

Update Memo:  
Standards-Based Middle School Reform  
Jefferson County Public Schools

Barbara Neufeld  
January 1998

## **INTRODUCTION**

When we visited Louisville in November 1997 we found central office administrators, principals, teachers, Clark Fellows and School Support Resource teachers lauding the ways in which the district was now focused on implementing standards-based reform. Their comments revealed a consistent picture of how the district was trying to move forward, an air of excitement and possibility that we had not heard in previous data collection visits. For the first time, we heard mention of the district's commitment to reform and the ways in which all parts of the school system were organizing to forward the district's reform agenda. The commitment, we were told, is tied to Superintendent Steve Daeschner's vision.

This vision takes as its basic assumption that "student success is the true measure of any school district." With that assumption, the vision commits the JCPS "to educate each student, not just to the minimum levels of literacy and mathematics but to the highest academic standards."

In this update report, we highlight components of the district's strategy for achieving the vision and explain why we think that they are indicators of genuine progress with standards-based school reform. These components include, 1) focused principal professional development, 2) the design and implementation of the Cadre Teacher position, 3) implementation of district level dialogue teams, and, 4) development of performance standards and a comprehensive local assessment system.

When we visited Louisville in November 1996, the district was confronting feedback from the previous spring's KIRIS assessment. Scores were low, and at the middle level, half of the schools were in "decline" and one was in "crisis." Central office administrators talked about KIRIS scores being a "wake-up" call that must lead them to focus on curriculum, instruction, assessment and standards reform more broadly. Some acknowledged how little attention they had actually paid to these aspects of reform in the past. Others said that for the first time, they were understanding standards, what standards and KERA had to do with each

other, and how they could be used to help children achieve at higher levels. Administrators stated that it was time for them to make standards-based reform the district's agenda.

The data we collected in November 1997 suggest that JCPS has taken on the challenge posed by Kentucky reform. It is paying attention to standards-based reform in ways that hold promise for the education of its students.

## **EVALUATION STRATEGY**

In a joint decision made by Education Matters, Sandy Ledford, Sherry DeMarsh and EMCF, Education Matters deferred its spring 1997 site visit until November 1997. We did this in order to learn about the reform strategies that the district was planning to implement after spring 1997 KIRIS assessment.

Because the district was just beginning to focus on teaching practices, we did not anticipate any changes in classroom teaching by the time of our visit. Therefore, we interviewed but did not observe teachers in our sample. We interviewed all four principals of our sample schools. And, we added the Cadre Teachers at each of our sample schools to our interview sample.

At the Gheens Academy, we interviewed a) Jackie Austin, the new Director of Curriculum and Assessment together with Deborah Walker, b) Lennie Hay, Director of Professional Development along with Pam Rogers, Coordinator of Professional Development, c) Ellen Lewis, the Writing Portfolio Specialist, d) Jean Green, Director of Support Services, and e) Carol Hall, Reading Specialist. Each of these people has a central role in forwarding the district's reform agenda.

At Van Hoose, we interviewed a) Steve Daeschner, Superintendent and Sandy Ledford, Assistant Superintendent for Middle Schools, b) Sherry DeMarsh, Director of the Clark Project, c) Ken Draut, District Assessment Coordinator, d) all five of the Clark Fellows, and e) four members of the Middle School Coalition.

## **OVERVIEW**

Superintendent Daeschner's vision includes a strong focus on literacy and mathematics with an immediate goal of reducing to zero the number of students scoring in the Novice category on the KIRIS assessment in these two areas. Over the longer haul, the goal is to increase significantly the proportion of children scoring at the proficient and distinguished levels. We heard about this component of his vision in interviews with educators at all levels of the school system and in a wide range of roles. For the first time, we were told, the district has a focus and

everyone knows that they are to prioritize children's learning needs in these two areas. The individuals in our sample applaud the emphasis and what they describe as the district's seriousness of purpose.

From the educators at Gheens with whom we spoke, we heard most about the focus on literacy. Although KIRIS is still a significant motivating factor in this emphasis, we heard about district-based reasons for focusing on literacy and we heard educators talk about their need to take responsibility for teaching and learning in this area.

For example, we learned that the district now realizes that too many teachers were focusing on teaching writing only because of the portfolio requirement. They would have a portfolio week or month to enable students to create entries to send to the state. Teachers were not, we were told, incorporating writing into everyday lessons. This year, through the work of the School Support Resource Teachers, the Clark Fellows and others who provide support to the schools, there is a constant push for writing throughout the curriculum and throughout the year.

In order to enable them to have the knowledge and skill to support the teaching of writing, Gheens staff, including the School Support Resource Teachers and Clark Fellows, attend monthly professional development sessions focused on writing. They also participate in professional development related to teaching reading in the content areas. They then use their knowledge and skill to do demonstration lessons for teachers.

Gheens staff are also involved in writing the performance standards for the district. This serves two purposes. First, they bring their content area expertise to the task. Second, they are learning, in depth, about the meaning and implications of the performance standards. This should serve them well as they help teachers and principals begin to align their curriculum with the performance standards. In preparation for using the performance standards districtwide, we learned that some STAR schools, those identified as in decline from the Spring 1996 KIRIS assessment, are looking at the performance standards under development to determine the fit between their curriculum, which is newly aligned and focused on the content standards, and the proposed performance standards.

In addition to these approaches to implementing standards-based reform with an emphasis on literacy, Gheens staff are encouraging teachers to take their copies of students' answers to KIRIS open-response questions and examine them to understand what characterizes exemplary student work. They are suggesting that students do a similar examination of responses so that everyone knows what proficient and distinguished work looks like. This strategy is an important start to

helping teachers figure out how to improve their teaching by looking at student work. The goal, according to Jean Green, is “to get teachers to begin developing their classroom lessons by looking at the work their students produce, seeing what they have, what they know, what they don’t know, and what they need to further develop.”

Rather than present our findings tied solely to issues of literacy, we have chosen to organize this update report around strategies that the district is using to reach its goals with respect to these content areas. It is in the strategies that we feel we have the best evidence that the district is committing itself to taking responsibility for implementing standards-based reform. The strategies suggest that KERA, broadly conceived, and not only KIRIS, is now the center of the district’s attention.

Although we describe the strategies one at a time, they are interrelated, a point which suggests the coherence of the overall approach. Virtually all of them are designed to increase teachers’ and administrators’ capacity to implement teaching and learning reforms. We begin and focus most attention on two strategies: 1) the district’s efforts to increase principals’ knowledge, skill and focus on teaching and learning, and 2) the new role of Cadre Teacher, a role developed to support middle school implementation of the curriculum and assessment components of standards-based reform. Both of these strategies have the potential to strengthen middle schools’ capacity to address teachers’ and students’ learning needs. We describe more briefly, 3) the new School and District Dialogue Process, and 4) the on-going work of developing performance standards and a district assessment strategy. Our purpose in describing these two strategies is to provide additional information about the ways in which the district has organized to move swiftly to establish its vision and develop an infrastructure that will support it. Taken together, these four strategies describe changes in the district’s approach to reform. They indicate that the district has established its own purpose and orientation to standards-based reform.

### **District-Provided Principal Professional Development**

Principals are crucial to the success of teaching and learning reforms. Yet, until very recently, the district had not provided them with professional development targeted toward instruction. This situation has changed. Principals now participate in district initiated professional development that is likely to increase their capacity with respect to teaching and learning. During the first part of their monthly meetings, they focus at least one hour on strategies to improve the teaching of writing. After lunch, in sessions that are voluntary but are usually attended by two thirds of the principals, the focus is also instructional. For example, one meeting this past fall was directed to reading, another to creating an effective and useful

consolidated school plan. Through its efforts, the district seems to be enhancing principals knowledge and skill. It is also creating a cohort of principals who work well together and who can provide each other with support and encouragement as they move forward with reform.

Approaches to Increasing Principals' Knowledge and Skill. Principals spoke with enthusiasm about the content of district professional development. They reported that it focused, for the first time, on instructional issues and gave them knowledge and skill that they could use when observing in classrooms and talking with teachers.

This year the monthly principals' meetings have changed drastically. It used to be that [for example] Metro United Way wanted to talk to you. And they got their five minutes and then someone else had ten minutes. And it's constantly one after another, somebody wanted a piece of your time to share some bit of information. Where this year, it's clearly more focused on instructional strategies. It's you as the instructional leader. We'll have in-services on writing, best practices again, writing portfolios, these kinds of things. Every principals' meeting. I don't think we've had one that wasn't focused in one of those areas....There's been a huge paradigm shift with the principals not as much [emphasis on us] as "maintainers"...but definitely more as the instructional leader. There's the difference.

This positive report on professional development results from a genuine change in the district's approach to principals' work. Rather than focus its monthly meetings on the managerial aspects of the role, the district now directs principals' attention to instruction. Although what principals are learning sometimes has a KIRIS focus, its content is integrally related to issues of teaching and learning that are important for standards-based reform in the broad context of KERA.

For example, one central office administrator pointed out that writing scores were not improving as much as the district would like. She noted that the district should be able to improve students' scores since the writing that is included in the writing portfolio is within the district's control. Her thought was that principals had to learn what the writing process should look like and how to tell whether it was being implemented in their schools. The result was principal professional development focused on the writing process, including strategies for observing writing instruction. Principals with whom we spoke valued the training and said that it enhanced their capacity to observe writing instruction and talk to teachers about writing.

We've done a lot of work in the area of writing. We've done some work in critical reading techniques and strategies. We haven't done too much directly related to KIRIS. Yet, they're all teaching/learning kinds of things that will impact [on KIRIS scores] I'm sure....I think the best thing we've done, we have brought in student [writing] and sat down and tried to analyze it using rubrics. I mean really to see what teachers are having to go through and how we could better supervise writing in class. How we would know what to look for in the working portfolios, know the right questions to ask the teachers. That was real informative.

Another commented:

One [principal meeting] I recall had to do with writing portfolios. And it talked about how to check the working portfolios. In other words, a working portfolio is what another content area teacher would have... The 7th grade is where the writing portfolios were assessed, but the student should have a portfolio that came from 5th grade. They have a working portfolio they'll send up to the next teacher so you can have pieces to pull from, to put into the 7th grade portfolio. We talked about ways to look at that, ways to analyze whether the right things were happening. Were there pre-writing activities? Were there strategies such as webs and the different things you might do to get your thought process together to write a piece? We've had writing specialists talk with us about some of the changes in the KIRIS assessment, the emphasis on pieces that were what they call transactive, meaning very real pieces such as resumes and memos and those kinds of things. All useful stuff. I mean, it's all been very good. It hasn't been just anything thrown in there, I guarantee.

Still another said:

The best training I've gotten is from my own district in reading and writing. At principals' meetings, we've been focusing staff development in little nuggets that the principals have time to absorb. And, we've had people from the state department writing portfolio unit come and, in a very focused way, contextualize exactly what principals need. [For example]: Here's a little half hour glimpse of an activity you can do to see if your writing portfolios are coming along. You can do "this" in October. Say, now, in February you can do "this."...You know, the middle school principals are together on wanting to get better. So this has been real helpful.

Some conversations about standards, teaching and learning, and some efforts to align curriculum within content areas and across the grades took place because schools in decline had to address these issues with their Distinguished Educator (DE). We want to stress, however, that in such STAR schools additional, voluntary work of this sort took place, and similar work took place in our sample schools that did not have a DE. These opportunities for principal learning represent a significant improvement in Jefferson County's approach to supporting standards-based reform at the school level.

Principals told us about an important, indirect consequence of their professional development activities. They said that they were now working together, in collaborative efforts, perhaps for the first time. We had often heard that the district culture, over the years, did not foster collaborative relationships among principals. It did not encourage them to share effective practices because to do so might diminish their own standing by raising someone else's. In November, principals told a very different story. They spoke about meeting with their colleagues to develop better practices. They noted how different this was from past practice and how beneficial it was likely to be. As one principal put it:

All districts tend to pit colleagues against one another. Not intentionally. But all the reports come out, all the attendance reports, all the suspensions, everything comes out in a long list of your school with everybody else's. So everybody looks to see what other people do. You measure yourself, you know. And I think because of that -- and of course, having the magnet program, people are competing for kids -- I think it tends to make you want to kind of pull in. Like, "Oh oh, maybe I'd better not let him know what I'm doing over here because my scores might go up and his won't." Which is so horrible. But, I think we've begun sharing more. And to me...I think that is tremendous growth....It's very powerful because it just gives you that feeling that you're not in this alone and that you have people you can bounce things off of.

The new culture of collaboration probably influenced the success of a principal retreat led by Sherry DeMarsh. The retreat, principals said, provided them with a thorough and valuable review of standards reform. It enabled them to focus on the national as well as the local reform perspective and to shift their attention from KIRIS as the central goal of standards-based reform to broader issues of teaching and learning. During the retreat, principals talked with each other about key issues of reform and their understandings and misunderstandings about standards and standards-based instruction and assessment. As a result of the retreat, the principals of Johnson Traditional, Mayzeek and Lassiter planned to provide a similar

experience for their department heads/team leaders in December. They were excited at the prospect of having the teachers work together toward implementing the reform agenda.

During this site visit we heard principals talk about instruction in greater detail than in the past. Their examples demonstrated the growing sophistication of their knowledge and skill with respect to standards. For example, principals talked about having participated with their teachers in looking at student work. Some reported being surprised by the variation in students' accomplishments. One principal talked about a session in which Ken Draut, the district's Assessment Coordinator, helped the faculty look at students' open response questions.

It's real revealing [to look at the students' work]...The group of work I had, it wasn't anything to be proud of. I was looking at this and I think out of the fifteen pieces I looked at, I was surprised that these kids were not doing better work.

Another principal talked about the impact of looking at on-going curriculum and instruction for its impact on student achievement. This was done by examining the work that students produced on the KIRIS open response prompts in light of classroom instruction.

We were able to discover what some teachers were doing routinely in their classroom that might pay off. We looked at the test scores from two different teachers and saw that one teachers' kids were doing a whole lot better on problem solving. And [that teacher] was doing a lot more problem solving with her kids and it really did come home to roost. And, by looking at [students'] answers more than just their scores, we were able to tell where their scores were breaking down and places that simple kinds of things that [one teacher] had added to her class made that difference.

Another principal talked about a work session in which principal and teachers,

...worked in departments. We wrote entrance criteria for the sixth grade level for our subject area, and exit criteria. And then we wrote benchmarks for the seventh grade. Then we took the actual content standards that were broken down by where it was actually being taught and at what level -- where it was introduced and where it was continued. So, science teachers [for example] had a furious conversation to get some kind of consensus about each standard and where it should go.

Summary. Without question, principals are now engaged in focused professional development, provided by the district, that is designed to help them increase their capabilities as instructional leaders. Their comments reveal that they are pleased with the new emphasis. They want to be better able to work with teachers to implement reforms that will increase student achievement. They want to be able to use their colleagues as resources in collaborative working relationships. Our visit to Louisville in November suggests that the district has made a commitment to help principals grow in ways that will help them forward the standards-based reform agenda.

Given this shift in the principals role, central office administrators are now looking for a new principal evaluation instrument that would better reflect the work that principals are being trained to do. The district is also seeking ways to improve the knowledge and skills of incoming principals. To this end, they are developing new criteria for entering principals and developing a more refined process through which to assess the qualities of principal candidates. All of this attention to the importance of principals as instructional leaders bodes well for the advancement of reform in the district.

### **Design and Implementation of The Cadre Teacher Role**

In order to increase school capacity with respect to standards-based assessment, district leaders of middle level reform created the role of Cadre Teacher. The idea was to provide each school with a pair of in-house teachers who had sufficient knowledge and skill to help their colleagues begin to use authentic/alternative assessments. According to Sherry DeMarsh, the hope was that Cadre Teachers would assume a leadership role and share strategies that other teachers could use to develop assessment linked to performance. District leaders realized that teachers would need help in this area if they were to use the performance standards that were to be available during the 1997-1998 school year. Performance assessment, after all, is intimately tied to what is taught and what teachers want students to know and be able to do. Performance assessment is integral to curriculum development in a standards-based system.

The idea of the Cadre Teacher role is a good one for several reasons. First, it complements the roles of the Clark Fellows, each of whom has area of expertise. It directly expands the impact of Marcia Lile, the Clark Fellow who focuses on standards. Second, the role responds to schools' requests for more support of the kind provided by the Clark Fellows. There is only one Clark Fellow for each of the major content areas for all of the district's middle schools. The strategy of training teachers to provide assessment knowledge puts more expertise into each school. Third, because of the design, Cadre Teachers remain in their schools to fulfill their

Cadre role. They do not have to give up their teaching responsibilities. They can try out the assessment strategies associated with performance standards in their classrooms, along with their colleagues. The Cadre Teacher role is another strategy for providing teacher learning opportunities at the school site.

In this section of the update report, we review teachers' and principals' understanding of the role and provide examples of how it is being implemented. This review reveals strong agreement about the purposes of the role and optimism about its future impact on the assessment component of standards reform. It will describe ways in which individual Cadre Teachers are using what they have learned in Cadre training sessions to influence their colleagues' work. In addition, it will note constraints on full implementation that result from a) variation in Cadre Teachers' knowledge and skill about assessment, b) their leadership skills, and c) the limited time Cadre Teachers have available to work with their colleagues.

Principals' and Teachers' Understanding of the Cadre Teacher Role. Principals and teachers agree that the Cadre Teachers' role is to build assessment capacity within each middle school. Assessment, in the view of these principals and Cadre Teachers, is integrally connected to the design of curriculum. Principals said:

Cadre Teachers have had in-depth training on how to go through a template of designing a unit based on content standards that has an assessment piece that is refined and actually assesses the standards that are being taught. So, they're going to become our experts in the building in that area when we get there.

[The role,] is to build capacity. You want some folks who are trained in assessment. That's the thing they hit hardest [with the Cadre Teachers]. And they'll come back into the building and spread the good news. You know, tell [their colleagues] that when you do assessment, it doesn't just have to be open response all the time. ....You can do [assessment] while you're having class; you can do checks for understanding; you can do performance events; you can do exhibitions...

Teachers have more credibility with teachers. So, I think, there was an idea that if we can bring a group of teachers together and get their level of skills up to a certain level and then somehow facilitate ways within the building so those folks could serve as leaders to others, [it would increase teachers' learning].

Cadre Teachers had the same perspective:

I think our role is to lead the direction toward more open types of teaching methods and assessments. Especially assessments. Last year, we focused a lot on performance assessments as opposed to the matching and the different classical types of testing...[With performance assessment] you have to sort of back into your lesson. You've got to know what you want them to perform and to demonstrate to you and then construct your lesson plan in such a way that it will lead them into that area. And I think that is a very important point about a proper and a real wholesome performance assessment.

[We are] real aware of using performance events. That they are [judged] against a standard of what is quality work. What really needs to be taught and how. I mean, that's all, you know. Pretty much people come back [from the Cadre meetings] and talk about it. We have more of a focus on what we're doing instead of just, you know, maybe going to the textbook and using that as your curriculum. Like focusing on what you really want kids to know and how they could do it. And just to make sure that there is a connection, that you're not just doing a project just to do a project. You know what the purpose is.

Cadre Teachers in one school noted that teachers tended to resist the idea of performance assessment because they equated it with the group projects that were once part of KIRIS assessment. Part of the Cadre Teachers' job is to persuade teachers that performance assessment is intended to help teachers understand individual progress and achievement as part of on-going classroom curriculum and instruction. Their job is to help establish links between content standards, performance standards and authentic assessment.

Selecting the Cadre Teachers. Principals understood the purpose of the Cadre Teacher role and that implementing it required knowledge as well as leadership capacity. Nonetheless, we were told that, across the district's middle schools, they considered a number of factors when looking for Cadre Teacher candidates. Some wanted to select teachers who were not already over-loaded with committee work. They saw the role as important and wanted teachers who could devote time to it. Some saw it as an opportunity to provide professional development to teachers who were not yet actively involved in standards-based reform. Principals felt that exposure to the Cadre training as well as participation in the Cadre group could enhance individual's knowledge and skill. Ultimately, this would benefit the

school through these teachers' participation in teaching teams and content-focused department work. Principals said it was a good opportunity for young teachers to learn. Other principals chose teachers who already were leaders, hoping to enhance their capacities even further.

As a result, Cadre Teachers came to their roles with different levels of knowledge and skill with respect to teaching and with different levels of leadership status in their schools. Some Cadre Teachers were already considered leaders; some were practically brand-new teachers when they were chosen. The Cadre Teachers in our sample schools represent a wide range of teaching experience and content areas. We understand that they are representative of the Cadre Teachers across the district. Such variation makes the work of training the Cadre Teachers complex. It means that some will take longer than others to develop the knowledge and skill in assessment and leadership that they will need to fully implement their role. However, as we report below, the Cadre Teachers with whom we spoke were fully committed to developing their roles in their schools.

Implementing the Role: The Middle School Institute. Teachers began to learn their roles and the parameters of authentic assessment early in 1997 through Cadre professional development sessions. Their true public "debut," however, came on June 18, 1997. This was the day that the JCPS ran a Middle School Institute that focused on authentic assessment. The Institute was carefully designed to give middle school teachers and principals an introduction to alternative assessment in light of the district's plans to develop and implement performance standards. The goal was to enhance teachers' and principals' knowledge about assessment alternatives and provide them with examples of those assessments in the context of specific lessons or units. With this knowledge, the hope was that teachers and principals would be better prepared to use performance standards as part of curriculum development.

The Institute began with keynote speaker Jay McTighe who spoke about the links between curriculum and assessment and the standards paradigm in which one might "Think of curriculum in terms of desired "performances of understanding," and then "Plan backwards" to identify needed concepts and skills." The Institute then ran two concurrent sessions, one in the morning and one after lunch, that included just over 30 teacher presentations on authentic assessment. District specialists in curriculum and assessment did content-focused presentations during the concurrent sessions. Teachers chose to attend one session in the morning and one in the afternoon. For the last hour of the day, teachers and principals met in school groups to "develop a plan for the integration of performance assessment and the reviewing of student work into school-based best practice for the upcoming school year." (Taken from the Middle School Institute Agenda.)

Cadre Teachers had an important role in the Institute. Either alone or with their partner, they presented a session demonstrating what they had learned with respect to performance assessment. Some showed videotapes of standards-based lessons that they had done with their students; some brought samples of curriculum units; all of them connected assessment strategies to their curriculum content.

Presenting at the Institute, we were told, gave many Cadre Teachers visibility and credibility with their own school colleagues; it helped initiate the work they were to do in their schools. From a personal and professional growth perspective, Cadre Teachers reported that these sessions were exceptional. For those new to teacher leadership, the experience boosted their self-confidence and demonstrated to others their growing knowledge. As one teacher said,

I got to speak at the Middle School Institute and I gained so much from that. I don't know if I can put it into words, but the speaking in front of my peers, that was one of the hardest things I've ever had to do. But once I had prepared, it was wonderful. And I got a lot of good feedback and some critical things...And I liked that. I'm that kind of person. And I think that you need to get out of teaching if you can't grow, you know.

This teacher was encouraged to take the risk of presenting by the Cadre leader and by Cadre colleagues. She reported getting tremendous help in putting her presentation together and in practicing it before a trusted audience. At the Institute, she was touched by the fact that most of the teachers in her school came to her Institute presentation. For this teacher, who was not initially a leader, and for others, being selected for the Cadre Role had a profound impact on their self-images. It is also having an impact on their knowledge with respect to standards and assessment.

Implementing the Role: School-Based Activities. In designing the Cadre Teacher role, Sherry DeMarsh reported that the hope was that, in each school,

These teachers would assume a leadership role and share planning tools they could use and actually set about setting an expectation [in the school] that teachers would begin developing assessment linked to performance and put into motion a process. To have them come back and revisit what they were doing was my goal.

According to principals and Cadre Teachers, this vision has been implemented in only a limited way. In some schools, Cadre Teachers have made faculty presentations about assessment and have shared the curriculum development tools and templates that they acquired during their professional development. This happened, we were told, where principals took a role in organizing the activity. In other schools, Cadre Teachers have worked with their departments or teams to offer ideas about assessment and curriculum development in light of standards. For example,

Last week we got our social studies department together, just the sixth grade teachers, and we took the template that we used to help plan units from the Cadre method. And we planned a unit on the UN and cultural diversity and things like that. And [we discussed] what were our standards that we hit on and some of the activities that we're going to do. ...And there's one teacher that knows a whole lot of information on the UN. And she gave us a packet and said, "Oh, this is a unit I did." And I'm like, "that's great. So, let's look at it and find the standards in it and let's do all this." And so we got it...And we were able to have a real productive meeting through it and spend the day doing that and planning and then we're going to try it, all three teams together.

Principals of other schools talked about how their Cadre Teachers were working with their team colleagues to develop instructional units that included performance tasks. Teachers on some of those teams were planning to discuss samples of student work from the new units in order to create benchmarks for performance. In other schools, we were told, Cadre Teachers had not yet had an opportunity to work with other teachers due to time constraints and/or other priorities.

Principals agree that implementation of the role, and, therefore, dissemination of the ideas, has been slow. Some say that they have not found a way to include the Cadre Teachers' work on the agenda of faculty meetings. However, they believe that, even if the dissemination process is slow, Cadre Teachers will eventually be able to share what they learn and to increase the capacity of many teachers to engage with performance standards and assessment when they are available from the district. Designers of the role agree that Cadre Teachers' knowledge and skill will become more salient when the performance standards are issued. In addition, they suggest that in those schools where Cadre Teachers have been working with their colleagues, teachers will have a good understanding of what implementing performance standards entails when they appear. They will not find the standards as daunting as they might have without the Cadre Teacher work.

Implementing the Role: Finding Time. Principals noted the problems that Cadre Teachers had implementing their roles as a result of time constraints. They agreed that it would be better if Cadre Teachers had release time in their own buildings so that they could say to other teachers, "You know, I'll be glad to sit down and talk with you about this," and "This is the way we've learned to develop things." In part as a result of the Cadre Teacher role, teachers and principals were becoming aware of the need for in-school time for on-going professional development work.

As part of its commitment to educate students to the highest standards, the JCPS was seriously considering alternate calendar proposals that would result in professional development time during the school year. For example, the district was considering whether to add two days to the winter break when teachers but not students would be in attendance. These days might be used to develop curriculum or performance assessments. Students might return to school earlier in August so that they would not lose instructional time. Virtually everyone with whom we spoke supported the idea of changing the school calendar to increase the time available to teachers for professional development that focuses on curriculum, standards, and assessment.

Impact of Cadre Role. It is too soon to determine the impact of the Cadre Teachers on their colleagues' understanding and use of performance assessment, but the early discussion with these teachers suggests that the future is promising. The strategy has, in effect, seeded schools with teachers who have specialized knowledge but who, at the same time, are regular members of the teaching faculty. At the outset, they do their work almost surreptitiously, in the context of on-going team, department and faculty meetings. We agree with principals, central office administrators and the Cadre Teachers that they could accomplish more were they to have time within the school day to meet with teacher teams other than their own or to go to other department meetings. Nonetheless, we think that the strategy of creating this role is off to a good start. We also know that the ideas are complex and will take time to fully integrate and implement.

If the Cadre Teachers are to be effective in their roles, they need knowledge and skill and they need to be supported in the development of their leadership capacities. Principals need to take a role in this latter aspect of their development. Given that they were not necessarily chosen for their extant knowledge of performance assessment, standards-based reform, or exemplary teaching, it may be that some Cadre Teachers are better able to fulfill the role than are others. While it will be important to provide these teachers with appropriate learning opportunities, it may also be important to make some assessment of the quality with which they implement the role. It is crucial that the people who are identified as leaders of standards-reform be seen as competent if others are to agree to learn from them.

The district, in collaboration with the principals, might consider how it will make the best use of the Cadre Teachers and insure that each school is served by teachers capable of fulfilling this important role.

Finally, we want to note, not surprisingly, that being a Cadre Teacher can have a great impact on the Cadre Teacher's work with his or her own students. Several commented that they used the Cadre strategies when developing units and thinking about what they want their students to demonstrate as evidence of learning. They did this for themselves even if they did not have the opportunity to do it with others.

Cadre [training] makes you sit down and, when you're teaching a unit, really think what you want the kids to get out of it. You think and you stop and you write down those standards. OK, I want them to learn this; I want them to know this. And then, when you plan an activity, the activity has a true purpose, not just, oh, that will be fun....This is where the Cadre program's been really helpful. Because I went back and re-thought this unit, the lesson that I did and this activity. I guess this is a performance outcome for kids. And went back and looked at it and said, "Wait a second. What am I really looking for here and why do we want to do this?" It helped me out.

Ideally, the Cadre Teacher role can provide teachers with what they need to know to come to these kinds of insights about their own teaching. When this happens, they will be in a good position to help others. Such growth in professional knowledge might then foster the academic goals of the Superintendent's vision.

### **School and District Dialogue Process**

As part of its effort to focus schools and all support personnel -- including central office administrators -- on increasing student achievement, the JCPS created a strategy called the School and District Dialogue Process. This process is designed to strengthen communication between the schools and central office so that a) central office has appropriate and sufficient knowledge of the issues facing schools and the ways in which they are trying to address them, and b) central office and the schools are better able to work together toward achieving the district's vision. The district stresses that,

These dialogue sessions are not for any auditing purposes. They are simply an opportunity for conversation so central office staff can better understand the direction schools are taking and to better understand areas where schools may need central office

assistance. (Memo from Sandy Ledford to Middle School Principals, 10/8/97)

The process, which was in its pilot phase during our November 1997 visit, has three stages. In the first, called the pre-dialogue phase, the district team of four or five people reviews a school's data in order to develop a focus for the Dialogue. The school team, usually made up of the principal, a parent, a teacher member of the site-based decision making council, and another teacher, also reviews its data with the goal of identifying strengths, weaknesses and issues it wants to discuss.

During the Dialogue, which takes place after school and lasts for ninety minutes, the district team asks questions about the data and helps the school team generate ideas about connections in the data and reasons for the results. The school team answers the district team's questions and can describe ways in which it has been addressing issues. According to one central office administrator who recently participated in a pilot Dialogue meeting:

The purpose is really conversation to find out what the school is doing, how they're working towards incorporating the vision, how they're doing on implementing their school transformation plan and working towards the consolidated plan [the new, state-required planning document], as well as just letting central office people know about what's going on in the building. And we just started. We had pilots last week. The team includes a cabinet person, maybe finance, then grounds and maintenance, you know, all of those. It's all of those higher level people. Plus directors from Gheens, plus the assistant superintendent, plus a data person. A person who would understand the data. Of course schools are real uptight about it, but the whole notion is to be real informal and interject humor. And it's all been wonderful. The schools have felt really good about it... And the pilots went really well. I mean, they are just so much fun to do because, you know, you focus your questions around those ten points of the vision, but then the school gets a chance to really talk about what they're doing. And then [you figure out] what it is the district can do to help.

When the formal Dialogue is over, the district team meets to discuss what it learned and to prepare a one-page report that summarizes the Dialogue, notes the school's strengths and makes suggestions to address areas of concern. This report is then sent to the school. The school completes a feedback form about the Dialogue process which it sends to the Dialogue Team chairperson.

The purpose of this structured process is to establish data-based discussions that a) inform the district of each school's strengths, weaknesses and proposed improvement strategies in much greater detail than is conveyed by the Consolidated School Plans, b) create a forum for which schools must carefully review their own data and examine the links between their plans and strategies in light of district and school goals, and c) enable the district, with more complete information, to help provide the schools with appropriate and sufficient resources.

Although the School and District Dialogue Process was just beginning at the time of our visit, it generated excitement among the central office administrators with whom we spoke. They consider it to be a step in the right direction of enabling central office to be organized to support school reform. Plans are for the Dialogues to become an annual part of the on-going work of central office and the schools.

### **Development of Performance Standards and a Comprehensive Local Assessment Strategy.**

At the time of our November 1997 data collection visit to Louisville, many Gheens staff members, the Clark Fellows, some regular classroom teachers and others with expertise were hurriedly developing performance standards for JCPS. This work began at the start of the school year with a request from Superintendent Daeschner that performance standards be brought to the Board by December 1, 1997.

The performance standards were being developed by grade levels because, in this way, they would match the academic content standards. In addition, the district wanted to avoid the situation created by KIRIS assessment in which only teachers at the accountability grades seemed to take responsibility for what students had to know and be able to do. Grade level performance standards would help insure that all teachers had responsibility for implementing standards.

The timetable was short because the Superintendent wanted to insure that teachers began to use the standards, even if in draft form, during the second half of the school year. He wanted teachers engaged in reviewing the performance standards and developing exemplars and benchmarks by the end of the 1997-1998 school year. Virtually every person at Gheens with whom we spoke was engaged in this work. Deborah Walker, Executive Director of Gheens, explained the roll-out strategy.

We have a performance standards, professional development roll-out plan. First is, we'd like to have more teacher involvement in these. And so the teachers will work with the standards, work with the sample tasks, to develop their own performance tasks, to try them out

with their kids. And over this next year, they will do some school level benchmarking asking [for example] what does good work look like based on these standards? And then the following year, [we will] take some of those sample performance tasks and the rubrics that go along with them that teachers have developed, select some of the really strong ones so we have them for grade level, and do a district wide assessment. And we probably could only score a sample of those. But what that would tell us is, you know, as the district is moving toward standards at each grade level, where do the problems seem to be, what kind of PD do we need to help teachers.

Middle school teachers and principals should be reasonably well-prepared for this roll-out strategy. After all, they began to understand alternative assessment, which includes performance tasks, at the Middle School Institute. They have the support of the Cadre Teachers and that of Marcia Lile, the Clark Fellow who supports the Cadre Teachers and also works directly with teachers as they ask for help in designing alternative assessments. Although not all principals and teachers will be ready for this next phase of standards implementation, we think that many will welcome it. It will help them understand the implications of content standards for student learning. It will shift the focus from content standards as a traditional scope and sequence to content standards as part of a new way of looking at what students should know and be able to do.

Teachers and principals in some schools are certainly ready for this next phase of reform. They have been asking for the performance assessments for quite some time. They understand the need to have performance standards that represent high quality work from across the district. One school administrator said, for example,

We need to be looking at student work based on things that are performance assessments all the time. I'd like to have some sort of like assignment that we give all across the county and department chairs take those some place, so some common place [ and score them]. I want to see how [our] kids compare with [kids from other schools]. Because, I think we get into this rut and think, "Oh well, these are our kids. You know, we're one of these schools with 65% of our kids on free or reduced lunch and we struggle to keep our scores up." But I really believe that our kids can do every bit as well as any other school in the county and I want to make our standards not [just] what we think our kids can do.

In preparation for implementing performance assessment, the district has been encouraging teachers to look at student work that has been scored for KIRIS.

The other thing that we're encouraging teachers to do is copy the open response questions, their student responses last year, and then sit as a group and look and look at those. And many of them did this last summer. And looked to see which ones really were exemplary pieces of student writing. And they have the kids do it too. So that they see what it takes to have a proficient or apprentice answer. We have an annotated open response that shows, you know, this is a good answer, this is not as good, this is ...(inaudible) So that they get the students involved in looking at each other's work also.

We cannot say more, at this time, about the performance standards and their implementation because they remain under development. However, it is clear that the district has taken the initiative in developing them and it has a plan for having teachers use them. At the middle level, due to the focus of the Middle School Institute, the work of the Cadre Teachers and all of the Clark Fellows, School Support Resource Teachers, and others involved in helping the schools implement alternative assessment, this process should prove fruitful. We look forward to observing some of work with performance assessments when we return to the district in March 1998.

Along with the performance standards, the district is developing other approaches to learning what students know and do not know. According to Ken Draut, District Assessment Coordinator, the district is moving forward with a "two-pillar" strategy. One pillar, is performance assessment; the other is a system of diagnostic tests specifically focused on students whose knowledge and skill places them in the Novice category on KIRIS. The diagnostic pillar will be designed to focus on a specific problem, according to Draut.

This diagnostic system is kind of the safety net because we've got to catch these Novice kids and get them assistance in reading and writing and math. And to do that, we've felt like we needed some specific diagnostic tools to say, "Okay, you're not reading well at 4th grade or 3rd grade, what specific things could a diagnostic test pinpoint for a teacher instructionally?" And so where we've evolved to now, within this diagnostic pillar, is that we would have a diagnostic evaluation system, K through maybe 9, 10, and it would give some detailed specific information back to teachers. It would say, "This is a weakness of this student in reading and math." And, "Here are the instructional things you might do to address that." So the diagnostic piece is real at the student level.

The diagnostic tests will identify what the district calls "supporting skills," skills it

considered to be the prior knowledge a student must have in order to participate in standards-based learning. We raised questions about this assumption, and about the potential for the district to use the two-pillar assessment approach to, inadvertently, create a two-track educational system. We worried about this potential at the early grades and at each of the transition grades.

Draut and his colleagues are aware of the danger inherent in such a system and intend to insure that students in need of additional support in “basic skills” do not end up in separate classrooms where they have no access to the higher level thinking skills and content. They argue that they must hold students accountable for achieving at performance standards and that, in order to do that, they must insure that the students have the skills with which to engage in the high level work of the standards-based system.

Over time, if the district is able to move all students out of the Novice category in elementary school, the potential difficulty arising from the assessment strategy would disappear. All students would be participating fully in the standards-based assessment system and, therefore, would be held to high standards. In the interim, the district needs a strategy, it argues, for helping students who are at the end of elementary or middle school and who do not have the supporting skills necessary for high level academic work. At the time of our visit, the district was thinking of the following strategy for helping students who, at transition points, are still in the Novice category.

Now, take a student at the end of 5th grade who is at the Novice level and in the 20th percentile with diagnostic tests that have shown they're still reading at 2nd grade level. Now, [in the assessment system] this student is moved on, but goes into this intensive program in middle school. So that's the diagnostic piece. Now we know that gets into the kind of basic skills that we call supporting skills. But we also know that that's not where we want kids to just end up. So we think the other pillar of this system is the standards piece, and that's the piece that we think of more of Apprentice, Proficient, Distinguished levels. Okay? The standards piece is for those kids. And the consultants even mentioned this too, they said we need some way to have classroom-based or curriculum-based tasks that kids can do so you can kind of measure how they're doing on the standards piece.

We are concerned about what appears to be the division in learning opportunities between students in the Novice category and those in Apprentice, Proficient and Distinguished. While we agree with the district's focus on helping students in the

Novice category, we want to stress that their learning will likely be enhanced if they are also involved in high quality, standards-based work and if they are part of the performance assessment system.

The district was grappling with how to address this issue at the time of our visit. We look forward to learning more about how it will forward the learning needs of all students to insure access to high quality curriculum and instruction.

## **Conclusion**

Teachers, principals, and central office personnel in Louisville have made great strides toward implementing standards-based middle school reform since our visit in the fall of 1996. We cite the district's orientation to principal professional development, the implementation of the Cadre Teacher role with its focus on authentic assessment, the re-orientation of central office to the schools through the Dialogue Process, and the rapid progress with development of performance standards and a district-level assessment strategy to support this conclusion.

We know that there is other work going on in the district at the central office and at the schools in support of this effort. In this one report, we cannot include everything. However, in subsequent reports, we intend to highlight school-based work, the on-going work of the Clark Fellows, and other aspects of middle school reform that appear to be moving the JCPS in a productive direction.