

Paradise Elementary School

Mary Anne Raywid and Maureen Miletta

This paper is a fictionalized account of the development, within an elementary school, of four distinctive schools-within-schools. Questions and issues arising in developing such programs are discussed, the theme of each of these four is described, and advantages that staff find in the arrangement are presented.

"Paradise" has not always been the name of this large elementary school. It was renamed several years ago, at the request of a particularly enthusiastic group of parents and teachers. The restructured school had been inspired and guided by another school across town. It was not exactly positive inspiration and instruction, but the Paradise staff were wise enough to profit from the mistakes being made not far away.

The district had stipulated that all schools must launch some kind of school revitalization plan. There were no directives as to just what should be done, or how. Instead, in deference to the principle of greater school-level decision making, each school was encouraged to design its own improvement plan. The neighboring school decided to try to involve all of the school's constituent groups in deciding what to do and designing the effort. Thus, a School Advisory Council was created, consisting of representative teachers, parents, and other community members, and under the leadership of the principal the group sought to build plans.

It turned out, however, that although the meetings were usually affable enough, council members had some very different opinions about what a school should be—and they talked for months about what an improvement plan should address: the school schedule, release time for staff collaboration, school organization, or curriculum redesign. The idea of launching an innovative pilot program within the school arose when it became impossible even for the *teachers* on the council to agree on a desirable curriculum redesign plan. But this fall-

Mary Anne Raywid and Maureen Miletta, Hofstra University. Address correspondence to: Mary Anne Raywid, Administration and Policy Studies, Hofstra University, Hempstead, NY 11550.

back idea, too, encountered real difficulty when the council began considering just what such an innovative program should look like. It was not that council members found it impossible to reach agreements. They interacted as mature people and managed to work out compromises. The problem was that most of the agreements reached this way represented such concessions for everybody that nobody could get enthusiastic enough to back them.

Meanwhile, the fact that a teacher at the struggling school and the principal at Paradise were neighbors and friends was supplying the Paradise staff with valuable insight. It seemed to them to recommend a different path to school improvement—since they also, like most schools, had substantial differences among themselves about what a really good school should look like. No one is sure now just who first mentioned the possibility of schools-within-schools, but two or three teachers immediately took it up. This, they suggested, would enable each teacher to be part of an effort he or she could really get enthused about—without having to water down their ideas to accommodate quite different perspectives.

Bob Keaner, the principal, was enthusiastic about the idea largely for three reasons. First, he was convinced of the importance of a shared and coherent mission to school success—and he was also aware of the array of educational perspectives represented among the staff. As a result of the preferences of two of his predecessors, plus the more recent influence of teacher contracts in hiring, the school reflected several fairly distinct persuasions. Second, Paradise enrollments had grown over the years to the point that it was difficult to maintain the personalization that Keaner felt young children need and deserve. Hence, the idea of somehow reducing the size of the school as experienced by the people within it had substantial appeal. And third, the principal was interested in the staff development possibilities that teacher collaboration was said to offer.

Thus, Keaner began encouraging the Paradise faculty to consider collaborative possibilities—initially simply by asking a question like “Are there others around here who share that idea?” when a teacher expressed a viewpoint. Two groups seemed to emerge rather quickly, with a third, and then a fourth, taking shape a bit later. Once the schools-within-schools idea was expressed, it began to influence the discussion.

For instance, several fourth-grade teachers had previously spoken of joint planning and indicated they might like to operate as a team. The school-within-a-school idea, however, recommended cross-age rather than grade-level groupings, in the interests of letting youngsters be part of a unit for more than just a single year. But not all of the teachers were familiar with the school-within-a-school concept, and a number of questions arose as things moved in that direction. One was whether each unit would provide a full program or offer only its own curricular specialty for a part of the school day. The decision to try the school-within-a-school organization settled that, since it recommends

units that are complete and extensively separate entities, as distinct from proposals for handling a part of the curriculum for some or all students. Some teachers were concerned that what they wanted to emphasize was not a curricular plan at all, but something else—a highly traditional school climate in one case, and an unusually close linkage with parents in another. Both groups were pleased to learn that the emphasis could go just where they wanted it—on curriculum, or particular teaching approaches, or school climate, or all three if that's what they felt strongly about.

PLANNING SCHOOLS-WITHIN-SCHOOLS

Once things began to move, there was concern about the fact that the teacher groups emerging were somewhat uneven in size. Later, other sorts of questions arose—for example, when one of the teams wanted to divide kids into strict ability groups in order to serve them better, and another began planning activities that appeared unlikely to appeal to virtually any local families. Thus, the planning stages posed fresh challenges daily.

Discussion eventually gave rise to these five schoolwide policies governing what could be planned: First, each school-within-a-school would need to be a program in which a child could remain for her full six years at Paradise. No youngster would be required to do so, but it would be possible, an option. Second, no program could include arrangements or activities generally held harmful to youngsters. This was a prohibition against unsupportable practice, but people whose idea was challenged were free to respond with research support recommending it, if they chose. Third, no proposal could contradict such fundamental societal values as equity and justice. This precluded admissions requirements that would exclude some students. Fourth, even though no program need any longer set out to please *all* parents, there was a need to accord with the educational preferences of some—and to be able to document somehow that there was indeed a parent group in the Paradise community that would find its program appealing. Finally, all of those associated with a school-within-a-school, families as well as teachers, would come to it by choice, not assignment. These understandings served as both guide and benchmark as the planning proceeded.

Paradise is one of those sprawling, two-story schools whose general design was popular in the suburbs of the 1950s. Today its location makes it a very “near” suburb—almost a part of the city it adjoins. This means it has a mixed population that has shifted from solid middle-class to lower-middle-class and working-class families. The ethnic range of the community has also expanded to include significant numbers of Asian as well as Hispanic households. The building is in good repair but posed a challenge when Paradise wanted to move to schools-within-schools. Keaner recognized that the different orientations of

teachers would very quickly give rise to rather different cultures in the several schools-within-schools, and to desires for quite different school climates among them. This in turn called for physical separation of the programs to enable the distinctive climates to flower. Thus, two schools-within-schools were assigned to each floor. On the first floor, the principal's office at the middle of the building served to separate the Partnership Program from Heritage House. On the second floor, new fire doors were added to separate the quarters of the Fundamental School from the Arts Academy. Because the latter program has fairly consistently required somewhat less space than the others, it has housed the teacher lounge and an adjoining conference room that gets extensive use.

Principal Keaner was anxious to arrive at some midpoint between the unitary school idea and the prospect of four separate schools housed in his building. On the one hand, he knew he could not rally much coherence around any single orientation—and besides, the diversity of his students strongly recommended multiple programs. Yet he wanted to stop somewhere short of entirely separate "mini-schools" under one roof. He found himself in the position of stimulating centrifugal forces as things got underway, knowing he would later need to initiate centripetal moves. He helped teachers identify the colleagues and programs with whom they wanted to work and he made planning time and resources available to them as each group designed its own direction. He also let it be known that he was prepared to welcome real innovation in the form of substantial departures from conventional practice.

Once planning was well underway, however, Keaner began to lay the groundwork for building the centripetal forces. He provided time at faculty meetings for exchange about the plans taking shape, and he introduced discussion about activities and programs that might continue as all-school functions. Eventually it was decided to add some schoolwide ritual occasions, and an annual teacher-for-a-day program was anticipated for each fall, as well as a yearly spring fair. It was also decided that some extracurricular groups would remain all-school affairs; others would be independent but interacting among the four programs, while yet others would remain separate and perhaps unique. Thus, an all-school orchestra and a drama club were planned, separate soccer and volleyball teams were anticipated for each of the four schools, and the Arts Academy and Fundamental School eventually developed a chamber music group and a chess team, respectively.

It was planned that faculty from all four of the mini-schools would meet monthly for interactive programs, and that some across-SWAS committees and task forces would be needed periodically. There is also a monthly faculty breakfast, and in addition Keaner makes sure that periodic staff social events are scheduled regularly throughout the school year to assure interaction among the four groups of teachers.

Otherwise, Keaner perceived the principal's role in such an arrangement to be largely one of encouraging continuing revitalization and aiding the four programs to refine and pursue their own visions. This is a real leadership challenge—and perhaps "facilitation" at its best: Instead of making the principal the source of the vision to be reflected throughout the school, teacher groups are aided in generating their own visions of what a school should be. The principal's job becomes one of helping each group to refine and perfect the mode it has chosen. This goes beyond a matter of providing resources and maintaining a sustaining environment in the building as a whole. It is also a matter of becoming an advisor and consultant, for example, by constantly being on the lookout for materials and program components—practices and activities—and other ideas that would mean improvement for each of the four programs.

The principal in such a school has fewer control functions and hence more leadership opportunities. Keaner has found the arrangement ideal for increasing the influence of the principalship, as immediate management functions diminish. As Paradise moved to a schools-within-schools setup, Keaner realized that his office needed less staff. When his assistant principal was offered a principalship elsewhere, he shifted the salary for that position to cover the costs of four halftime teacher leaders. These leaders are selected within each program, being elected for four-year terms.

Each of the programs determines its own schedule, allocates its proportionate share of the budget, makes its own personnel decisions, and designs its own instructional program. Thus, the teacher leaders function as both managers and leaders. Their administrative duties claim half of each day. For the other half, they are in the classroom. Their classroom roles vary somewhat from program to program. In one of the four, the teacher leader helps train and supervise parent aides, in two others the leader's classroom time is spent largely as utility person, while in the fourth program the teacher leader serves as a specialist teaching regularly in all classes on a field of particular personal interest and expertise (anthropology, in this case).

One of the functions Keaner performs is to attempt to determine how successfully the arrangement is responding to the needs of Paradise youngsters, and whether it is responding to the educational preferences of local families. Enrollments are one indicator, of course, and he watches those. He also keeps an eye on attendance data and achievement. It is conceivable that an existing program would need to be closed, or a new one created, and although neither need has arisen, Keaner feels it is part of his role to keep on the lookout for such situations.

Meanwhile, however, all four of Paradise's initial schools-within-schools appear to be thriving: the Partnership Program, the Fundamental School, the Arts Academy, and Heritage House.

THE PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM

This program rests on the conviction that if school is to function optimally for young children, there must be a close, continuing working relationship between parents and teachers. Those associated with the program tend to take the word *partnership* rather seriously. They have rejected the typical role divisions between home and school, assuming instead that teachers cannot succeed without the help of parents, and that parents, too, have much to gain from teacher assistance in helping children mature as human beings. Thus, the usual distinctions between expert and layman, bureaucracy and client, are not observed in the Partnership Program.

Not surprisingly, then, a number of parents are part of the daily operation of The Partnership, as it is called. In fact, an outside observer might be hard-pressed to distinguish the parents from the professionals. Parents perform a number of classroom roles, as well as volunteering other forms of assistance.

For some part of every day in first- to third-grade classrooms, parents listen to individual youngsters read. They do not ordinarily provide reading instruction, but they offer what teachers have come to view as indispensable coaching and support. Depending on how many parents are present on a given day, a child may have an adult listening to her read for as long as 15 or 20 minutes. Parents also offer regularly scheduled "Hobby" courses, helping youngsters learn how to cook, or to organize a stamp collection, or to build birdhouses, or to garden.

Other parents collaborate in other ways. Some are members of such standing committees as Field Trips (accompanying classes), or Curriculum (helping locate and explore new possibilities), or Outreach (attempting to involve enrolled but not yet active families), or they sit on the School Council that joins teachers and administrators in making policy decisions for The Partnership.

As teachers in the program readily acknowledge to colleagues, The Partnership is not for everybody. Not all teachers would want to work in this sort of proximity to parents, nor might such an arrangement be ideal for all youngsters. But for those who want such ties—and a highly nurturant, intensely collaborative home-school environment—the rewards are enormous.

THE FUNDAMENTAL SCHOOL

It is no surprise that the halls and classrooms of the Fundamental School are usually orderly and quiet. Here, academic accomplishment and character development are seen as the primary goals of education. The faculty are convinced that children need the security of a well-disciplined, well-ordered environment. Patriotism, respect, courtesy, and high moral standards are emphasized, along with diligence, perseverance, and patience.

Patriotism is stressed not only because it gives children an identity but also

because it helps develop a sense of responsibility for the preservation of the ideals upon which the nation was founded. Furthermore, a good citizen is also a good person, and one who knows how to work and contribute.

Teachers in the Fundamental School are kind authority figures who enjoy strong parental support. Fair, impartial discipline is maintained, and dress and behavior codes are observed by students and faculty alike. High standards are rarely compromised, and there are consequences for infractions.

Phonics and penmanship are taught and practiced. Reading is most often taught from a reading series. While writing is taught through a process approach, there is great attention to correct grammar and spelling. Arithmetic, science, citizenship, geography, and history round out the subject-oriented curriculum. History is taught chronologically with planned continuity through the grades. Standardized textbooks are used in each subject. There is an emphasis on acquiring facts, and achievement tests are administered regularly throughout the year. Students receive letter grades based solely on their achievement. Teachers are in charge of self-contained classrooms. They regularly assign homework for continued practice and to help students learn to work independently. Accuracy, neatness, and precision are emphasized.

Art, music, and physical education classes, as well as special-interest groups, meet both before and after the school day in the Fundamental School. Here again, standards are high and children work diligently to achieve recognition for hard work. The program's debate team has distinguished itself on the local level and the chess team will compete nationally in an upcoming tournament. Teachers as well as parents have been astounded at the accomplishment of youngsters in the Fundamental School. Families seeking a serious, respectful ambiance for their children have been extremely enthusiastic about the program.

HERITAGE HOUSE

Heritage House is perhaps Paradise's most original program, having developed out of several needs and concerns. The growing Hispanic and Laotian populations in the area were making bilingual education a necessity for many youngsters. Additionally, ethnic tensions were surfacing within the neighborhood—even while some parents were requesting foreign language instruction in the elementary school. Yet a third strand eventually woven into the program that ensued was the special interest on the part of several teachers in cooperative learning. The result was Heritage House, a program combining a multicultural theme with two-way bilingual instruction provided extensively through peer tutoring.

As would be expected, Heritage House reflects a strong emphasis on languages as English-speaking youngsters help recent arrivals to learn English—

and in return are tutored in Spanish or Laotian. Cultural themes typically yield much of the substance as well as the vocabulary for language instruction, and an effort is made to use authentic texts in children's literature written in each of the languages. Emphasis is placed on the oral retelling of stories, a daily activity in which paired youngsters address and respond to each other in two languages. Critical response to the written material is encouraged in journals the children write and then share in cooperative groups. The youngsters manage desktop publishing in a computerized language laboratory and publish their own literary magazine in three languages. Many of the articles are based on stories told to them by parents and grandparents of memories from their own childhoods.

Thus, social studies content is emphasized along with language, and paired youngsters supplement teachers' lessons by aiding one another. The teachers work in teams and ideally each team has at least one member who is bilingual and uses both languages when teaching content lessons. (It has not always been possible to find a Laotian-speaking teacher, and parents have filled in. More recently, sixth-graders help out in this sort of capacity.) Sometimes one teacher presents an introductory lesson in English and a second person repeats it in Laotian or Spanish. Reinforcement and review are conducted using both languages interchangeably. And then children are organized into cooperative learning groups to supplement lessons by aiding one another.

Heritage House is a major success. Youngsters seem to thrive there. The ability to shift roles from dependent and deficient outsider to resource and helper is enabling the foreign-born children to cope far more successfully with school. And the need to depend on those sometimes seen as less fortunate appears to have strong benefits for the native-born youngsters as they learn to deal with people of quite different backgrounds from their own.

ARTS ACADEMY

Paradise's Arts Academy is not a school for teaching *about* the arts; rather, it was designed to operate as a studio for active exploration of and participation in the arts. The staff believes that the arts contribute to an enhanced awareness of the world and create a sense of agency—a sense of personal responsibility for one's own perception of that world. The students enrolled are not required to be talented in the arts, since the program is not concerned with preparing professionals. Youngsters who seek admission do, however, need to be interested in encounters with dance, theater, music, literature, and the visual arts. Through these encounters, students learn that their perceptions count, that they can question and explore. In this way, the arts become a vehicle for effective and equitable education.

In music class, for example, youngsters create their own primitive instru-

ments and simple compositions, devising ways to notate what they have composed using symbols of their own creation. Their "scores" are then "read" by classmates. The composers indicate the extent to which their texts have been faithfully reproduced, and the variations between the conception and the performance are then evaluated by the class. In this way, youngsters deepen their understanding of the composing process in preparation for a visit from a performing artist who will perform some of her own chamber music.

Practicing professionals visit the Arts Academy regularly to act as teaching artists and to conduct workshops for students, teachers, and parents. Often they focus on a specific repertory that the school will eventually see in production. Trips to local museums, theaters, photographers' and artists' studios are all built into the curriculum. But the Academy's whole environment is conceived as a showcase for the work in which the youngsters are engaged. Walls are covered with paintings, murals, photographs, stories, and poems, and opportunities are created for youngsters to share their accomplishments in other arts.

Staff hold that the more experiences children have in creating choreography, performing plays, exploring media in the visual arts, composing songs, or writing stories, the better chance they will have of comprehending and appreciating C. S. Lewis or Puccini or Balanchine or Monet. Equally important in the eyes of the staff, the better chance they will have of becoming truly engaged with school. Academy teachers sometimes speculate as to whether they are teaching the arts through the acquisition of the "basics," or whether they are teaching the basics through the arts. Whichever the case may be, it clearly seems to be working for the children enrolled.

BENEFITS

The mini-schools, or schools-within-schools arrangement, is working well at Paradise Elementary School. The downscaling has brought benefits to all, as children, parents, and teachers each experience a much smaller environment with fewer people to come to know than was the case with the more than 1,000-pupil elementary school Paradise used to be. The distinctive programs have quadrupled the chances that what each youngster needs can be provided by the school, and that the sort of education individual families can support is to be found there.

Teachers' work lives have changed considerably. Many are able for the first time to work in an environment supportive of their own educational beliefs and values. Moreover, the smaller size and the fundamental consensus within each program enable each to look primarily to value agreements, rather than regulations, as the basis of daily operation. In consequence, despite rather extensive expectations, the environment is inclined to *feel* much less restrictive than does one articulated by a list of rules.

Additionally, many teachers are collaborating extensively with colleagues for the first time. The schools-within-schools arrangement obligates diversity, which means that with the increased autonomy provided comes the *responsibility* to innovate and create. This calls for joint effort, and the new programs that result typically require team efforts to sustain them. This means a new way of working for teachers, and most of them find it far more stimulating and rewarding. Thus, teaching openings at Paradise occur rarely, and draw many applicants.

As for Bob Keaner, he is delighted with the arrangement. The satisfaction and approval levels of parents and community have risen steadily, as families have been able to locate an orientation in synch with their own—and to leave without prejudice any program that strikes them as misguided. Pupil effort and achievement also appear enhanced by the arrangement, whether through expanding their own interest in school or through claiming the gains of increased parent support. Word from the local junior high suggests that youngsters from all four programs appear well prepared and able to adapt smoothly. Thus, from the standpoint of those who focus on educational outcomes as well as from that of the people whose daily lives are lived at Paradise, the school-within-a-school structure appears a success.

Keaner is aware that the arrangement is not without risks. Like the system it replaced, it has its own set of characteristic challenges to be met. The risks are quite different though. Typically, they represent the "flip side" of the reforms widely being sought today. For example, while much attention is being addressed nationally to the importance of faculty cohesion and consensus, the risk here is that SWAS faculty will become too insular an in-group with too little incentive to pursue other associations. Or, to cite another example, while national attention focuses on the danger of alienating youngsters in school environments that appear indifferent to the individual, fears are sometimes expressed that SWAS environments are too supportive and sustaining to prepare youngsters for what is to come. Keaner recognizes such challenges and wisely perceives one of his major functions to be directing faculty attention to discussing them. It may be, he feels, that someday we will need to take a very different path toward school improvement. Meanwhile, to cope with the major challenges of today, those associated with Paradise Elementary School feel we could hardly do better.