



By combining funds and reallocating teacher time, this elementary school is able to reduce class sizes and increase learning for staff and students

SHRINKING

BY JAN O'NEILL AND DEBORAH MERCIER

To get to where the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act wants to take us — every child completely proficient in all academic subjects — we have to change. And it may not be as hard as we think. We can prioritize our efforts and reevaluate how we use the resources we have. It's easy to feel trapped in the box of

limited resources, to believe the idea that the money we get from Title I, English as a Second Language (ESL), special education, and other programs is untouchable and can be used only for specific students. But one principal in Madison, Wis., put her hands on some of that money to reduce the student-teacher ratio — and tells how it can be done.

SEEING CURRENT REALITY

Not long after arriving at Franklin

Elementary School in Madison, Wis., new principal Deborah Mercier, one of the authors, was charged with organizing an extensive needs assessment. The assessment's results were clear. Almost all the major problems — communicating with parents, building a sense of community in the classrooms, using best practices in language arts and math, coordinating special services such as Title I, Talented and Gifted, English Language Learners — were directly

related to the challenges of managing a wide range of needs in classes of 22 to 25 students.

Mercier and her staff also noticed a disturbing programming and traffic pattern: The students who were most at-risk — often African-American students in Title I programs, and Hmong and Hispanic students attending ESL programs — had the most disruption through pullout programs. Meanwhile, their white classmates were benefiting from consistent instruction in smaller classes with their regular teachers.

The combination of problems linked to large classes and instructional challenges for needy students led to an obvious conclusion: The school needed to find a way to reduce class sizes and eliminate pullout programming. By the end of the next school year, all instructional staff were working in the regular classroom, and class sizes had dropped from a 24-1 ratio to 15-1. Students, teachers, and parents reported improvements in climate. Within the same time frame, reading achievement improved. By the end of the first year, 88% of 2nd graders were reading at grade level as measured by the Madison Metro School District's Primary Language Arts Assessment. In addition, the district conducted a matched-pair study that showed after two years, the school's 2nd graders were outperforming their matched peers. What it took was a change in traditional thinking and an increase in professional learning efforts.

LAYING THE GROUND WORK

Along with the original needs assessment, staff at Franklin reviewed literature on pullout programs. They concluded that pullouts were detrimental, particularly to young children (Hoff, 1997; Thomas & Collier, 1997). Pullouts breed stereotypes and result in the most needy children spending the least time on task

Franklin Elementary School

Madison, Wis.

Grades: K-2

Enrollment: 360

Staff: 24 classroom teachers (nine dually certified in ESL)

Racial/ethnic mix:

White: 60%

Black: 14%

Hispanic: 12%

Asian/Pacific Islander: 5%

Native American: 1%

Other: 8%

Limited English proficient: 14%

Languages spoken: Hmong, Spanish, Korean, Chinese, Vietnamese, French, and Khmer

Free/reduced lunch: 28%

Special education: 5%

Contact: Deborah Mercier, Principal
305 West Lakeside Street
Madison, WI 53715

Phone: (608) 204-2292

Fax: (608) 204-0405

E-mail: dahoffman@madison.k12.wi.us

because they spend time traveling between classes and coping with multiple adults and transitions. These students' sense of classroom community and safety is disrupted daily.

In addition to the negative stigma that such programming and traffic patterns created, the practice was, they noted, illegal according to Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. No one was being intentionally racist, but delivering services this way certainly was.

The Franklin staff noted that pullouts place additional burdens on teachers as well. Not only do teachers struggle with helping these students catch up on the instruction and direc-

JAN O'NEILL is co-owner and vice president of professional development with QLD Learning, LLC. You can contact her at Yarmouth Crossing, PMB 188, 2935 S. Fish Hatchery Road, Madison, WI 53711, (608) 251-5393, fax (608) 251-5396, e-mail: jano@qldlearning.com.

DEBORAH MERCIER is principal of Franklin Elementary School. You can contact her at 305 W. Lakeside St., Madison, WI 53715, (608) 204-2292, fax (608) 204-0405, e-mail: dahoffman@madison.k12.wi.us.

tions they missed while out of the regular classroom, but they also lack sufficient planning time to coordinate their instruction with all the different specialists.

Not long into their research and assessment process, Mercier and her staff focused on reduced class size as the means to eliminate pullouts while allowing teachers to have a reasonable chance of addressing the range of student needs. They discovered ample evidence that simply reducing class size without changes in instructional practices does little to improve student achievement (Zahorik, 1999; Molnar, Smith, & Zahorik, 1998). However, when a school uses the advantages of smaller class size to improve instruction, curriculum, and assessment, student achievement improves (Molnar, Smith, & Zahorik, 1998; Word et al., 1994; Slavin, 1989; Robinson & Wittebols, 1986). Just as importantly, the Franklin staff believed strongly in the value of community in the classroom — and there was ample research (Shanley, 1999; Johnson, 1998) to support the value of community as well.

The Franklin group decided to rethink the school's staff allocation and instructional practices.

RETHINKING THE GIVENS

A key element in Franklin's plan was to deploy all teachers in classroom teaching teams, serving children directly in the classrooms. No more pullout programs. The question was how to accomplish this when the Title I funds are mandated for pullout programming, and the state similarly restricts English as a Second Language (ESL) and Talented and Gifted (TAG) funds.

The school applied to the U.S. Department of Education for a Title I

The students who were most at-risk — often African-American students in Title I programs, and Hmong and Hispanic students attending ESL programs — had the most disruption through pullout programs.

schoolwide waiver. It was granted. At the same time, the school applied for federal Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) funds to provide additional professional development and support staff. After the federal waiver was granted, the school got district and state permission to reallocate money from Title I, Talented and Gifted, district funding for reducing class size, and state English as a Second Language programs to reduce class sizes.

By using Title I, TAG, ESL, and the school's supplemental teacher allocations, Franklin was able to reduce class size from a ratio of 23-1 to 16-1 initially and then to 15-1. Until 1998-99, Franklin had a full-time Title I teacher, a part-time Talented and Gifted program teacher, three part-time ESL teachers, and supplemental teacher allocations that were used for additional social work support, all operating as specialists in pullout programs. By combining all of these different teacher allocation resources that equaled four full-time positions and using the allocations to add to the 16 classroom positions rather than as pullout positions, Franklin was able to reduce class size and pullout programs at the same time (see box at right).

The teachers attached to the specialist pullout programs were given the option of a classroom position if they were certified. If they were not certified, they had the option of becoming a Reading Recovery teacher or transferring to different positions within the school district. Three of the teachers chose to go elsewhere and one remained as the Reading Recovery teacher.

A FOCUSED APPROACH

The goal was to have classroom teachers dually certified in elementary

The teachers attached to the specialist pullout programs were given the option of a classroom position if they were certified.

A PRIMER IN CUTTING PULLOUTS TO REDUCE CLASS SIZE

The schoolwide goal was to reduce class size by a third to have 16 to 17 children per class. The premise was that regular education teachers could provide the expertise and differentiation needed daily to meet all students' needs if they had fewer students in their classrooms.

Here's what we did:

Projected enrollment for 1998-99: 339 students

District regular teacher allocation: 16 FTE (22-1 ratio in K-1 and 23.5-1 ratio in 1st and 2nd)

1. We added up the pullout programs staffing:

- Title I allocation: 1.2 FTE
- Talented and Gifted allocation: 0.3
- RISE (Resource Integration for Success and Equity, a program aimed at minority student achievement) FTE allocation: 0.5
- English as a Second Language allocation: 2
- Supplemental (principal discretionary) allocation: 0.5
- Reading Recovery allocation: 0.5
- Total: 5 FTE for pullout programming

2. We applied for waivers to reallocate our staff resources:

- From the U.S. Department of Education for Title I, we asked for a waiver for Title I to be schoolwide. We received a waiver in July 1998.
- From the state for ESL, we asked for a waiver with support from our Department of Public Instruction's ESL Administrator. We received a waiver in August 1998.
- From the District's Board of Education, we asked for a waiver for Reading Recovery. The board denied the waiver.
- From the district's management team, we requested a waiver for Talented and Gifted and RISE. The district granted the waiver, contingent on state and federal approval.

3. Waivers were in place to reallocate 4.5 full-time equivalent positions, but we couldn't have a classroom with 0.5 teacher, so we added four full-time positions to the 16 regular classroom teachers.

Result: With an enrollment of 339 and 20 classroom teachers, the average class size was now 17.

and ESL education since the changes in staff assignments and class programming meant all classroom teachers now had to deal with the full range of student needs. The federal CSR funds were used to give teachers a tremendous amount of professional development support in ESL and language arts best practices and assessments to cope with full accountability

for all students.

One change during the first year the plan was implemented was that all professional learning was offered on-site, some of it during time normally devoted to staff meetings. The state class size money was used to hire a local university professor to offer a three-credit ESL course. Twenty-one of the 25 classroom teachers (along

with other staff) participated in the course. Those who did not take it for credit at least were paid for their time since the class was after normal work hours. (In the initiative's second year, the ESL course was offered only to staff members pursuing an ESL degree.)

The school also exploited other resources for additional staff learning activities. Mercier drew on available resources — particularly those available for little or no cost — to achieve its professional development goals. The school developed collaborative partnerships with professors at the University of Wisconsin, who lectured for free during staff meetings. District staff helped facilitate and guide action research groups. Teachers on the action research teams explored best practices and identified more than 23 strategies they could use with smaller classes. They then immersed themselves in learning best practices in reading, math, science, and writing. They learned new ways to assess and flexibly group children based on the students' developing skills. To further support the restructuring, teachers were encouraged to get dual certification in ESL and elementary education.

Early in their efforts, Mercier and her staff also took the time to make sure that everything they contemplated was aligned with state and district standards. "If you go against the grain," said Mercier, "it will all get yanked out from under you eventually. What we did was unusual at the time, but it all worked to support the achievement goals set by the district."

RESULTS

Reducing class size has been shown to impact factors beyond student achievement, such as parent support, teacher morale, and classroom community (Slavin, 1990). Certainly this appears to be the case at Franklin, where climate surveys, administered

annually to parents and staff, have shown consistently positive results since the restructuring.

Teachers overwhelmingly feel that 15 students is a better class size than 24. They cited reasons such as having more time for:

- Individual (one-to-one) instruction;
- Working with behavioral problems;
- Getting to know students better academically, socially, and emotionally;
- Developing individualized instruction;
- Doing more hands-on activities;
- Getting to know parents and families better.

One teacher commented, "I am willing to try new strategies and rethink old strategies." Another said, "Because I have more time for each student, I feel more responsible for his or her progress. If a child seems not to be learning, I keep looking for new approaches to reach him." A third said of the collaborative teaching approach, "I really enjoy the partnership opportunities and feel positive about the results of having these staff in the classroom."

These subjective impressions have their objective counterparts. For example, Franklin earned an "all-star rating" when the district released four-year average "grades" for every school.

At the time Franklin decided to keep the students together in the classroom, some were concerned that Title I and ESL students' performance might drop without the support from pullout programs. Teachers set a goal of having no child do worse in the first year after the restructuring. In the fall of the first year, 31% of Franklin's 2nd graders were below grade level in reading, 63% of whom were minority. At the midyear check, 29% of these struggling 2nd graders were above grade level in reading,

with 33% of the remaining students just three to six months behind. Just 12% of 2nd graders were more than one semester behind in reading achievement and not meeting the district goal of passing the state's 3rd-grade reading test. Franklin's stable achievement results — coupled with significant gains in climate and community — speak to a solution that is working.

DISCUSSION

Evidence shows smaller class sizes, particularly in the early elementary grades, can have a significant impact on student achievement (Nye, Hedges, & Konstantopoulos, 2000; Mosteller, 1995). The amount of time a teacher can spend with each student appears to be particularly related to learning and achievement (Johnson, 2000). Class size has an impact on student learning processes when teachers change the way they deliver instruction (Molnar, Smith, & Zahorik, 1998). Further, when teachers are given opportunities to reflect on and improve their practice, thereby increasing their competence and effectiveness, student achievement improves (Barth, et al., 1999; Calhoun, 1994). A sense of community — an additional benefit of smaller class sizes — is also associated with higher achievement, especially in high-poverty and at-risk populations (Shanley, 1999; Johnson, 1998). The bottom line is that when small class size is supported by improved professional practice and reduced pupil-to-teacher ratios in the classroom, student achievement across all subgroups improves. Just as importantly, a strong sense of community — of "family" — pervades the classrooms and school.

The bottom line is that when small class size is supported by improved professional practice and reduced pupil-to-teacher ratios in the classroom, student achievement across all subgroups improves.

Reducing class size doesn't require additional funding. Principals can work within the teacher allocations they have. As the Franklin case shows, principals have the resources they need — but they must change their paradigm about how to structure and use those resources.

REFERENCES

Barth, P., Haycock, K., Jackson, H., Mora, K., Ruiz, P., Robinson, S., et al. (Eds.). (1999). *Dispelling the myth: High poverty schools exceeding expectations.* (Report No. SR9901). Washington, DC: Education Trust. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED445140)

Calhoun, E.F. (1994). *How to use action research in the self-renewing school.* Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Hanushek, E. (1996, Fall). A more complete picture of school resource policies. *Review of Educational Research*, 66(3), 397-409.

Hoff, D. (1997). Tracking Title I. *Education Week*, October 22, 1997, pp. 16-18.

Johnson, K. (2000, June 9). *Do small classes influence academic achievement? What the National Assessment of Educational Progress shows.* (CDA Report No. 00-07). Washington, DC: Heritage Foundation.

Johnson, J.F. (1998, June 29). *The promise of school reform in Texas.* Paper presented at a meeting of the Poverty and Race Research Action Council, Washington, D.C.

Molnar, A., Smith, P., & Zahorik, J. (1998). *1997-98 results of the Student Achievement Guarantee in Education (SAGE) program evaluation.* Milwaukee, WI: School of Education, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

Mosteller, F. (1995,

Summer/Fall). The Tennessee study of class size in the early school grades. *The Future of Children*, 5(2), 113-127.

Nye, B., Hedges, L.V., and Konstantopoulos, S. (Spring 2000). The effects of small classes on academic achievement: The results of the Tennessee class size experiment. *American Educational Research Journal*, 37(1), 123-151.

Robinson, G. & Wittebols, J. (1986). *Class size research: A related cluster analysis for decision making.* Arlington, VA: Educational Research Service.

Shanley, M.K. (1999, September). Students at risk: Providing the tools and support for positive change. *Curriculum Administrator*, 35(9), 38.

Slavin, R. (1989). Class size and student achievement: Small effects of small classes. *Educational Psychologist*, 24, 99-110.

Slavin, R. (Fall 1990). Class size and student achievement: Is smaller better? *Contemporary Education*, 62(1), 6-12.

Thomas, W.P. & Collier, V.P. (1997). *School effectiveness for language minority students.* Retrieved March 22, 2003 from <http://www.ncela.gwu.edu/ncbepubs/resource/effectiveness/thomas-collier97.pdf>

Word, E., Johnston, J., Bain, H., Folton, B., Zaharias, J., Achilles, C., et al. (1994). *The state of Tennessee's Student/Teacher Achievement Ratio (STAR) project: Technical report 1985-1990.* Nashville, TN: Tennessee Department of Education.

Zahorik, J.A. (September 1999). Reducing class size leads to individualized instruction. *Educational Leadership*, 57(1), 50-53. ■

Reducing class size doesn't require additional funding. Principals can work within the teacher allocations they have.