SECTION II:
FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS BY LEVEL OF INSTRUCTION

MANSFIELD HIGH SCHOOL

On November 17, 2004, Joseph Olchefske and Dr. Steven Leonard visited Mansfield High School (MHS) for the purpose of observing programs and organization and interviewing school leaders. This followed an earlier interview of the 9–12 Curriculum Director by Dr. Adamowski.

The new high school is one of the finest examples we have seen of a school designed for small learning communities. The District, under the leadership of its former superintendent, is commended for its foresight and planning in the creation of what is truly a model high school facility. Unfortunately, despite excellent planning for the building, little has been done to change the nature of the school's academic program from its previous comprehensive model. Time is still apportioned in seven periods per day; most students take less than half their coursework in their chosen academy, following a master schedule largely carried over from the previous year; course work is still differentiated by level of difficulty; and there is little in course content or internship experience to differentiate one academy from the other.

It is important to point out that the purpose of any small learning community of which the academy concept is a type is to create a structure that facilitates the development of two conditions that research and practice suggests are strongly related to student achievement and completion at the secondary level: *academic press and social ecology*. Small size facilitates these conditions, but small size in and of itself is not sufficient.

"Academic press" is obtained by all students engaging in a rigorous common or core curriculum directly related to a particular theme, interest, or focus that serves as a distinct yet shared path through which state standards are achieved (Murphy, Beck, Crawford, Hodges, & McGaughy, 2001). This core curriculum approach contrasts with the early 20th century comprehensive high school design that differentiated coursework on the basis of content and difficulty, appropriate for an earlier economy in which only a portion of students would assume jobs that required the mastery of high standards.

"Social ecology" refers to a student's sense of belonging and connectedness to school through relationships (Murphy, Beck, Crawford, Hodges, & McGaughy, 2001). There is a direct connection between increased graduation rates and school environments where students are able to forge strong interpersonal relationships with their teachers and other students and where an esprit de corps of interdependence is developed through curricular and extracurricular experiences.

The way to increase academic press and social ecology through the academy structure of MHS would be to:

- Develop a core curriculum program for each academy that meets state graduation requirements and includes specific coursework related to the academy's focus.

- Revise staffing, organization, and scheduling so that students take virtually all their coursework within their chosen academy with the same group of teachers, with the exception of Advanced Placement courses and a small number of elective courses that would be available across academies.

- Create a semiautonomous decision-making structure for each of the academies as a means of accelerating the small school concept. Allow teaching teams within each academy to determine the allocation of time and resources necessary for students to achieve standards measured by the Ohio Graduation Test and improved graduation rates.

However, a closer examination of the staffing and budgeting implications of achieving these goals within current student enrollment and the capacity of the high school facility suggest that achieving this in a four-academy structure may be costly and fall outside the district's current fiscal limitations and other competing needs. Therefore, we recommend that the district examine two other long-term organizational options to increase the academic press and social ecology of the high school:

- The first option represents an adaptation of the highly successful Talent Development Model (Talent Development High Schools, www.csos.jhu.edu/talen/high). It involves the creation of a ninth grade academy that would feed into a choice of three distinct, highly focused 10–12 career academies. In this approach, ninth graders would participate exclusively in a core academic program with a team of teachers entirely within their academy. The goal of the ninth-grade program would be to successfully introduce students to high school work, remediate skill efficiency, and provide students with information to make a meaningful choice of specialized programs for grades10–12.

- The second option would be to organize the high school into lower and upper schools along a 9–10 and 11–12 grade configuration. One of the two wings of the high school would be used for each purpose. Students in the lower school would be assigned in groups of 75–90 to teams of 5 teachers (four core subject areas and a special education or intervention specialist) for a period of 2 years supplemented by summer sessions and additional time as necessary. The national America's Choice design, developed by the Center for Education and the Economy, offers a 2-year integrated curriculum sequence for the lower school.

In an adaptation of the recommendations contained in *The New American High School* (Marsh & Codding, 1999), the goal of the lower school would be to ensure that all students were prepared for upper school work through the attainment of a Certificate of Initial Mastery (CIM), in this case measured by the Ohio Graduation Test (OGT). Students would demonstrate mastery of standards and qualify for the upper school by passing the OGT. Once qualifying for upper school in this model, students would choose one of two upper school programs. One might be focused exclusively on a college preparatory core curriculum with the goal of 100 percent college admittance. Capitalizing on the current program strengths of MHS, or the needs of its community, the other might be focused on one or more career specialties such as information technology, health sciences, and/or the visual or performing arts.

Recommendations

Regardless of which high school model is pursued for the long term, we recommend that the following steps be taken for the next school year:

1. Each academy or small school should be allocated resources on a per pupil basis. The staff and principal of each small school should be engaged in the development of its program and have the autonomy to allocate time and resources to support their plan to improve student learning.

2. The number of high school administrators should be reduced by two to three positions. We do not see a need for a "super-principal," given the organization of the new school. One academy principal may be designated as the lead principal and paid a differential for the responsibilities of scheduling common areas, overseeing the student activities program and coordinating transportation and mediating other intraschool issues. In an earlier section, we recommended that the 9–12 Curriculum Director's position be consolidated in the position of Chief Academic Officer.

3. The number of elective courses should be reduced overall as a step toward establishing a core curriculum for each small school of choice. In the place of electives, each academy should develop some required course content specific to the academy focus.

4. A system for student support combined with the use of time as a variable should be initiated in the next school year. Struggling students should be allowed to take less than five classes per semester and complete high school in longer than 4 years. Some students may also benefit from starting later in the day. Time made available by taking less than the typical class load should be repurposed for tutorial periods to support these students in their remaining classes.

5. A summer bridge program should be established for at-risk, ascending eighth graders entering each academy.

MANSFIELD MIDDLE SCHOOLS

On November 16, 2004, Dr. Steven Leonard spent 8 hours visiting the Malabar and Simpson Middle Schools. This time was spent visiting classrooms, meeting with teachers, interviewing school leaders, and talking to students in classrooms. During this time period, Dr. Leonard also witnessed the beginning of a student assembly. At one of the schools, teachers remained after school to inform parents of student performance in one-on-one conferences.

Of all the schools visited, instruction was observed to be the least effective in the two middle schools. Formulating recommendations for the middle school also posed the greatest challenge to the reviewers, as we feel that the improvement of student achievement at this level may rely more on bold, fresh, new approaches than on incremental improvements.

It is at this level that instruction was found to be the most traditional and outdated given the current needs of Mansfield's preadolescent students. The dominant mode of teaching observed was teacher centered and directed instruction. There was no observable evidence of student work or data