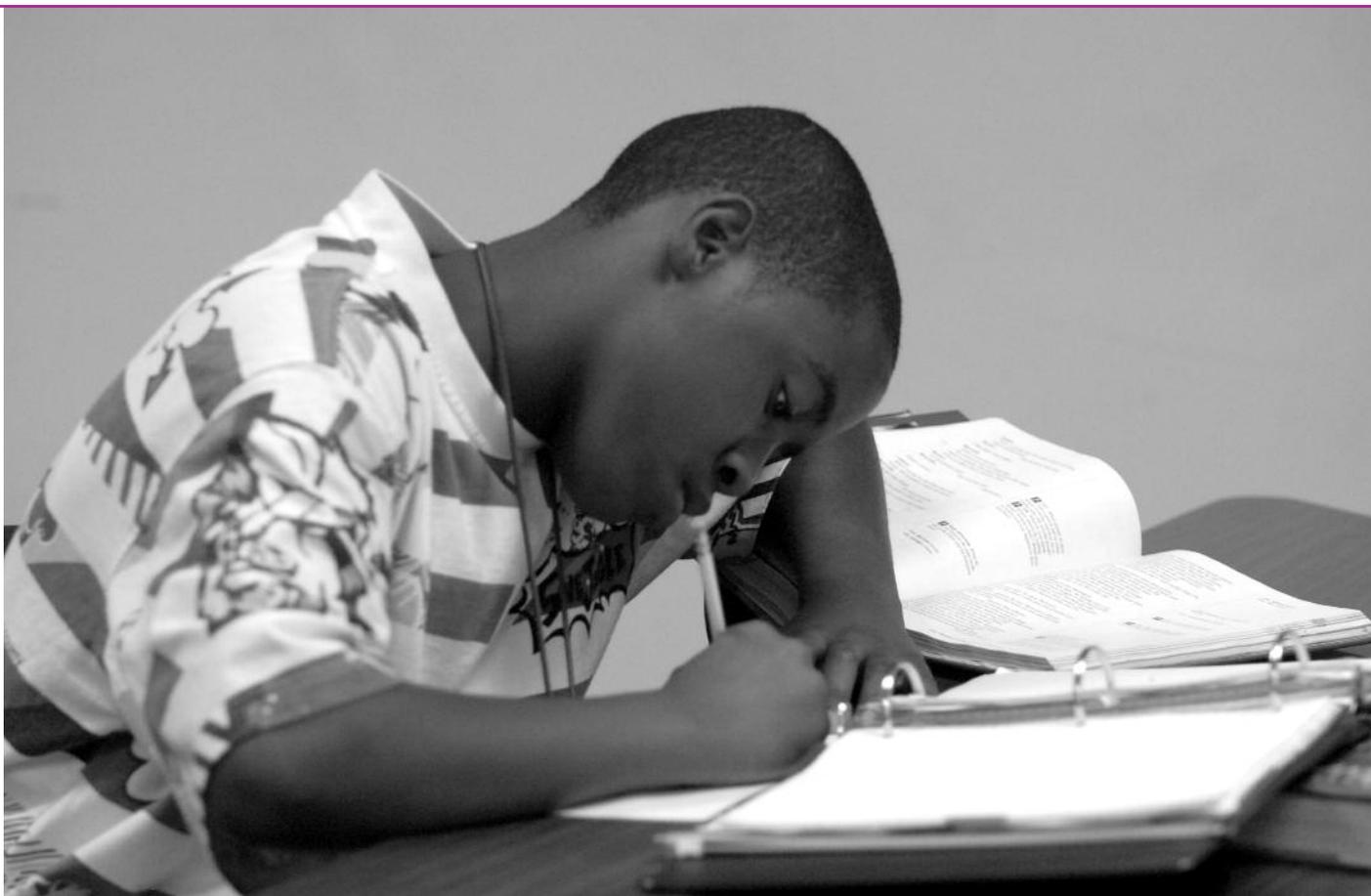
principal and asks, "Who should I be tomorrow?"

"Be the small school leader," Talisa Dixon tells her.

Making the Mission Clear

Hegyi has also been preparing for the new year. The week before school starts, she, another colleague and a student drag an overhead projector up Legacy's central hallway. They project some of the Habits of Mind: "Be trustworthy and truthful," "Be active listeners," "Show respect to others," "Show respect to yourself," and "Change the world" on the wall above the lockers, then make them permanent with black paint.

She wants to make the mission and spirit of Legacy more obvious to the kids, to the colleagues who don't seem to get it yet and to the world outside that's tracking their progress.



Students in Carla Hegyi's English classes, like Saviyon Cunningham, are often asked to write for the first several minutes of the period.

Hegy is teaching freshmen only this year, and everything about that challenge is complicated. High school requires students to accept new classroom rules and develop more independence. Ninth grade is the number-one place where Columbus Public's students fall down. A large percentage of freshmen do not move on to sophomore status each year.

Ready to Move Forward

Despite that nearly every administrative position in the building has changed, the staff seems ready to move forward.

As building principal, Dixon has made visible changes in the building, as well as the way students' days are structured.

The flow of movement through the building has changed, easing the traffic jams that had clogged the old building's narrow intersections. Offices for the three small school leaders and the counselors are now in or closer to their central hallways.

There are now three lunch periods – one for each small school – during which no one is allowed outside, much to the chagrin of students and some teachers. The number of study halls is reduced dramatically, replaced by academic assistance periods when students can seek help from teachers.

Seniors – the last class of Brookhaven's old model – are given longer lunch periods, and many of their classes are compressed into one hallway, apart from the rest of the school.

The hallways are quiet on the first day of school. Not only quiet, but quieter than most regular school days last year, and clear enough to hurl a bowling ball without tripping a single wandering student. A cluster of teachers and administrators gathers in a main intersection, laughing, looking relaxed and in control. Some glitches remain, but the staff has learned to better manage students as they work out scheduling problems.

The Legacy Way

One week later, Legacy students are gathered in the front half of the auditorium. Mott walks in at the side of

Charles Richardson, a distinguished older man, who then walks around the perimeter of the students, examining faces. Richardson, a Columbus Public Schools administrator, has been brought from another school to lead Legacy.

On stage, a skit begins. Two female students sit at school desks. One, negotiating an armload of books, drops a pen, and the other student steals it. They raise their fists. "Okay, that's the wrong way," a teacher calls out from the side of the stage. The students start over. One drops the pen again, the other picks it up, hands it over and offers to help her get settled. "That's the Legacy way," the teacher calls out.

Mott is quickly won over by Richardson's commitment to small schools, and even more by his ability to deal with discipline issues, a weight Mott is happy to have lifted.

Jumpstarting Relationships

While Legacy's hallways have plenty of students familiar to Hegyi and Hayes, their classrooms are largely filled with freshmen. To jumpstart their relationships with the new group, they decide that getting away from the school is a good idea. With Mott's help, they organize a field trip to historic Greenlawn Cemetery.

"Hey everybody, can I have your attention?" Hayes gathers a group of freshmen around a gravestone that has a statue of a small boy sitting on the top of

it. "This is Georgie, a seven-year-old boy who fell from a hotel balcony downtown in 1973. For years, this has been one of the most well-tended graves in the cemetery. Sometimes you can find toys here next to it, and someone, presumably



Teacher Carla Hegyi shares a light moment with student Henry Green V. Having students for more than one year, Hegyi says, allows her to get to know them well.

a family member, often puts a coat and hat on him for the winter."

The students respond sympathetically with "awws" and "that's so sad!"

"Okay, everybody, let's keep moving," says Hayes. The students, along with Mott, Hegyi, Hayes and a few other staff members pile back into the two yellow school buses.

The nature sanctuary and burial ground is filled with monuments of the wealthy founders of the city and its businesses as well as the graves of ordinary citizens.



Legacy students Ana Vallejo and Tyler Miller debate politics in Phil Hayes' citizenship class.

Several students learned that they have relatives buried there when they brought home permission slips for the trip.

Hayes points out the modest headstones of the Sells, who once ran the second largest circus in the country. He yells out names he has mentioned in class – Lazarus, like the department store; Wolfe, the owners of the daily newspaper. Students strain to look out the windows, knees on the seats.

The staff hopes this trip will let the freshmen learn a little about local history, but also about their teachers and each other, away from the social blender of the school.

The buses stop again in the middle of the cemetery, and rolls of paper and crayons are unloaded, along with pinhole cameras made of oats containers. Students hunt for graves that interest them to do photographs and rubbings of the grave markers.

A student named Alanna picks the grave of a man based on the list of accomplishments she finds on it. “He went to all kinds of different schools and did all kinds of different things,” she says, beaming. “It just looks like he was a really smart person.”

Drawing in Parents

One early November evening, Brookhaven's large looped driveway is brimming with cars. The aroma of spaghetti fills the front hallway, where students and teachers greet incoming parents, directing them to their child's small school.

The hallways are bustling with teachers and parents, especially North Star's, where invitations were sent home in English, Spanish and Somali. A long table covered in blue and yellow paper beckons parents to write down their dreams for their students. A few have complied: “Texas University – First one baby! Yeah!” and “Mom's proud of you, keep it up – stay strong little girl.”

A parent scans her son's report card in the hallway. Her face falls.

“Let me start with the good news,” the teacher says, slipping her arm around the mother's shoulder. “Your son is my most improved student. I know you are looking at that and all you can see is a D, but ...”

The mother begins to cry, so they go into a classroom to talk privately.

The evening stands in contrast to

previous years' parent nights. “I usually think I'm doing well if six to 10 parents show up in a night,” one teacher tells another. “Today I had 12 by five o'clock.”

'Where I Am From'

Two girls stop in front of Hegyi's desk to see what fragrance of hand lotion she has out this week.

“What's sweet pea?” one asks, picking up the pink bottle to examine it.

“Try it and see if you like the scent,” says Hegyi. “That's what it's there for.”

Hegy's classroom always has students in it, even during her free periods. Kids come in, asking her for advice on everything from how to cope in science class to how to deal with jealous girlfriends. Papers are taped to her blackboards with the latest things that students have written from the regular writing prompts she gives them. Today several are titled “Where I Am From.”

*Where I am from, cookouts and fights
Where I'm from, stolen bikes
Where I'm from, carnivals in Kroger
parking lots.*

- Jamal Lucas

*Where I am from they leave you neckless
for that necklace
I am from people robbin' you and
daylight...*

*I'm from a place where it's hard to learn
because everybody is trying to put you on
the payroll (selling drugs)*

- Brandon Graham

While Hegyi's students reflect on their roots, Columbus' school board is discussing how to handle the district's financial straits. With charter schools draining away students and funding, the board votes to close several buildings. The small schools initiative brings Brookhaven outside funding and helps generate higher enrollment, which helps keep it off the chopping block. But the superintendent has warned that there will be cuts in personnel next year.

Pushing Teachers' Comfort Zones

Slowly, more of the changes essential to the small school reform plan are made. An advisory period is established for the entire building on the last period every Thursday.

At a teachers' meeting the day before advisory sessions begin, Hegyi shares what she learned in a training session about effective advisories.

"It's an opportunity to build a relationship with 15 students or less," she says.

She tells them that advisory period is meant to be a time when students address any problems that could affect their performance. When advisories work, a student who gets in trouble or has a personal problem can be sent to an advisor before an administrator.

"This is an opportunity to build relationships, to get these kids thinking," says Hegyi. "You are going to be responsible for every individual in your group. You are going to be the buffer, the go-between for that student – the person other teachers will go to if they have a problem with that student."

A few teachers nod along. Others say very little.

Richardson, Legacy's new leader, speaks up.

"I am not going to pretend that this advisor/advisee project is not going to take you out of your comfort zone," he tells the teachers. "I want you to be ready for some level of rejection. I want you to be mentally prepared for some student to come in and look at you and say, 'Aww, I don't want him.' The objective is to stay as positive as you can."

The next day, Hegyi has Hawaiian Punch and chocolate chip cookies for her advisees. A group of boys shuffles into her doorway, begging to come to her room for advisory so that they can have a snack. One hazel-eyed boy named Miles, well known for more than a little class clowning, stands at the door, claiming not to have an advisor, asking if she'll take him.

"Okay," she says, looking him directly in the eye. "I need to ask you a serious question, and I need you to think about your answer seriously. Can you see that I am not joking with you? Do you feel me right now?"

He meets her gaze and answers "yes."

"If I take you on, will you be here for every Thursday advisory?"

"Yes," he says, shuffling his feet in place.

She looks him in the eye for a few more seconds.

"Okay, you can stay," she tells him.

"Yes!" he says, pumping his elbow backward with his fist.

'This is home to them now'

Mott walks from one classroom door to the next, shuffling an armload of blue papers – a safety survey for students to discuss with their families. While grant money for emergency certification training was originally to be used for Legacy, she's opened the work to the entire building to generate more interest in service learning.

Meanwhile, Mott continues to assist Richardson through the transition, lead most of Legacy's staff meetings and participate in the school-wide literacy team.

"I really am liking my job this year," she says. "I'm doing the things that I wished I could before – working with teachers in the classroom, developing projects ... The stuff I thought the small school leader could do.

"And the staff – they've taken more ownership than I saw them take last year.

This is home to them now."

While Mott and others cope with the new landscape, the school district continues to buckle and shift under the weight of its financial woes. By early 2006, the school board votes to close 12 school buildings. A plan is introduced that will



Patrick Connell makes a point during a classroom discussion.

shorten the school day by one academic period to trim a few million more from the budget.

A Rite of Spring: Test Prep

It doesn't take long for advisory to get bogged down in problems. Hegyi, and the handful of other teachers who embrace the concept, quickly end up responsible for more than 15 students. Students realize that advisory isn't an academic period and that attendance will not affect their grades. With advisory held the last period on Thursdays, many see it as a pass to get out of school early.

As preparation for Ohio Graduation Tests eats up more time, advisory period slips from being held weekly to every other week, then less frequently.

Hegyí struggles to push forward. For the last couple of weeks, she has worked to get permission forms from the parents of her advisees so that she could show *Crash*, a movie loaded with suggestions about racial and ethnic stereotypes. Hegyí felt the film, which was weeks away from winning the Best Picture Oscar, could spark healthy dialogue among her students.

“I wanted to do cultural dialogues,” she says, having recently completed diversity training. “I had a series of questions that would facilitate a discussion – so the kids would talk to each other, look at the stereotypes, start thinking about themselves and Brookhaven differently.”

But the advisory period is repeatedly canceled because of disciplinary issues and scheduling conflicts. After a few weeks, Hegyí gives up on showing the film.

She begins to feel the burnout of the

year, like some of her peers – one has had his cell phone stolen three times. A math teacher was hit in the jaw while trying to break up a fight.

“I’m on 14 committees, and that’s not hyperbole,” she says, listing several of them: literacy, diversity, professional development, governance. “So I’m not shining in any one place. I have a hard time saying no when I am asked – if I don’t step up and put my hand in it, then I can’t complain if it doesn’t work.

“I can’t take a relaxed, backseat approach because I’ve been there from the beginning.”

She is also teaching at the school’s winter institute to help students prepare for the Ohio Graduation Tests. The week before testing, she goes to the store to buy little pick-me-up gifts she can give to the students each morning.

“The kids are scared. The kids I have on Saturday tell me how scared they are over and over,” she says. “The kids don’t want to fail and for some of them, their

fear of failure may make them do things like not come at all.”

A Setback

As spring arrives, so does a new threat. A \$28 million deficit for the 2007 fiscal year is staring everyone in the face. In March, district officials announce that 11 percent of the food-service staff will be cut. Then building administrators are told that they must downsize.

Seven positions are cut from the Brookhaven staff. Although many of those affected have enough seniority to find new positions in the district, that’s a daunting number of people for a school in transition to lose.

The following Monday, the principal holds a meeting for the entire campus and announces that because of the staff reductions, some teachers will have to teach some classes in other small schools next year. It’s also made clear that a tighter student-to-teacher ratio, central to the small schools model, will be blown.

Remaining staff members struggle to accept the cuts and murmur about the potential setbacks they may create for small schools. Legacy, North Star and Leadership have worked hard on building individual identities, each with its own goals, professional development and curriculum model. Being expected to teach another school’s unfamiliar model seems unfair.

There are whispers that small schools are effectively dead. Some teachers are angry, feeling that their commitment, work and drive has gone unnoticed. They resent that the district still sees them as interchangeable “factory model” teachers, rather than the unique contributors to the architecture of a new school climate that they believed they were.

Others feel that the cuts weren’t distributed evenly enough among the three small schools. Hayes, the building’s union representative, is frustrated because the school is still viewed as one unit, making him responsible for advocating for North Star and Leadership’s teachers as well as Legacy’s.



When district budget cuts seem to slow the momentum of reform, individual teachers from across the three small schools, including Mary Crowley and Joleata Howell, reach out to each other.



English teacher Carla Hegyi struggles to push school change forward without pushing herself into burnout: “I have a hard time saying no when I am asked – if I don’t step up and put my hand in it, then I can’t complain if it doesn’t work.”

Hegyí’s peers are coming to her in “core meltdown” mode to bend her ear. She jokes that she’s like Lucy in the Peanuts comic strip, offering nickel advice for free.

Hayes speaks to the local suburban paper about his concerns that small schools will be significantly weakened by the cuts. “We are a flexible and resourceful team of teachers and will adapt to the changes that have been put on us,” he tells the paper. “But anything that makes it harder for us to be small schools makes it harder for us to achieve our mission of doing the right thing for our students.”

More Goodbyes

The Legacy staff begins to rebound a little. Several teachers get substitutes

for their classes for a day so that they can work on goals for their small schools. When they start to despair over meeting those goals with smaller staffs, Mott encourages them.

“If you look at what’s happening here in the district, we’re dealing with some disappointing realities,” she says. “But I think we need to move forward with perfect-world expectations and adapt to realities as they come.”

By the end of April, more adapting is required. Brookhaven loses more teachers as the district eliminates 300 more jobs on the basis of seniority and content area.

Molly Mott finds herself suddenly, shockingly, not just out of the small school business, but out of a job after a

two-decade run.

“I don’t mind not being here at Brookhaven, but I’ve been pink-slipped for the whole district, so I’m upset,” she says. Her desk is overwhelmed with books and files about literacy, tools from a conference she recently attended.

“I learned all of this great stuff about literacy strategies for the classroom,” she says, then takes a long, distracted pause. “I have to see if someone will let me teach a class or two to try them.”

She has a new granddaughter.

“At least I’ll have time to have fun in the garden with her this summer.”

Brookhaven loses other teachers as well. Two of the Leadership Institute’s English teachers are cut, as are some teachers of electives. They will be replaced with teachers with more seniority, but administrators and staff in the building have no control over who gets those jobs. Five people who may or may not have any idea what small schools are meant to look like, or any interest in advancing them, will be assigned to the building.

“Anything that makes it harder for us to be small schools makes it harder for us to achieve our mission of doing the right thing for our students.”

– Phil Hayes, teacher

Hanging on to Opportunities for Change

The chalkboard in Hegyi's classroom is covered with her students' latest writing assignments – personal manifestos. “I will show more respect for myself.” “I will learn how to control my anger.” “I will stay awake in all of my classes.” “I will try harder to make my mother happy.”

Like her students, Hegyi is examining her life choices.

Had the cuts gone one year deeper into seniority, Hegyi would be without a job. With another \$20 million in cuts looming for the 2007-08 school year, she knows the next school year could be her last.

“The idea that it doesn't matter how good I am or I'm not, that I could still lose my job, is hard to take. But I know I have

and earned Brookhaven its second year of a continuous improvement rating.

And Mott is offered a job at the Academic Acceleration Academy, a charter school for eighth- to 12th-grade students who are over-aged or may not be able to make it in a large high school building. Her retirement is safe and her training will be put to good use. It just won't be at Brookhaven.

Year Three: The New Normal

Another year begins. All around the building, the lockers have gotten fresh coats of blue and yellow paint. Teachers accompany groups of freshmen through the hallways. Schedules are taped onto the library windows, and students who need help are triaged into the library or cafeteria.

students have been shifted. Hegyi was able to pick this group herself and include some of her students from the previous year.

“All of you sitting in here with me will be with me until you graduate,” she tells the group on the first day.

“Yea!” one of the students yells.

“We all know what happened to advisory last year. Sometimes when you do something for the first time, it doesn't work out exactly as you planned, and you have to learn from your mistakes and do better.”

Hegyi asks what students did or didn't like about the advisories they were in the year before and what they want this year.

“I don't want to spend time talking about my problems like it's counseling or Dr. Phil or something,” one girl says.

Some students want field trips, another wants to do crafts. One wants “family groupings” – students paired off and made responsible to look out for each other.

“Who can tell me the definition of the word evolution?” Hegyi asks.

“Something can evolve into something else,” one girl offers.

“Do you think of that as something positive or negative?”

“POSITIVE,” several voices respond.

“We're going to evolve you this year,” says Hegyi. “By the end of the year, some part of your life should be better.”

Focusing on Literacy

A sizable percentage of Brookhaven's students come to high school unable to read, and a sizable number of the teachers aren't trained to teach them to read. Fall assessment tests for a small group of freshmen and sophomores reveal that only 33 percent read at or above a ninth-grade level, while 46 percent are at a fourth- to eighth-grade reading level. About one-fifth of the students read below a third-grade level. Even with some hint that students didn't take the test so seriously because their diplomas were not staked on it, the numbers are hard for teachers to fathom.

A literacy team made up of teachers from all three small schools works to find solutions. Participants in ongoing training

“If you raise the standards, a lot more students are going to ... achieve a lot more.”

– Joleata Howell

one more year to make good change.”

The opportunity for change still exists. Despite the switch to a seven-period day, Brookhaven will be able to build in two advisory periods a month. Two teachers from each of the small schools did advisory training in preparation and will work to help other teachers understand their purpose. To that end, a custodial training space is to be converted into a space for professional development.

In addition, after a survey finds that 86 percent of the students believe peer mediation would help, administrators send several teachers, including Hegyi, to training. They plan to transform one of the rooms in what was the senior hallway into a space for peer mediation.

After the tumultuous year ends, some good news arrives. The three schools together have met – for the first time – the state standards for Adequate Yearly Progress

Amid the calm, the three schools brace for an uncertain year. The Leadership Institute and Legacy have retained their small school leaders, but North Star now has its third leader in as many years. A couple more positions have been quietly cut. Neither of the spaces that were to promote peer mediation and professional development has opened.

Student advisory starts up while autumn is still new, at a more manageable time – mid-morning on Wednesdays. Because so many teachers don't understand the principles behind advisory, they've been handed a curriculum to ensure some uniformity. For teachers like Hegyi, the suggested exercises feel like more of a hindrance than a help.

Even so, she pushes forward with a new group. Advisees are supposed to stay with the same advisor as long as they are in school, but with the staff shake-up,

with KnowledgeWorks, team members try to come up with strategies to help students build literacy skills in every subject, not just English class.

“We’re supposed to be trying to change a culture here at Brookhaven,” says Joleata Howell, a North Star English teacher who is the leader of the group. “The literacy team is enhancing what teachers can do in the classroom, not adding more work.”

“I keep telling everyone that we have got to raise our standards. Teaching to the OGT is lowering our standards. If that’s the highest bar kids have to aim for, there are always going to be those who miss it. If you raise the standards, a lot more students are going to clear that bar and achieve a lot more.”

A few months into the year, the literacy team presents a plan for Sustained Silent Reading every day of the week, requiring every teacher to give up 20 minutes of class time in each period once a week so that students can spend that time reading. There is some resistance, but teachers agree to give it a try.

‘These kids are our babies’

“Okay everybody, get your notebooks out and get ready to write down this question,” Hayes says to a classroom of seniors in his Citizenship class.

Covers flip. Pens and pencils come out.

“Write me a paragraph – four sentences – about what would happen if drugs were made legal.”

There are murmurs. A few heads shake. After a few moments of students scratching on paper in relative silence, Hayes passes out pieces of chalk.

“We’re going to do chalk talk today,” he tells them. “Leave your papers there. Come up to the blackboard.”

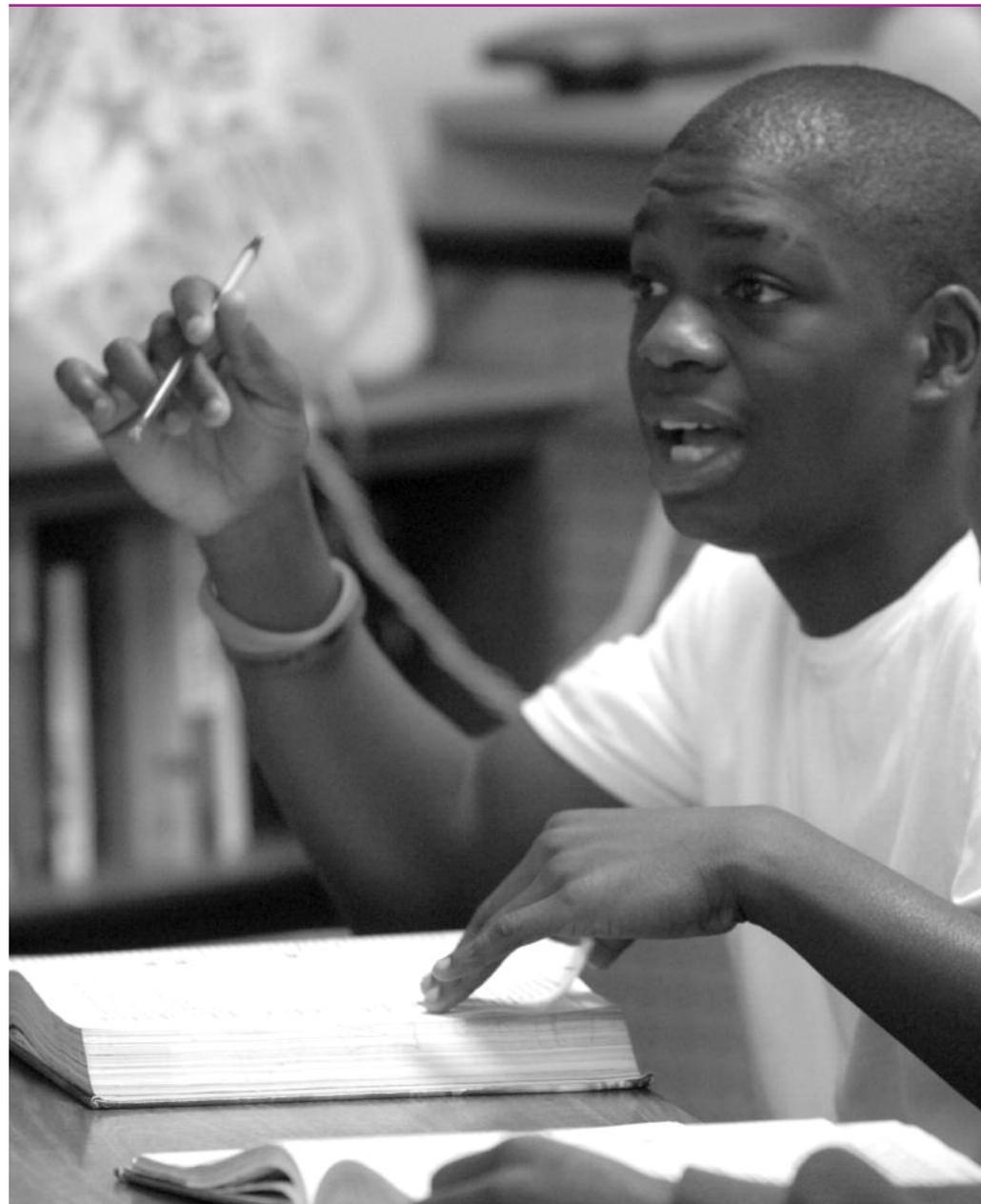
“My rules are this: When I say go, can you talk?”

“No,” a couple of voices answer.

“No, only the chalk can. Can you erase other people’s comments?”

“No,” a couple of students answer again.

“When chalk talk begins, all talking stops – start writing. After you are done



Students participate in advisory periods, which are meant to give them a time to address any issues that might affect their performance. Here, Fred Gadson engages with a teacher.

writing your comments, step back and please don’t talk.”

The room is silent, save the sound of chalk tapping and squeaking along the blackboard.

Hayes has taught several of these seniors for three out of the four years they have been in high school. He keeps a steady hand in the classroom, but when the students aren’t looking, Hayes beams over their abilities to articulate, research and write.

“These kids are our babies,” he says.

“Government would be able to tax the sale of drugs, but creates an unstable society with altered minds,” one student writes on the blackboard.

“STUPID THINGS DONE MORE.”

“There would be a lot of people hooked and a lot less work done.”

After reading a few of the comments aloud, Hayes has the students return to their seats.



The schools at Brookhaven struggle to push Ohio Graduation Test scores up by offering a winter academy on Saturday mornings and individual tutoring after school.

“Raise your hand if you support the legalization of heroin,” he says.

No one does. He asks about methamphetamine, crack cocaine. A few think hallucinogens or marijuana could be legal.

“How many of you do not support the legalization of any drugs?” he asks.

About six hands go up. He divides the room, putting those students on one side, those who support the legalization of at least one drug on the other. The debate is lively for several of the students, while a few hang back.

“I say legalize marijuana because of my son. He has cataracts in his eyes and it could be used for medical reasons to help him,” one girl offers.

“Someone in my family smokes marijuana on a daily basis,” a girl on the anti-legalization side answers. “If it was legalized, he would smoke it like it was a cigarette and waste his whole life.”

“How can something that grows out of the ground be illegal?” a boy on the legalization side asks. “It’s a plant. It grows like corn.”

“I would be terrified for my life if a person on Ecstasy was allowed to drive.”

Hayes always covers the clock in his room to keep kids from watching the time. Students, engaged in the debate, barely hear the bell as the period ends.

o o o

Hegy, who is teaching seniors from all three small schools this year, is a little discouraged by what she’s seeing midway through the fall.

“A lot of students are failing by their own choice,” she says.

“I have a kid in the foster care system, her dad is homeless,” says Hegyi. “She talks to me about it, but she’s not taking advantage of her education to get out of this cycle of poverty... Some kids get so close to getting out, then they trip up, they falter.”

And after feeling too close to the fault line when so many colleagues were laid off last spring, she’s decided to hold back a bit. Several of the committees she was on

the year before, including governance and diversity, have dropped off the radar.

Teaching kids from other schools leaves her feeling disconnected from Legacy, and the school identity is further weakened because new teachers aren't given any instruction about the Habits of Mind.

Fighting to Hang On

Hegyi isn't the only one fighting to hang on to the small school ideal. The shortened school day gives teachers less time to re-energize during the day and crowds out other activities.

The Legacy staff meets less frequently this year, and when it does teachers often find themselves dealing with such things as security issues.

Advisory period happens more regularly this year than last, but remains easily usurped by other assemblies and emergency drills.

"Ah, advisory," one science teacher says to a colleague. "That period when we're supposed to create deep, meaningful connections with our students, in a half an hour period that occurs, at most, twice a month, and sometimes not at all."



The literacy team meets in mid-May, and most of the members' faces are ashen. Early OGT scores have arrived, and it looks as though, after two years of improvement, the school will not make Adequate Yearly Progress – the federal mandate that holds schools accountable for student performance.

What's more, a number of seniors didn't pass one or more portions of the test and won't be able to walk in the graduation ceremony. When they get the news, some shed tears in the hallways. One student tells another who failed that he is stupid and a vicious fight breaks out.

The next morning, Hegyi watches seniors play flag football at a nearby park at their annual cookout. She's had trouble sleeping since she heard about the OGT scores.

"I'm just sick over it. I feel sick," she says.

But students are coping. "A lot of the kids have had a good reaction and are talking about a game plan," she says. "There are four-week summer tutoring sessions, and they understand that there's another graduation ceremony in August, so there is something to look forward to."

Hayes isn't sure what the school has to look forward to. He's concerned that the

'We Believe You Can Fly'

Because students who failed a portion of the OGT won't be able to walk with the peers they went through the high school experience with, one of the small school leaders organizes a baccalaureate ceremony for all seniors.

The auditorium is sweltering and parents fan themselves. Some are dressed



Talisa Dixon moved to restructure the building and students' days when she became building principal.

group of teachers who pioneered small schools continues to erode. About seven more teachers have chosen to leave Brookhaven, either because they think small school reform has been irreparably damaged or because they find it difficult to teach in an urban environment.

"When you have teachers leaving like this, you don't have the continuity you need to keep the reform moving."

But he has seen a positive change among his students as a result of Sustained Silent Reading.

"You know, SSR bugs me. I don't like losing the class time," he says. "But I appreciate it. I'm seeing the kids change when it comes to reading, and not only the kids who were already bookworms."

for the 90-degree weather, while others are dressed to the nines, having donned sequins and high heels. Students mill about in the hallway with their mortarboards on, waiting until the very last minute to pull on their gowns.

Finally, the theme from "Dangerous Minds" blares over the sound system, and students swagger down the aisle, swerving in time with the music. Occasionally, a student will bust out dancing, to the delight of friends in the crowd.

"Tonight, we will salute 154 members of Brookhaven High School's senior class," says principal Talisa Dixon. "Parents, we salute you for assisting us on this journey."

Because this class led the small school phase-in, they are the first to graduate as



“The sky is the limit, and Brookhaven class of 2007, I believe we can fly.”

– Legacy valedictorian Ruth Jones

three small schools. Their diplomas say Brookhaven, but they’ve been given different colored stoles to wear and will walk by school. There will also be three valedictorians speaking at the formal ceremony.

Legacy principal Charles Richardson introduces his school’s valedictorian, Ruth Jones, who will address the baccalaureate audience.

“She exhibits the characteristics of what we call the Legacy way,” says Richardson. “She is an active listener and one of the most positive, dynamic ladies that I know. And she will be at Denison this fall.”

“AMEN!” comes a shout from the audience.

Ruth’s speech is short and sweet, about the way that baby birds learn to fly and how, like their parents, the school has nurtured them.

“The sky is the limit, and Brookhaven class of 2007, I believe we can fly.”

With that, a curtain parts, revealing teachers and parents standing on risers, swaying to music that has started. They sing,

We believe you can fly.

We believe you can touch the sky.

Think about you every night and day

Spread your wings and fly away...

“As we conclude tonight’s event, I’d like to pay special tribute,” says Dixon. “This class is so very, very dear to my heart. So many of you started in the Freshman Academy just before small schools came.”

“I’d like to give a charge to the class,

and say you are wonderful. I love you. Go out and make Brookhaven proud. I believe in you. I believe you can truly fly and I know each one of you will.”

The high note of that night soon turns sour. With only 130 seniors able to make the real diploma walk, Brookhaven’s graduation rate falls back into the district’s bottom third. When the official test scores are released in late summer, the school slides one level, from continuous improvement to academic watch.

Year Four: To Be Continued

When Hegyi and her helpers painted Legacy’s key messages along the main hallway two years earlier, they penciled in the school’s logo – a burning torch – at one end, but it was never given a coat of black paint. There is much about small schools that feels the same way: penciled in, unfinished.

Meetings focused on challenging the staff to take their teaching to the next level, to reach out further to help a student who’s about to fall through the cracks, don’t happen anymore.

And the turnover in teachers slows progress.

“There isn’t enough built-in time for the new staff members to get acclimated, and they all missed that great professional development we had the first year, when everyone saw this as the beginning of something bright,” says Hegyi. “Now we

have staff members who come in and the first thing they do is shut their door and stay in their own world.”

Advisory has started up again this year, and for the remaining teachers who understand its purpose, it still doesn’t feel like enough time. What’s worse, the rosters have changed for the third year in a row, which means that Hegyi has unwillingly broken the trust of some students.

“The kids I had last year were angry. They said, ‘You promised that you would have me until my senior year.’ I don’t know what to tell them.”

The literacy team is still working to improve students’ reading. The Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) testing of freshmen and sophomores shows that reading skills remain a struggle for many.

The team invites the 10 lowest-performing students in each of the three schools to after-school tutoring. A few take up the challenge. Most do not show up.

Against that backdrop, a member of the literacy team passes out index cards at a January meeting. “Write down a particular fear that you have, personal or professional,” the teacher says. “They should be anonymous. Then we’ll go around the table and read one and comment on it.”

After the cards are put into a bag and mixed up, Howell pulls out the first card and reads it:

“There is not enough time to do everything I am being held accountable for, and more keeps being added, so nothing is done well.”

“I think that one is the title of the book of my life,” Howell jokes. “You start doing 100 things at ten percent, so you feel like you can’t succeed at anything.”

Nods and sounds of agreement spread across the table.

Legacy science teacher Brian Hamilton picks out the next card.

“I’m afraid that the small school initiative will fade away at Brookhaven in the not-so-distant future,” he reads.

“That’s certainly a common fear – or in some cases a desire – of many,” he agrees.

“After all of that planning and work and all of those great ideas, we are nothing like we were going to be.”

Similar fears come up on other cards.

North Star science teacher Linda Duellman thinks about it, then says, “I agree that the lack of success is disappointing, but I’d rather be in a place where we’re still trying.”

North Star social studies teacher Linda Ray agrees. “I also see a lot of big differences in a lot of different areas, so I know that this work has had a positive effect on both teachers and students.”

The next cards reveal a different kind of fear.

“I am fearful of what is going to happen to some of my students if they don’t graduate. What will it be like for them?”

The school’s college counselor chimes in with some optimism.

“We’re putting out a lot of the baggage today, but I also do hope we remember that when we make a difference, we make a big difference,” she says. “When we make an impact, it’s a long impact. One high school diploma, one kid going to college can break a family cycle for generations.”

Looking Back on Four Years

The library is lined with laminated posters of the staff, reading their favorite books under the word “READ.” Hegyi is there with *Caucasia*, a novel by Danzy Senna. Hayes appears with *Tough Liberal: Albert Shanker and the Battles Over Unions, Race and Democracy*.

As the time draws near when Legacy and the other schools will graduate their first classes of students who attended small schools for all four years of their high school careers, those who helped plan the transformation are drawn to reflect on obstacles they have encountered.

Phil Hayes regrets the turnover in teachers. “If we had been able to keep that pre-layoff lineup, can you imagine where we would be right now?” he asks. “We’ll never know what we could have been.”

Any substantive educational change has



North Star English teacher Joleata Howell constantly pushes both her students and her colleagues. She says their job is to change the culture at Brookhaven.

to be codified by contractual language, he now believes. “The extra time, the amount of control teachers have, the different structures of governance all need to be spelled out.”

He’s not sorry he’s been part of the change, though. “But you know, I still feel like I can do more good here than I can anywhere else.”

Down the hall, two of his comrades are also looking back. Byrd Prillerman, a social studies teacher in the Leadership Institute, stops by to say hello to Hegyi after school. Both have been regularly voted teacher of the year by their students because of their knack for relationship-building and passion for teaching. They have both been dynamic forces in their small schools and have come to be closer friends in the past year.

Today, they are frustrated that advisory, one of the few touchstones of the small school plan that still exists, has happened so few times. They chat about what could have been.

“This could have been something,” Prillerman says. “Wasn’t that first year something?”

Hegyi agrees. “This had potential. This made changes. I felt so lucky to be here. Two years ago, 93 percent of my students passed the OGT the first time.”

The two exchange a few reminiscences before turning back to their class work. A few weeks later, Prillerman’s position is eliminated.

A Difficult Spring

Prillerman’s loss is just the opening act to another difficult spring for Brookhaven. A North Star student and his father die of carbon monoxide poisoning from a generator they were using because power to their house was shut off. The freshman was well-liked and friendly, and a lot of North Star kids are devastated by the news.

Several teachers, some original and some of the newer but active group, announce they are moving to other high schools.

“It’s not so much that people thought it was so bad here,” says Hegyi. “It’s that

they are looking for opportunities.”

The possibility that the school will be in serious trouble if it fails to make AYP again this year permeates the staff. There are rumors that the building will be reconstituted or that administrators will be relocated in a year if it happens.

The rumors gain currency when a disappointing number of Legacy seniors fail to pass one or more portions of the OGT. Of 16 who needed to pass, none did. Counselors scramble to file the paperwork that will grant some of the students exceptions.

The First R

Howell keeps pressing forward with the literacy team. She comes up with a plan to share literacy strategies with teachers from the three “feeder” middle schools that are most likely to send students to Brookhaven, hoping to address reading problems earlier.

For the rest of the year, she reassures the group that it’s okay that their number is shrinking. The principal says she will find funding for the project, and the team continues to hold working sessions so they can implement their plan in the summer.

“What matters is that we have doers on this team,” she tells them. “What matters is our quality, not our size.”

It helps that literacy team teachers know that some of their students are better off than when the school year started. The MAP testing shows that more than 50 percent have improved their reading proficiency.

Class of 2008

As the school year draws to a close, Howell’s school, North Star, learns that it will have its fifth small school leader in as many years. Staff members reassure themselves with the knowledge that having a higher number of experienced teachers has helped them lead themselves. The school also changes its name to the North Star School of Business and Economics.

Hegyi is happy to find that she’ll have her freshmen again as sophomores and that she and Hayes will be able to work

together again. “I like that,” she says. “It means we can start on the right foot.”

She plans to return to the literacy team in the fall and to go through more professional development with KnowledgeWorks in the summertime. She’ll also go to Florida for a vacation and try to regenerate before the next year.

In spite of all of the dour speculation, there aren’t enough programs for the crowd on graduation day. A total of 134 students get diplomas, while the administration celebrates the fact that the graduates have earned \$1.3 million in scholarships.

Brookhaven’s teachers sit in a row near the dais in St. John Arena. Many of them were the architects and early advocates of small school reform. Their vision has been buffeted by outside forces that no one could have predicted or controlled, but most feel richer for the experience. They have gained a deeper knowledge of strong teacher-student relationships, of team teaching and of demanding, relevant education. These dedicated educators will continue to carry that knowledge into classes at Brookhaven and elsewhere – and they will use it to lift students into more promising futures. ■



About the storyteller

Tracy Zollinger Turner is an award-winning freelance writer, editor, blogger

and mom from Columbus, Ohio. Her work has appeared in newspapers all over the country, as well as in a variety of regional and national magazines, online publications and on public radio.

Every Student Deserves a Legacy

This series from KnowledgeWorks Foundation shares the day-to-day struggles and triumphs of educators and students working to transform underperforming large urban high schools into small personalized schools or to pioneer schools that blend high school and college learning. Previous books in the series are available at www.kwfdn.org. You can also follow a particular school or campus by going to “School Stories” on the website.

2004-05

A Year of Transformation in the Lives of Ohio's Urban High School Students

Teachers and students in three urban districts struggle with sometimes overwhelming challenges during the first year of innovative high school reform.

2005-06

Small Moments, Big Dreams

Real-life stories from five redesigned urban high schools in their second year show both progress and promise yet to be realized.

Learning by Degree

Three early college high schools, each at a different stage of development, work to find the best structure to help teenagers attend high school and college at the same time.

2006-07

Most Likely to Succeed

In their third year, new small schools see change in both culture and practice – but unexpected hurdles slow progress for some.

To a Higher Degree

As teachers and administrators refine their schools, students in early college high schools defy expectations.

2007-08

From First Day to First Graduates

Educators at Brookhaven High School in Columbus fight to keep their dreams alive over four years of introducing small schools in a hard-hit urban district.

Learning to be Leaders

In Cleveland Heights, principals and teachers adjust to expanded roles that give them a greater voice during the first four years of small schools.

Getting to Know You

The role of relationships in the first four years of a small schools transformation at Libbey High School in Toledo.

A Different School of Thought

Breaking with tradition, innovative educators plan and launch Toledo Early College, which blends high school and college.

Starting from Scratch

Five years in the life of Ohio's first early college high school bring changes in structure but not in mission.

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