

# Secrets to teaching all children

Small classes, high expectations key to success

By Phil Brinkman  
Education reporter

While policymakers haggle over where children go to school or who they sit next to, researchers say it's what happens in the classroom that counts, especially when it comes to improving minority student achievement.

Among the things that work, experts say, are:

- smaller classes
- innovative ways of involving parents and the community
- a "culturally relevant" pedagogy that teaches teachers to recognize the unique cultural contributions all children can make in class.

Some of those methods are already being tried in the Madison schools.

On the most basic level, researchers have confirmed what teachers have long suspected: Students learn better in small classes.

In a mammoth, four-year study, researchers in Tennessee tracked the progress of 10,000 students, who were randomly assigned to small classes (13 to 17 students per teacher), regular classes (22 to 25 students per teacher) and regular classes with a teacher and a full-time teacher aide.

The study found that:

■ Students who attended smaller classes had higher achievement test scores across the board.

■ Among children who attended the smaller classes, the achievement gap between poor children and better-off children narrowed, as did the gap between blacks and whites.

■ In every situation, those students eligible for free lunches did worse, on average, than those who were not, underscoring the impact poverty can have on achievement. The findings prompted the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction to ask earlier this year "whether money being spent on other programs while class sizes remain high ... is money well spent."

Madison already has made class size a priority in some of its poorer elementary schools, limiting it to an average of 20 students per teacher compared to the district elementary average of 23.5.

Each of the student assignment plans being considered by the School Board would further reduce class size in schools with high percentages of poor students.

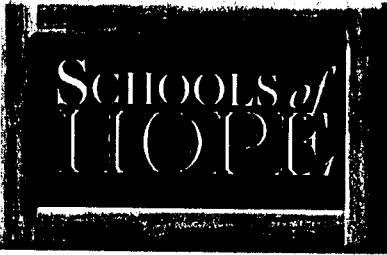
## "The Comer Method"

Only one of the Madison plans, known as the neighborhood/choice plan, mentions making use of "the Comer Method," a pioneering approach to educating poor children developed by James P. Comer, professor of child psychiatry and director of the School Development Program at Yale University's Child Study Center.

Comer established projects at two inner-city schools in New Haven, Conn., in 1968 that tried to bridge the social and cultural gulf between home and school, believ-



Fourth-grade teacher David Spitzer, a product of UW-Madison's partnership program with the Madison schools known as "teach for diversity," says he has found a home at Lincoln Elementary. "People are here because we want to be here," the 43-year-old Spitzer said.



"Schools of Hope" is a civic journalism project involving the Wisconsin State Journal and WISC-TV.

As part of the project, Madison School District residents were surveyed Sept. 12 through Oct. 3 about their views on school-related issues. The results of the entire survey will be published in the State Journal next month. They will also be presented to a "Schools of Hope" leadership group. The group was started in late August with seven members but will be expanded in the coming weeks. It will meet in public to review the results of the project's journalism and will look for ways to improve the school system.

ing that students succeed only when they can see a relationship between the two.

Like other researchers, Comer was disturbed to find teachers blame students, their parents and their communities for their failures. The parents, many of whom had negative experiences at school themselves, would grow defensive and hostile and avoid contact with the schools, setting up a spiral of failure for their children.

To combat that, Comer helped set up a "governance and management team" at the two schools made up of the principal, parents, teachers and a mental-health worker.

The teams drafted comprehensive school plans that included academics, social activities to bring parents and teachers together, and special programs such as a "discovery room" where turned-off children could develop a renewed interest in learning through play.

The results have been dramatic. By 1984, fourth-grade students who had once ranked lowest in achievement among the city's 33 elementary schools scored third- and fourth-highest on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. Attendance rates at one of the schools had risen to first in the city, and there were no serious behavior problems at either school for more than a decade.

Comer's collaborative, no-fault approach has been used successfully at hundreds of "accelerated schools" in poor areas around the nation. These schools, established by researchers at Stanford University, are based on the assumption that failing students need to learn at a faster, not slower, pace.

Instead of remedial instruction, the schools emphasize high expectations of all students and instructional programs that stimulate students by bringing in and acknowledging aspects of their own cultures.

## Secrets to success

Other researchers have drawn similar conclusions.

Gloria Ladson-Billings, a professor at UW-Madison's School of Education with a background in anthropology, studied eight teachers in a northern California district to find out the secrets of successful teaching. Her conclusion, summarized in her recent book, "The Dreamkeepers," is startlingly simple:

"A bottom line with every last one of them was a belief that the children are educable," Ladson-Billings said.

A second key finding, Ladson-Billings said, was the conviction among the teachers that children learned best by working together. Even in the most structured, traditional classrooms, she said, teachers made sure students had a "buddy" who could help them on projects or check their papers before they were turned in.

This buddy system helped students work together and feel a part of a community. Individual suc-



State Journal photo/L. ROGER TURNER

cesses were group successes, and individual failures were group failures, she said.

One teacher, upon learning one of her students helped win a football championship, brought the trophy to her class the next day, telling her students, "Look what we won."

The teacher was not diluting the success of the student who won it, Ladson-Billings said, but celebrating that success much as a family might bask in the success of a brother or sister.

"If the kids could see the classroom as a sort of family they couldn't tolerate hurtful things toward others," Ladson-Billings said.

The approach has been incorporated into the university's "Teach for Diversity" teacher-education program, which has placed student teachers at Lincoln, Marquette and Hawthorne elementary schools.

Substitute teacher Paula Amadeo, who graduated from the program last year, recalled a Hispanic girl in her fifth-grade class at Lincoln who hated school and was un-

# City's desegregation history

Madison's desegregation struggle at a glance:

■ **Dec. 3, 1979:** Madison School Board votes to close Hoyt, Longfellow and Sherman middle schools as a result of declining enrollments. Lincoln was then reopened as an elementary school. The closings come months after the board also closed Spring Harbor, Hawthorne and Lapham elementaries.

■ **Dec. 5, 1979:** The boards of directors of the South Madison Neighborhood Center and Neighborhood House send a letter to the U.S. Office for Civil Rights (OCR), alleging a pattern of past and present discrimination against minority students by the district.

■ **June 2, 1983:** The school board adopts a student assignment plan that pairs Lincoln with Midvale, and Franklin with Randall. Some students in the Lincoln area are also bused to Allis and Glendale.

■ **June 24, 1983:** The OCR approves the plan, which is finalized later that year.

■ **Jan. 13, 1984:** The South Madison Neighborhood Center asks the OCR to block implementation of the plan, saying it puts an unfair burden on minorities.

■ **Aug. 24, 1984:** The OCR concludes the plan does not create "bur-

dens which fall, wholly or primarily, on minority students." Busing between the paired schools starts soon after.

■ **Spring 1993:** West Area Study Committee is formed to look at redrawing student assignments in the West High School attendance area. The group is eventually paired with the Memorial Area Study Committee to make up the South/West Area Task Force.

■ **Aug. 28, 1995:** South/West Area Task Force recommends keeping the pairings but swapping some children at Van Hise with children in the Lincoln-Midvale pair. It also would move most children from the Allied Drive area from Thoreau to schools in the Memorial attendance area.

■ **Sept. 11, 1995:** Madison School District staff draw up their own "neighborhood/choice" plan, intended to reflect the consensus of the school board.

■ **Sept. 15, 1995:** Unhappy with the staff plan, the school board's conservative faction drafts a "total neighborhood" plan that makes no effort to integrate schools.

■ **September and October 1995:** The school district holds hearings and forums on the various plans. A decision is due by early November.

SCHOOLS of HOPE

The debate over school busing and desegregation in Madison will be the focus of two town hall meetings sponsored by the State Journal and WISC-TV (Ch. 3, Madison) as part of the continuing "Schools of Hope" civic journalism project.

The meetings will be facilitated by members of the *We the People/Wisconsin* partnership which includes the State Journal, WISC-TV, Wisconsin Public Television and Radio and Wood Communications Group.

Call the *We the People/Wisconsin* hotline to register **1-800-261-9571**:

Oct. 17, 6:30 - 8:30 PM, Lincoln Elementary, 909 Sequoia Tr.

Oct. 19, 7-9 PM, Thoreau Elementary, 3870 Nakoma Rd.

★★★★★★★★

Call 1-800-261-9571 or return the coupon below to register!

Yes! I'd like to participate in *Schools of Hope*!

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Age \_\_\_\_\_

Street Address \_\_\_\_\_ City, State, Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone day ( ) \_\_\_\_\_ evening ( ) \_\_\_\_\_

Occupation \_\_\_\_\_ Ethnic Origin \_\_\_\_\_

Do you have kids in school? ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Public ☐ Private

Which school district do you live in? \_\_\_\_\_

I would like to take part in the Oct. 17 town hall meeting: ☐ 6:30 - 8:30 PM, Lincoln Elementary

I would like to take part in the Oct. 19 town hall meeting: ☐ 7 - 9 PM, Thoreau Elementary

Over all, would you say that public education in Madison is on the right track or the wrong track? ☐ Right Track ☐ Wrong Track

To reserve a seat at the town hall meeting please register by sending this form to *Schools of Hope*, c/o Wisconsin State Journal, P.O. Box 8058, Madison, WI 53708. You may phone in your reservation to (608) 252-6103. Walk-in registrations are welcome.

able to produce more than a sentence or two in writing exercises.

Then Amadeo did a unit on immigration and the history of Texas. The girl, the daughter of Mexican immigrants, found she knew some things the others didn't. By the end, she had produced a four-to-five-page report ("huge" by fifth-grade standards, Amadeo said), that drew on research and interviews with her parents.


"She was seen as an expert in my eyes, and the eyes of other students, and she became a valuable asset in the class for others to learn from," Amadeo said.

The experience confirmed Amadeo's image of teachers as talent scouts, finding what talents each child brings to class and allowing them to flourish.

Some students may not do so well on written tests, for example, but excel in hands-on experiences or role-playing, she said.

"It seems like the burden of learning has always been placed on the student, and if the student isn't learning there's something wrong with the student," Amadeo said.

"Now I think of it in terms of, what am I doing to bring out the interests of the child? The burden of them not learning is on my shoulders."



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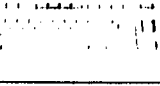
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