



# THE TRANSFORMATION

Dayton's Bluff Achievement Plus Elementary School: A Case Study

**SAINT PAUL PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

**Superintendent**

Patricia A. Harvey

**Chief Education Officer**

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# CONTENTS

About the Author	ii
Acknowledgments	ii
Introduction	1
<b>I. Before and After: Snapshots of the Community, School, and District</b>	<b>3</b>
Neighborhood History and Demographics	3
School Characteristics	3
School District Context	4
The Wilder Foundation and Achievement Plus	7
<b>II. Overview of the Change Process</b>	<b>9</b>
Leaders and Key Players	9
Major Stages	9
<b>III. Core Components of the Initiative</b>	<b>16</b>
Strong Leadership	16
Broad, Collaborative Ownership	17
High Standards	17
Academic Coherence	19
Professional Development	21
Continual Analysis and Use of Data	22
Accountability	25
Building-Level Flexibility from District Policies	25
Extended Learning Opportunities	26
Learning Supports	27
<b>IV. Key Components at Dayton’s Bluff</b>	<b>30</b>
Strong Building-Level Leadership	30
A “Teachable Environment”	31
Appropriate Staffing	32
Professional Development and Extra Support for Teachers	34
Team Approach	34
Costs	34
<b>V. Looking Back: Lessons and Observations</b>	<b>36</b>
Necessary Strategies, Opportunities, and Resources	36
Turning Points	38
Value Added by Achievement Plus	39
<b>VI. Looking Ahead: Challenges and Opportunities</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>Achievement Plus Funders List</b>	<b>41</b>

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### ***About the Author***

Leila Fiester is an independent writer and editor who specializes in issues, programs, and policies that affect children, communities, and service systems. She helps national and regional foundations to plan, describe, and assess their investment strategies; distill lessons and implications; and share their stories with a variety of audiences. Leila previously served as a senior associate of Policy Studies Associates in Washington, D.C., which conducts education research and evaluation, and as a reporter for the *Washington Post*. She lives in Frederick, Maryland, but maintains close ties to her hometown of Saint Paul, Minnesota.

### ***Author's Acknowledgments***

Most writers would jump at the chance to tell a story as compelling and inspirational as that of Dayton's Bluff Achievement Plus Elementary School, and I am no exception. But the story you are about to read belongs to many people who worked long and hard to turn a good idea into an even better reality. Those individuals were extraordinarily generous with their time and insights, and I could not have captured this story without their help. They include: Saint Paul Public Schools Superintendent Patricia A. Harvey, whose vision for public education framed both Achievement Plus and this report; Saint Paul Public Schools Chief Education Officer Maria J. Lamb, whose leadership of Achievement Plus schools shaped the outcome in countless ways; and Amherst H. Wilder Foundation President Tom Kingston, whose unflagging commitment to strong schools and healthy communities gave birth to the initiative and sustained it through the growing pains.

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# Introduction

In 2000, Dayton’s Bluff Achievement Plus Elementary School was widely considered one of the worst elementary schools in the Saint Paul Public Schools (SPPS) system. It had the lowest test scores in the district. Students blatantly disrespected their teachers and each other; chaos ruled the hallways and classrooms. “I was doing more babysitting than teaching,” says a teacher who left because of the turmoil. “The school was a soap opera, and you were caught up in the plot instead of what was happening with the kids,” says another observer. Parents blamed teachers and administrators for the school’s troubles. Teacher morale was so low that on any given day, 80 percent might call in sick; every year, half the staff chose not to come back. Substitute teachers usually left mid-day, vowing never to return. To many, the school felt like a battleground.

Just two years later, Dayton’s Bluff had been transformed. Test scores after the first year showed very dramatic gains; after the second year, Dayton’s Bluff students showed the largest year-to-year gains in the district. Students worked quietly and collaboratively in classrooms. In the halls, harsh words and fistfights gave way to wide grins and hugs for the principal. Teachers arrived early and stayed late as they poured their energy into creating a fun, rigorous learning environment. Parents, on their way to the school’s family center, often stopped for a friendly chat with teachers.

How did this miracle happen? People who lived through the school’s restructuring say it took a combination of ingredients: the infusion of high standards for students and teachers, a strong instructional model and curriculum, recruitment of motivated teachers, high-quality professional development, vibrant leadership at the building and district level, a real commitment to accountability,

<sup>1</sup> Based on interviews conducted at the school, with SPPS and Achievement Plus representatives, and with community partners; observation at the school; and a review of historical documents.

widespread use of data to monitor student progress, and strategically selected services and supports.

Lots of schools and districts have tried to use those core components to breathe new life into struggling schools, to little or no effect. Why did Dayton’s Bluff succeed? This case study tells that story.<sup>1</sup>

## DAYTON’S BLUFF THEMES

- 1. Schools are the hub of community life.** As such, they are a natural point of convergence for education, student and family supports, and community revitalization.
- 2. Academic standards help to improve student achievement** when they are clearly articulated and enforced by teachers and well understood by students and parents. Standards and practices should be consistent within a classroom and across the school and district.
- 3. Strong leadership is essential to improving both schools and school districts.** Such leadership is focused, consistent, inclusive, respectful, collaborative, and committed.
- 4. Successful schools have high expectations for both achievement and behavior,** and they apply those expectations to everyone—students, teachers, building administrators, and parents.
- 5. Educators need extensive professional development** to implement the type of curriculum and instructional model that produces good results.
- 6. Frequent data analysis and use** keeps students and teachers focused on standards and helps guide the selection of instructional strategies.

**Chapter I** outlines the community, school, and district contexts that influenced the Dayton’s Bluff Achievement Plus Elementary School story. **Chapter II** provides an overview of the change process, including its leaders, key players, and major stages. **Chapter III** presents the core components of the Achievement Plus Community Schools initiative, including its principles, strategies, choices, and

actions. **Chapter IV** examines additional components that were especially relevant at Dayton’s Bluff. **Chapter V** explains the lessons that emerged as one school’s turnaround experience began to influence an entire district, and **Chapter VI** looks at the challenges and opportunities facing the school, district, and initiative today.

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# I. Before and After: Snapshots of the Community, School, and District

## Neighborhood History and Demographics

Dayton's Bluff Achievement Plus Elementary School sits high on the hills of east Saint Paul—high enough, in winter when the leaves are down, to overlook the thick braid of freeway that connects Saint Paul with its twin city and points beyond. Beginning in the late 1800s, that transportation corridor brought Dayton's Bluff a steady stream of new residents in search of industrial jobs and low-cost homes. First Swedish and Irish immigrants moved in, taking jobs at a large brewery and, decades later, a refrigerator manufacturing company. They were followed by more blue-collar workers, including an influx of Southeast Asian families after the Vietnam War. Over the next few decades, as the rest of the city enjoyed an economic boom, gentrification of nearby neighborhoods drove displaced families to the East Side. Then the factory jobs evaporated. Affordable housing grew scarce even in Dayton's Bluff, and the neighborhood's large contingent of low-income residents became highly mobile, perpetually searching for cheaper housing. The proportion of resident homeowners declined, and with it some neighborhood cohesiveness and identity.

Today, the Dayton's Bluff community is a multi-ethnic melting pot of African-American, Asian-American, Anglo, and Latino residents. What they share is a need for education—a need that, until recently, was not well met.

## School Characteristics

Between 1980 and 2000, Dayton's Bluff Elementary School had six principals, each with a different (and generally unsuccessful) plan for improving the quality of education. In 1996–97, the school's chronically low performance earned it a place on the state's list of schools that required “reconstitution.” At that time, approximately two-thirds of Dayton's Bluff students performed below average on standardized reading tests.

In 1997–98, Dayton's Bluff became one of the first schools to join the Achievement Plus Community Schools comprehensive reform initiative. In summer 2001, a redesign of the school replaced the principal, other building administrators, and about 80 percent of teachers; rejuvenated the school building; and realigned the array of support services in the school.

Dayton's Bluff now has over 40 licensed staff and a family resource/referral center, food and clothing bank, nurse practitioner, counselor, social worker, and dental clinic. The ambiance is bright and cheery. A huge quilt decorated with staff's handprints hangs

## DAYTON'S BLUFF SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS

In 2003–04, Dayton's Bluff Achievement Plus Elementary School enrolled 365 children in grades K–6.

Approximately 46 percent were African-American, 26 percent were Asian-American, 14 percent were Anglo, 13 percent were Latino, and less than 1 percent were Native American. The percentage of students of color is much higher than for the district as a whole.

Many students moved with their families to Saint Paul from Chicago, Detroit, or Gary (Ind.), and many students did not attend Dayton's Bluff for the full school year, due to family mobility.

Approximately 90 percent of the total student population qualified for free or reduced-price meals because their family income was near or below the federal poverty standard (compared with a district average of 66 percent). For 37 percent of students, English was a second language.

—Source: SPPS

in the entry, and comfortable chairs welcome visitors outside the office.

Student attendance is relatively high: 97 percent among Asian-American students, 94 percent among Latinos, 93 percent among African-Americans, and 90 percent among American Indians.

Student achievement has similarly improved. In 2002–03, the proportion of third-graders scoring at or above standard on the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment (MCA) in reading grew by 5 percentage points. Third- and fifth-graders also showed slight gains in math, although writing scores dipped slightly from the previous year’s substantial increase. Dayton’s Bluff led the district in overall test score improvement on the nationally normed Metropolitan Achievement Test (MAT-7), increasing by 6.41 NCEs.<sup>2</sup>

In spring 2003, SPPS switched from using the MAT-7 to the Stanford Achievement Test (SAT-10). That year, 63 percent of Dayton’s Bluff third- and fifth-graders scored at or above average in reading, and 70 percent scored at those levels in math. (The national norm for both subjects was 77 percent.)<sup>3</sup> Students’ scores on the 2003 MCA, compared to the 2002 MCA, were 35 percentage points higher in math and 28 percentage points higher in reading.<sup>4</sup>

## School District Context

With 100 public school sites serving more than 42,000 students, Saint Paul has the second-largest school district in Minnesota. Several factors within that school environment influenced the course of change for Dayton’s Bluff, including: (1) the arrival of a new superintendent of schools, which gave the city, school leaders, and other stakeholders a chance to rethink their approach to education; (2) SPPS’ status as a school district of choice, which pits magnet, charter, and neighborhood schools against each other in the competition for students; and (3) state-mandated reconstitution of low-performing schools

and a public debate about vouchers, which made some type of action inevitable.

### ***Superintendent of Schools: Patricia A. Harvey***

Patricia Harvey arrived in Saint Paul in 1999 after successes in Chicago, where she was Chief Accountability Officer of the public school system, and Washington, D.C., where she worked for the National Center on Education and the Economy as a senior fellow and director of the center’s proprietary instructional model, America’s Choice School Design. It was Harvey’s first superintendency, and she had always expected to take charge of a more deeply troubled school system than the one she found in Saint Paul. But she quickly realized that Saint Paul had potential to become a national example of high-quality urban education. Saint Paulites generally value education and have a “can-do” attitude, and the city’s moderate size makes it easier than in larger urban areas to create a critical mass of change.

Harvey saw that SPPS lacked connections to the city’s government, businesses, arts community, and other important stakeholders in children’s futures. She began looking for a way to forge partnerships and soon found it in Achievement Plus, an initiative proposed by the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation. Wilder is a local foundation long committed to education and social equity in Saint Paul. Achievement Plus’ architects envisioned small community schools that educated children and their parents but also provided a comprehensive array of school-based social services, supported through partnerships with the county, city, state, and private sector. The result would be not only better education but also a revitalization of impoverished neighborhoods. “I just knew this was an opportunity to bring to reality on a small scale what we were talking about on a larger scale,” Harvey recalls.

### ***A City Policy of School Choice***

Superintendent Harvey’s priority of giving all community members a voice in education was not entirely new to Saint Paul. The city already had magnet schools and was a “district of choice,” where parents could choose which school their children

<sup>2</sup> Achievement Plus Newsletter, Annual Report Issue. (2002).

<sup>3</sup> Achievement Plus. (September 2003). Interim Grant Report for The McKnight Foundation.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

## PATRICIA A. HARVEY'S VISION AND ACTION PLAN FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

### GOALS:

- Prepare students for life
- Provide clear and accurate reporting
- Engage the public
- Create institutional change
- Respect and include all cultures and differences

Achievement Plus is incorporated into the first of seven **Essential Efforts** to:

1. **Implement best practices in standards-based education**—Align curriculum, instruction, and assessment to high standards in order to continuously improve all students' achievement while closing the gap among racial and socioeconomic groups.
2. **Offer students and families a world of educational opportunities**—Implement a diverse array of high-quality programs, services, and other options to ensure that SPPS meets the unique educational needs of every student.
3. **Hold ourselves accountable for continuous improvement**—Develop, implement, and refine an accountability system that holds everyone involved in education responsible for results.
4. **Partner with families and the community**—Work together to increase the percentage of families and community members actively engaged in helping students learn to high standards.
5. **Support leadership and professional growth**—Expand and improve leadership and professional development programs to engage all staff in high-quality opportunities for growth that are sustained, intensive, collaborative, and site-based.
6. **Empower school and program sites**—Further decentralize decision-making authority to the school and program level, and strengthen the capacity of schools and programs to implement comprehensive school reform.
7. **Embrace diversity as one of our greatest strengths**—Strengthen the capacity of schools, programs, and central administration to understand and meet the educational needs of students, staff, and community members from diverse backgrounds.

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*“The remarkable transformation at Dayton’s Bluff has tangible benefits that extend far beyond the students, teachers, and families directly involved.”*

—Patricia A. Harvey  
Saint Paul Public Schools

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would attend rather than automatically sending them to the one closest to home.

Nationally, the school choice option works well for middle-class and affluent families that lead settled lives and can make a choice based solely on the quality of education. A family that struggles economically has a different set of factors to consider, however. Is the building safe? Does it open early in the morning so parents can get to work on time? Is it accessible without a car? Does school staff understand all the challenges family members face? When those families find a school that works for them, they tend to stay there regardless of the academic quality.

To make school choice work well for all students, therefore, all of the choices have to be good ones—and that was not the case in Saint Paul. Schools in the poorest neighborhoods were not as strong or, consequently, as desirable as those in more affluent communities. The magnet schools siphoned off the most academically oriented students. Meanwhile, a small subset of high-achieving schools had long lists of children waiting to get in, a barrier that frustrated parents who had been told they had a choice. With rare exceptions, the district does not provide transportation to schools outside a family’s neighborhood, so children who moved outside their school’s catchment area—as low-income families in search of affordable housing are likely to do—couldn’t remain at their chosen school.

### ***State-Mandated Reconstitution and the Voucher Debate***

In 1997, then-Governor Arne Carlson, a vocal proponent of public school vouchers, identified 11 Saint Paul schools that qualified for state-mandated “reconstitution” because of their chronically low performance. Two schools that would become Achievement Plus sites, Dayton’s Bluff and Monroe, were on that list. Carlson challenged SPPS to turn the schools around and promised financial support if the district would adopt a voucher system. The school board and superintendent rejected the idea, but it caught the attention of the mayor of Saint Paul. The ensuing debate over reconstitution and vouchers increased the pressure on schools to shape

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## **STRATEGIES PROMOTED BY PATRICIA A. HARVEY**

- Foster new leadership through extensive **training and professional development**.
- Emphasize **research-based, proven practices** for instruction in core academic areas.
- Empower schools and communities through **site-based decision-making councils**.
- Develop and enforce a framework for **school- and district-wide accountability**.
- Hold all students to **high standards** for academic achievement.
- Seek **input from community stakeholders**, frequently and with respect for diverse opinions.
- **Use data** to analyze strengths and gaps for individual learners, classrooms, grade levels, schools, and the district overall.
- **Establish partnerships** that make necessary services and supports easily available to children and their families, and align the services with schools’ educational priorities.

up. Such urgency can be interpreted either as a crisis or, as in Achievement Plus' case, an opportunity.

## The Wilder Foundation and Achievement Plus

The Amherst H. Wilder Foundation is a nonprofit health and human services organization with an annual operating budget of about \$58 million. Wilder operates more than 100 programs in Saint Paul and its surrounding area, serving an estimated 50,000 people annually. In the late 1990s, Wilder President Tom Kingston and his colleague Claudia Dengler (then Director of Services to Children and Families, and now Vice President of Programs) wanted to expand Wilder's efforts to close the achievement gap between low- and middle-income students. After rejecting the idea of charter schools as too expensive to create and unnecessary when the public system already owns extensive school infrastructure, they suggested an approach based on the Children's Aid Society model for full-service community schools.

The public schools that Children's Aid Society began operating in 1992, in partnership with the New York City Board of Education, a school district, and community-based service providers, were nationally acclaimed for their success in combining strong educational practices with an array of community services that help children become physically, emotionally, and socially ready to learn. The Children's Aid schools were open early and late, year-round, to provide academic enrichment programs, sports, arts education, community service opportunities, summer camps, medical and dental services, mental health counseling, links to social services, adult education, immigration assistance, child health insurance enrollment, early childhood programs, and activities for community members.

Kingston and Dengler proposed launching a similar effort in three Saint Paul schools that represented different types of education challenges so local partners could see how the model worked before implementing it district-wide. One would be Dayton's Bluff, the lowest-performing and most impoverished school in the district and therefore the toughest nut

to crack. The second would be Monroe, a school that needed to improve academically but wasn't viewed as deeply troubled. The third school, at a site not yet selected, would test how the model worked when implemented from Day One at a new school in a neighborhood with all the predispositions for failure. That school, added in 2000–01, was John A. Johnson Achievement Plus Elementary School (Johnson Achievement Plus Elementary School).

## WHAT IS ACHIEVEMENT PLUS?

Achievement Plus is an initiative to develop and strengthen community schools in Saint Paul, with the goal of improving children's academic achievement. The premise behind the collaboration is that community schools are the foundation for a **comprehensive education reform model** that integrates efforts by the school, community, and families and **resources from the public and private sectors**.

Key components include:

- **A standards-based curriculum** that emphasizes high expectations; student-driven, authentic work; individualized and group instruction; and extensive professional development for teachers
- **Learning activities that extend before and after school**, reinforcing the school-day program and standards and also providing opportunities not available during the school day
- **Access to educational and social services and supports**, both at the school and in the community

The founding partners of Achievement Plus were Saint Paul Public Schools, Ramsey County, the City of Saint Paul, and the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation. In addition, many community organizations partner directly with one or more Achievement Plus schools.

All schools would be located in racially diverse areas with high concentrations of children under age 16, diverse levels of family income, low student achievement rates, high dropout rates, inadequate recreational facilities, and crowded classrooms.

Kingston and Dengler took their idea on the road to generate support. Dengler culled from education research the best ideas about education reform, organized them into a one-page diagram, and thrust it in front of as many people as she could. Recalls Kingston, “At the state legislature, our argument was that we really needed to change academic test scores, to have a unified curriculum, and to have family supports for kids. Who could argue with that—or

with the idea that we needed [adequate] facilities to make it happen?”

The Achievement Plus concept sold like road salt before a blizzard. The Wilder Foundation’s credibility and long history of successful initiatives, and the clearly articulated model for the schools, attracted major funding from the city, state, and private sources, mostly local and national foundations.

“We were almost too successful” at fundraising, Kingston observes. The real struggles still lay ahead: refining the model, aligning the partnership, and achieving results.

## II. Overview of the Change Process

Although each Achievement Plus school encountered some unique challenges during the transformation process, certain ingredients and strategies for change were common across the initiative. They included the leadership, key players, and major stages in the change process, described in this chapter, and the core components of the Achievement Plus model described in Chapter III. Chapter IV, Key Components at Dayton’s Bluff, examines extra features that distinguish the initiative at that school.

### Leaders and Key Players

The four entities in the Achievement Plus partnership are the Saint Paul Public Schools, the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation, Ramsey County, and the City of Saint Paul. Superintendent Patricia A. Harvey, Wilder President Tom Kingston, two city mayors, and three county managers, in succession, have lent political support to the initiative.

When Achievement Plus began, its designers assumed that each partner would be equally involved. As the work unfolded, however, SPPS and Wilder emerged as the most active leaders. The city’s involvement in Achievement Plus centered on two issues: negotiation, funding, and renovation of the shared facility for the school and community/recreation center at Dayton’s Bluff; and redevelopment of the Johnson school and surrounding property, which involved moving or demolishing 61 housing units and redirecting traffic around the new campus. Once those challenges were resolved, the city’s role became largely passive. Officials now respond if asked for assistance but are not actively involved in the initiative.

Achievement Plus planners had envisioned a strong role for the county in the partnership, because so many of the services and supports that families needed were funded and provided by the county. Unfortunately, the idea of locating services at schools or in their immediate neighborhood was at odds with the county’s shift toward centralized service delivery. Thus the county only became actively involved in Achievement Plus when specific services were requested.

At first, the initiative was directed by a SPPS administrator on loan to the initiative. After two years, however, when Achievement Plus had not produced strong results, Kingston pushed for a change in leadership. “I stepped out of a collegial, equal role in relation to other partners and said we needed crisper philosophical leadership,” he recalls. “I came to the conclusion that to succeed we had to have very strong leadership by the school district, and Wilder should be secondary behind it.”

Superintendent Harvey realized that Achievement Plus’ high visibility and compatibility with education priorities made the initiative a good platform for her reforms, and she agreed to have SPPS take the lead. Wilder offered to hire an Achievement Plus executive director who would report directly to Harvey, and the superintendent knew just whom she wanted: Maria J. Lamb. Lamb was a professional development expert who had founded the Alice Carlson Applied Learning Center, a K–5 school in the Fort Worth (Texas) Independent School District. With Lamb as principal, Alice Carlson had excelled as the first school of choice in Fort Worth using a standards-based curriculum and instructional model. Alice Carlson became a national model, and Harvey brought several groups of teachers and administrators to Carlson Institutes. In late 1999, Harvey took the Achievement Plus principals, school board members, and a few other partners to Fort Worth to visit Lamb’s school. In spring 2000, Harvey and Kingston successfully recruited Lamb as executive director of Achievement Plus and she became the driving force behind the initiative.

### Major Stages

Achievement Plus was not introduced into Saint Paul Public Schools as a full-blown model with all components simultaneously ready for implementation. The initiative evolved through several informal phases, including strategic planning; early implementation of the instructional, extended learning, and social support programs; restructuring to improve each component and keep the initiative on

track; and efforts to institutionalize the programs and ensure their sustainability.

### ***1. Introduction of the Achievement Plus Initiative***

Wilder began soliciting support for the Achievement Plus concept in 1995, and it coalesced quickly. In 1996, the concept was presented to elementary schools in the district, which could opt to become community schools under the initiative. The following school year, Achievement Plus began in two elementary schools, Dayton’s Bluff and Monroe.

For the next three years, the initiative focused on completing physical expansions to the school buildings and putting in place the core components of an Extended Learning program, Family Resource Centers, and access to health care and social services. In 2000–01 Achievement Plus expanded to a third site, the just-remodeled Johnson Achievement Plus Elementary School, which encompassed all of the core components from the start.

### ***2. Arrival of Patricia A. Harvey***

When Superintendent Harvey arrived in 1999, she immediately put her experience as head of accountability for the Chicago schools to use. Harvey recruited Margo Baines, a Chicago colleague, as SPPS’ new Chief Accountability Officer, and together they conducted quality reviews of all Saint Paul public schools.

First, Baines and her staff examined three years of test data. They identified eight chronically low-performing elementary schools (including Dayton’s Bluff), one junior high, and two high schools. All schools were placed on academic probation—a first for SPPS.

Next, the SPPS Director of School Interventions and her assistant visited each school for two days to assess the quality of leadership, the instructional program, school climate, staff development, parent/community involvement, and self-monitoring. They produced an in-depth case study of each school. Baines discussed these quality reviews with area superintendents who supervised the principals and then met with the principals to talk about the findings and to establish a productive process for sharing the results with each school’s site council, staff, and parents.

Superintendent Harvey and the school board also read the reviews. The review process thus helped to create a climate for change, Baines says—an environment in which all schools examined their academic and nonacademic components more closely with an eye on future improvement.

On the rationale that low-performing schools often have fragmented approaches to curriculum and instruction, with each teacher doing things his or her own way, Harvey directed the targeted schools to become “comprehensive.” By that she meant instilling a coherent educational strategy, shared curriculum, alignment between grade levels, and proven instructional practices. In that sense, Harvey viewed the change process more as a restructuring than a reconstitution of the same old elements.

In other schools, the challenge to become more comprehensive was enough to start the turnaround process, but Dayton’s Bluff declined even more visibly. At the end of the school year, a group of Dayton’s Bluff teachers came to ask Harvey what she planned to do about the situation. It was a good question. Despite the teachers’ frustration, they didn’t seem to feel any ownership of a solution. Most viewed Achievement Plus services as add-on supports that wrapped around the school day but didn’t affect what happened in classrooms.

A month later, after holding a retreat with Dayton’s Bluff staff, SPPS leaders decided “we couldn’t bring about any real change with people who were convinced that the change had to come from outside [in the form of] more money, more [of the same] staff, and getting rid of kids who don’t behave,” Harvey recalls. “The best way to start was to be sure we had people who wanted to be here, and that’s where the redesign came in.”

### ***3. Strategic Planning and Community Outreach***

Harvey realized that she couldn’t dictate a model for school redesign; the effort would only work if it emerged from a collaborative process. So for the rest of 1999, SPPS focused simply on raising expectations for children, parents, educators, and city and community partners. A 30-member executive

## ACHIEVEMENT PLUS CHRONOLOGY

### 1995–96

- Wilder Foundation proposes Achievement Plus school improvement model and solicits support.

### 1996–97

- Achievement Plus concept is presented to Saint Paul schools.

### 1997–98

- Achievement Plus begins at Dayton's Bluff (K–6) and Monroe (K–8) with a yearlong planning and development process. Wilder takes planners to New York City to observe the comprehensive school improvement model developed by Children's Aid Society.
- Extended Learning program begins at Dayton's Bluff.
- Family Resource Centers open at Achievement Plus schools.
- Construction begins at Johnson school, the third Achievement Plus site.
- Dayton's Bluff and Monroe receive national 21st Century Community Learning Center grants.

### 1998–99

- Extended Learning begins at Monroe; both schools form health/wellness teams and adopt student/family support models.
- Community site team forms to provide input into the development of the Johnson school.

### 1999–2000

- Patricia A. Harvey becomes Superintendent of SPPS.
- Physical expansion of two Achievement Plus schools is completed.
- Harvey takes team to visit Maria J. Lamb's school in Fort Worth.

### 2000–01

- Maria J. Lamb becomes Achievement Plus Executive Director.
- Johnson Achievement Plus Elementary School opens as the third Achievement Plus school.
- The organization and management of Achievement Plus is restructured.
- Two Achievement Plus schools begin implementing America's Choice.
- YMCA opens at Johnson site.

### 2001–02

- Dayton's Bluff is restructured with new principal and teachers and begins the school year with new focus.
- Monroe begins implementing America's Choice.
- SPPS establishes Saint Paul's Project for Academic Excellence, a school improvement effort that encompasses Achievement Plus.
- Maria J. Lamb is named Chief Education Officer of SPPS but continues to lead Achievement Plus as a district priority.

### 2002–03

- Achievement Plus schools, led by Johnson Achievement Plus Elementary School, demonstrate best practices to local, national, and international educators.
- District receives 21st Century Community Learning Center grant in conjunction with Achievement Plus.

### 2003–04

- Elements of Achievement Plus are replicated in other SPPS schools, although no new sites are added to the initiative.
- Leaders continue to seek new supports for Achievement Plus schools and ensure high-quality implementation.

committee—including the governor, lieutenant governor, Wilder President Tom Kingston, local university presidents, heads of community-based organizations, and faith leaders—led the process.

For four months, SPPS held focus groups to gather input on six topics: preparing students for the challenges and opportunities they would encounter as adults; community engagement; performance expectations (not only for students but for families, the community, and stakeholder groups); clear and accurate reporting; institutional change; and respect for and inclusion of diverse cultures. Telephone surveys and interviews also elicited feedback from students, parents, and community members. By the end, school district leaders were confident they had heard the wishes of constituents across the city.

#### **4. Selection of a Reform Model**

Rather than reinventing the wheel, Harvey wanted to bring to the district a standards-based instructional model that had already proved its success for schools that were lagging behind in student achievement. Margo Baines identified several potential models for SPPS schools: Success For All, Core Knowledge, High Schools that Work, and America's Choice School Design.

Harvey then invited members of community advisory panels, principals, and teachers from schools with low student achievement to review the models and propose one to implement. Baines' office arranged a fair where people could talk with the models' representatives about implementation issues, costs, training, and staff development plans. Baines also gave each school funds for intensive planning activities.

Although team members did not all favor the same model, the three Achievement Plus sites eventually selected America's Choice.<sup>5</sup> (The reform elements that America's Choice encompasses are shared by Saint Paul's Project for Academic Excellence, an overarching reform initiative that came after the selection of individual reform models but by 2003–04 had virtually superseded them district-wide.)

One aspect that made America's Choice attractive was that it supports sites with three years of teacher training in how to apply a standards-based model for curriculum, instruction, and assessment. In addition, the district formed a partnership with the Institute for Learning at the University of Pittsburgh, which provides professional development at the school leadership level. Lauren B. Resnick, founder of the Institute, is an international expert on school reform, assessment, cognitive science, and education policy. She also helped to develop the standards on which America's Choice is based.

SPPS' relationship with the Institute for Learning is important, especially as the reforms have evolved into the district-wide Saint Paul's Project for Academic Excellence. The Institute offers "current, research-based knowledge about learning processes and principles of instruction"<sup>6</sup> to the schools' instructional leaders, and its Principles of Learning (p. 21) help guide their academic improvements.

#### **5. Policy Changes to Support School Redesign**

The kind of changes Harvey and her colleagues sought required fundamental shifts in how people in and around schools thought, acted, and interacted. As a first step, in 2000 SPPS established site-based decision-making. With a grant from The McKnight Foundation, the district created and trained site-based councils in every school. Those councils began to work with the district-wide planning group to develop reform strategies.

#### **6. New Leadership for the Initiative**

After two years of implementation, Achievement Plus leaders grew concerned because they couldn't see dramatic improvements in children's academic achievement. At Dayton's Bluff, discontent was brewing in the community about the amount of money and effort flowing into the school without noticeable results. Teachers were adrift. "We knew we were in Achievement Plus but we didn't really know what that meant," recalls one teacher. "We were aiming for a culture change, but in order to do that you have to

<sup>5</sup> Five other schools selected Success For All. Core Knowledge and High Schools that Work were each chosen by one school. Since 2000, four additional schools that are not participating in Achievement Plus have selected America's Choice.

<sup>6</sup> Saint Paul Public Schools. (September 2002). "Saint Paul's Project for Academic Excellence."

have facts. And we didn't have any facts." None of the Achievement Plus partners had stepped up to provide those facts and lead the process, and the Achievement Plus director lacked authority to take the necessary steps on her own. Meanwhile, a great deal of money was being spent without any logical hope that it would change the learning environment.

Clearly, the notion of having four partners with equal responsibility wasn't working. Against the wishes of deputies in the three other partnering entities, Kingston argued that leadership should be lodged in the school system, linked directly to the superintendent, and headed by someone able to exert strong leadership on the academic front.

The ultimatum made Kingston very unpopular, he says, but without it he was convinced that Achievement Plus would become one more experiment that faded into the sunset along with a lot of money, and he persuaded Patricia A. Harvey that he was right. They concluded that the initiative needed a new leader; a more rigorous, uniform, research-proven curriculum that all teachers would buy into; and a more selective approach to bringing services and supports into the schools so they didn't interfere with the academic program. Kingston and Harvey brought in temporary Achievement Plus leaders to maintain the work and monitor spending, and they aggressively pursued Maria J. Lamb to become the new executive director of Achievement Plus.

Lamb had experience engaging and training staff around a strong curriculum. She was very focused on the things that needed to happen immediately:

getting a curriculum installed, getting principals and staff on board with it, and aligning the Extended Learning program with the curriculum. For two years, Lamb worked to reframe Achievement Plus as a Wilder employee on loan to the school district. She worked closely with Chief Accountability Officer Margo Baines and Judy Neece, currently Project Administrator for Achievement Plus, and in direct contact with Superintendent Harvey.

### **7. Restructuring of Achievement Plus**

The first thing Lamb needed to do was develop a strategic plan that conveyed in writing what the initiative was about, who was involved, and what the expectations were for each partner. She examined the schools' instructional plans and quality reviews, looked at data gathered by Achievement Plus, and brought Superintendent Harvey to Dayton's Bluff for a full day to see for herself the sorry state of affairs.

The strategic plan Lamb produced for 2001–05 emphasized Curriculum, Extended Learning opportunities, and improved Learning Supports as the three strands of work Achievement Plus would pursue to support Saint Paul Public Schools. The plan called for the following actions:

- **Curriculum and Instruction**—Full implementation of America's Choice; extensive professional development to make instruction and assessment standards-based and consistent from one grade to the next in reading, writing, and math; and continued development of Johnson Achievement Plus Elementary School as a demonstration school for standards-based curriculum.

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*“For the first two years, we had the idea that if you just let teachers do their jobs, and take out the interference caused by family problems, and keep people engaged in out-of-school [learning activities], the momentum and energy will produce changes. It just doesn't work that way.”*

—Tom Kingston  
Amherst H. Wilder Foundation

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- **Extended Learning Opportunities**—Strategic selection of intervention strategies to make sure they align with students’ academic improvement goals; uniform programming at all three Achievement Plus sites; and greater involvement of community providers.
- **Learning Supports**—A targeted focus on six areas: student and family assistance, home involvement in schooling, support for transitions (of the family and in school), crisis assistance and prevention, classroom-focused support (e.g., teacher education and assistance with problems), and community outreach; and creation of a team at each Achievement Plus school to oversee implementation, collaboration, and integration of resources for learning supports.
- **Governance and Management**—Heightened attention to fiscal responsibility and responsiveness; communication to all partners, staff, and community members about Achievement Plus components; continuing efforts to attract public and private funding; evaluation of outcomes; and the use of data to inform decisions at all levels.

The exercise of developing a strategic plan to which all roles and activities would be linked revealed, among other things, that Achievement Plus was staff-heavy. The initiative had 55 employees, including a full-time accountant, a full-time communications expert, and numerous Extended Learning program and support staff. Each school had its own Achievement Plus director, counselors, social workers, and assistants. That structure duplicated the one provided by school principals and their staffs—a setup that was both isolating and unnecessarily expensive for Achievement Plus.

The initiative’s financial status was Lamb’s second urgent concern. Public and private funders had invested huge amounts of money in the initiative: \$10.5 million for operations and \$33.4 million for capital construction between 1996 and 1999. The funders wanted positive results without negative publicity, yet the media were dragging Achievement Plus through the mud. And the first cycle of funding was reaching its end. Achievement Plus planned to

seek another cycle of funding, if the initiative could be put back on course, but at that juncture there was just enough money to finish the current school year and the beginning of 2001–2002.

Lamb knew she had to get Achievement Plus’ finances in order so the initiative could attract the funding it needed to improve and sustain program quality. She reduced staffing to an efficient level, cutting nonessential roles and consolidating others. She insisted that all activities align with the strategic plan; those that didn’t were eliminated. The strategy paid off: between 2000 and 2003, Achievement Plus attracted an additional \$2.6 million in operating funds from public and private sources.

Lamb’s third priority was to reengage Achievement Plus’ partners around the strategic plan—not only the city, county, school district, and Wilder Foundation but local residents, legislative representatives, council members, and the agencies that contributed to Extended Learning and support services.

Community partners at Dayton’s Bluff, for example, included:

- Camp Fire Boys and Girls
- Children’s Dental Service
- Children’s Theatre Company
- Community Design Center
- District 4 Community Council
- East Side Arts Council
- East YMCA
- Higher Education Consortium for Urban Affairs
- Hubb Center
- Merrick Community Services
- Metropolitan State University
- The Minneapolis Foundation
- Minnesota Care
- Minnesota Department of Natural Resources
- Minnesota Higher Education Services Office
- Minnesota Literacy Council
- Ramsey Nurses Association
- Saint Paul Parks and Recreation
- Saint Paul Public Library
- Second Harvest Saint Paul Food Bank
- University of Minnesota

“We had thrown programming at the issues before we had infrastructure in place, and the community hadn’t bought into the vision enough,” acknowledges Lynnell Thiel, Director of Student and Family Support for Achievement Plus. So Maria J. Lamb met with community members to reengage them around the strategic plan. Lamb and Patricia A. Harvey also met with city council members, while Thiel and Andrew Collins, Director of Extended Learning, met with providers to discuss whether their services really enhanced the school’s academic agenda and whether there were better ways to coordinate service delivery. For instance, both the Wilder Foundation and another organization provided separate therapists to Dayton’s Bluff one day a week; it made more sense to have one entity (in this case Wilder) provide a full-time therapist and have the other organization pull back.

#### **8. Introduction of an Overarching Initiative and Consolidated Professional Development**

In 2002, SPPS created the Office of Instructional Services under the leadership of Maria J. Lamb, who became the district’s Chief Education Officer. SPPS also merged its departments for curriculum and instruction, staff development, gifted/talented education, alternatives to social promotion and retention, and federally funded instructional programs into the Office of Instructional Services. Lamb’s continuing responsibility for Achievement Plus, despite her promotion, gave the initiative even greater support and

security within the school system. Moreover, moving the initiative into the school system gave Lamb the extra authority she needed to do her job.

#### **9. Expansion of the Model**

In 2003–04, SPPS leaders focused on figuring out what worked best in the Achievement Plus schools, especially academically, and exporting those elements of the model to other Saint Paul schools. Saint Paul’s Project for Academic Excellence was established as a vehicle to infuse curriculum reform district-wide. The project gained momentum in improving academic coherence, curriculum, instruction, assessment, and student outcomes in all Saint Paul schools. Johnson Achievement Plus Elementary School continued to serve as a demonstration site for good instructional practices, and Dayton’s Bluff and Monroe opened their doors to observation by other educators.

The Wilder Foundation continued to raise money and support for Achievement Plus but also began work on a new initiative, the Opportunity Housing Investment Fund, to improve the quality, availability, and affordability of housing in the area around John A. Johnson Achievement Plus Elementary School. The Fund, capitalized by investments from individual “social venture partners” and the Katherine B. Andersen Fund of The Saint Paul Foundation, is expected to support the rehabilitation or creation of 75 housing units within five years.

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*“A safe and healthy school is the most powerful force a neighborhood can have. Our Achievement Plus schools are making a profound difference in the lives of families throughout Saint Paul. They’re helping to stabilize the communities in which they operate by serving as support nets for employment, housing, childcare, and transportation. . . . They are making our dream of world-class education in Saint Paul a reality.”*

—Randy Kelly  
Mayor of Saint Paul  
(From a videotaped story on Achievement Plus, SPPS)

# III. Core Components of the Initiative

The most essential elements of all Achievement Plus schools include: (1) strong leadership; (2) broad, collaborative ownership; (3) high standards; (4) academic coherence; (5) professional development; (6) the continual analysis and use of data; (7) accountability; (8) flexibility from district policies at the building level; (9) extended learning opportunities; and (10) strategic partnerships to provide services and supports. This chapter describes those components and how Achievement Plus created them.

## Strong Leadership

Perhaps the most obvious, distinctive aspect of Achievement Plus is the thoughtful but assertive leadership exhibited by and among Superintendent Patricia A. Harvey, Chief Education Officer Maria J. Lamb, Wilder Foundation President Tom Kingston, and the schools' principals and top administrators.

**Patricia A. Harvey's** leadership style is to inspire and elicit rather than to dictate. When she arrived she made it clear that Saint Paul could no longer pursue a scattershot approach to school reform characterized by numerous unrelated initiatives. Although she had a clear vision for change, she did not mandate a replacement model. "Each school had to think and learn about different comprehensive models, which caused them to buy into and support [the process] more," notes Richard Kreyer, SPPS Executive Director of Human Resources and Labor Relations.

After the schools and Harvey agreed on the selection of an instructional model that would support balanced literacy, math, and science, Harvey led educators and administrators deeper into the change process by making sure they understood how to teach a standards-based curriculum. "Her ability to unpack things in bite-sized pieces was crucial," one observer says. "Otherwise we would have rebelled because the changes were so far beyond what we knew."

Harvey believes that good leaders are necessary at all levels of the education chain if schools are to flourish, and she fosters other leaders in several ways:

- Instead of consolidating leadership and accountability for school improvement with one cabinet member or administrative unit, she spreads the responsibility across departments and senior staff. There are risks to this approach—as Harvey says, "If one [leader's] part of the work is a misfit the whole house of cards could come down"—but thus far the benefits appear to outweigh the costs.
- She does not assign teachers or principals to specific schools. Instead, candidates must be interviewed and accepted by site-based teams.
- She incubates programs and practices in Achievement Plus schools and then helps them spread to other schools so that some educators and administrators will be familiar with the strategies from the outset and can serve as peer leaders.
- She allowed Dayton's Bluff Principal Von Sheppard to serve as her intern while earning his superintendent's license, and she arranged for Maria J. Lamb to serve as his mentor.

**Maria J. Lamb** is an energetic, persuasive woman whose professional journey has given her a broad perspective on school and community change. She is simultaneously approachable and impatient for progress, with an unflagging passion for school reform. An educator, staff developer, administrator, and well-known reformer of public education, Lamb had established a high-achieving school in Fort Worth, Texas, that earned wide recognition and helped shape the philosophy of the nationally implemented school reform project known as New Standards.

Lamb became Executive Director of Achievement Plus in July 2000 and Chief Education Officer of SPPS in July 2002. In her district-wide role, she provides leadership, direction, support, and oversight for the Office of Instructional Services. The role of the office is to institutionalize large-scale improvements in the quality and performance of staff as they

learn instructional practices that support student achievement. The office also organizes and aligns school services around instructional excellence and student assessment, and it works to institutionalize performance standards and best practices to improve student achievement. Although Lamb's responsibilities have grown considerably, she continues to provide active leadership of Achievement Plus.

**Tom Kingston** is an outgoing, politically savvy man with a deep commitment to community development who has the respect of many in the Twin Cities' public, private, and philanthropic sectors. He has special talents for concept development and fundraising, and those are perhaps the areas in which he exerts the most leadership for Achievement Plus. Under Kingston's direction, Wilder took the lead in initiating Achievement Plus, convening partners, and serving as "general developer" of the initiative. Kingston also was the person who intervened when Achievement Plus faltered during early implementation.

Other Achievement Plus partners who have leadership roles include the school principals, teachers, and Design Leadership Team. **Principals** keep the flame of school improvement lit and make sure everyone feeds the fire without getting burned. **Teachers** participate in professional training as both learners and trainers, which helps them develop leadership skills, and some demonstrate good classroom practices for their peers locally, nationally, and internationally. All Achievement Plus schools encourage teachers to visit each other's classrooms informally to share ideas and examples of student work.

At each school, a Design Leadership Team meets weekly for an hour to discuss implementation of the school plan, including issues, concerns, and next steps. The team also analyzes individual student work and Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment scores. At Dayton's Bluff, the 11-member team is led by the design coach and includes classroom teachers, the special education and English Language Learner teachers, the principal and assistant principal, literacy coach, math coach, Family Resource Center director, and Extended Learning program director.

## Broad, Collaborative Ownership

The best leadership in the world can still produce poor results if the troops on the front lines don't share the leaders' vision for change. Thus Achievement Plus is designed as both a top-down and bottom-up initiative. Broad community conversations guided the planning process for Dayton's Bluff and other Achievement Plus schools, and periodic public meetings facilitated by Achievement Plus continue to shape the initiative. The schools' site-based decision-making councils foster parent and teacher buy-in and give those stakeholders a way to influence the schools' mission, structure, staffing, budget, instructional practices, and services.

## High Standards

Achievement Plus revolves around high standards for academic achievement and instruction, for the behavior and achievement of every person associated with schools, and for the schools' physical appearance and capacities.

### *Standards for Academic Achievement and Instructions*

Patricia A. Harvey has long been a proponent of standards-based curriculum and instruction because, as materials produced by her office explain, it "proposes that effort, not just native ability, creates achievement and . . . [it provides] regular assessments of student progress toward benchmark[s]."<sup>7</sup> When Harvey took charge of SPPS in 1999, the prevailing force behind academic improvement was the state's Profile of Learning, a set of standards for public schools. Although the Profile increased pressure to improve test scores, it provided little guidance for school staff and administrators on what it would mean for a child to fall below, meet, or exceed the standards or how standards should be incorporated into classroom instruction. And if teachers and principals didn't understand the standards, it was very unlikely their students would meet them.

America's Choice and, later, Saint Paul's Project for Academic Excellence not only encompassed high academic standards but helped educators under-

<sup>7</sup> Saint Paul Public Schools. (2000). General information sheet.

stand what it meant to organize teaching and learning around the standards. SPPS schools, including those that participate in Achievement Plus, now make a point of ensuring that children and their families understand the standards. Bulletin boards in hallways and classrooms display the standards and samples of student work (identified by child's name) that meets or exceeds the benchmarks, accompanied by explanations of work and criteria. "We hear kids say, 'If I'd known this was what you wanted I could have given it to you a long time ago,'" one educator notes.

### ***Standards for Behavior and Classroom Management***

Saint Paul schools use a variety of models for classroom discipline. Achievement Plus schools use the Responsive Classroom model, disseminated by the Northeast Foundation for Children, which helps children learn social skills along with academic content and, in the process, makes classrooms safer and more conducive to learning. Classroom teachers received at least two years of training in Responsive Classroom so classroom management would be consistent throughout the schools.

Guided by seven principles (see box at right), the approach encompasses two elements that are especially important to Achievement Plus schools. Morning meeting is a daily ritual at which students bond with each other and start the day on a positive note. Children sit in a circle to hear a message about the day's events or topics of study, and they hold an informal conversation in which everyone participates. In addition, a set of rules for behavior is posted in every room and hallway along with "logical consequences" (disciplinary actions that escalate in severity from "take a break" to dismissal from school). Like Achievement Plus, the rules emphasize personal accountability and high standards for behavior.

### ***Standards for the Physical Environment in which Learning Occurs***

The renovation of Dayton's Bluff and Monroe and the complete rebuilding of Johnson Achievement Plus Elementary School created environments in

which students, parents, and teachers are proud and opened doors—literally—to facilities never before incorporated into Saint Paul schools. Johnson Achievement Plus Elementary School adjoins a full-service, state-of-the-art YMCA where the school holds gym classes and swimming lessons. The recreation center attached to Dayton's Bluff includes a 165-seat theater, full kitchen, teen lounge, dance studio, craft rooms, and multi-purpose area, all of which are used by students and community members for recreation and by faculty for staff meetings.

Each school has an Achievement Plus wing where health and wellness services are provided. At Dayton's Bluff, the facility includes offices for a social worker, mental health counselors, school nurse, nurse practitioner, and dentist/dental hygienist. A nearby Family Resource Center provides access

## **RESPONSIVE CLASSROOM PRINCIPLES**

- The social curriculum is as important as the academic curriculum.
- How children learn is as important as what they learn.
- The greatest cognitive growth occurs through social interaction.
- There is a set of social skills children need in order to succeed academically and socially: cooperation, assertion, responsibility, empathy, and self-control.
- Knowing the children we teach—individually, culturally, and developmentally—is as important as knowing the content we teach.
- Knowing the families of the children we teach and inviting their participation is essential to children's education.
- How the adults at school work together is as important as their individual competence. Lasting change begins with the adult community.

to food, clothing, grocery vouchers, and transportation tokens to families in need. Homeless parents are referred to programs that help them find and retain housing, and unemployed parents get help finding job openings and preparing for interviews. The center has a book and videotape lending library and abundant materials on services available in the community. Programming at the center includes Healthy Start, guidance on techniques to support children's learning, and social events. About a dozen parents use the center daily as a major resource and another dozen drop in to use the telephone, chat, or learn more about the school.

The hallways of Achievement Plus schools are clean and orderly because everyone is expected to take care of their surroundings. Bulletin boards and signs are designed to be meaningful, uniform, and easy to read. Many contain colorful charts illustrating the quarterly progress of each grade toward an academic standard, over a two-year period. A "Class of Excellence" chart (part of the Responsive Classroom model) tracks kudos earned by classrooms for commendable behavior. Every month, the class with the most commendations earns cookies and a trophy.

## **Academic Coherence**

America's Choice School Design, the instructional model that gave Achievement Plus academic coherence, is a comprehensive reform model with standards that children should achieve by the end of each grade in writing, reading, math, science, and applied learning. The standards align with and surpass Minnesota state standards.

America's Choice does not provide scripted lessons or a packaged curriculum. Using the standards and elements described below as a framework, teachers select strategies in response to how children are performing. Teachers constantly assess students according to the standards, using examples of appropriate work provided by America's Choice. With coaches, in grade-level meetings, and on their own, teachers review and analyze student progress.

America's Choice comprises the following key features: a focus on balanced literacy, including the use of leveled books geared to each student's reading

skills and needs; the use of workshops to teach subjects; writing journals and reading logs; and the school-wide adoption of common routines, rituals, and artifacts. According to Superintendent Harvey, those features produce academic coherence because they offer a mechanism for taking strategies to scale, both within schools and across the district, and because they complement the district's agenda.

### ***Balanced Literacy***

Balanced literacy refers to efforts that teach reading by working both on phonics (i.e., skills involving sound/letter relationships) and on whole-language immersion (i.e., the meaning of words). In a classroom that promotes balanced literacy, children have lots of time to (1) read aloud and to themselves, both independently and in groups or with a teacher; (2) be read to; and (3) write. In all activities, teachers strive for student comprehension and fluency.

Achievement Plus schools' classroom teachers read aloud to their students every day to build listening skills. While they read, teachers ask students to respond to questions and volunteer comments, which tests their comprehension and gives them a chance to practice problem-solving skills. During guided reading periods, the teacher works with small groups of children who share the same difficulties. Students read new books and reread familiar ones for practice. While this occurs, other students go to literacy centers for activities that reinforce the skills and concepts introduced during the mini-lessons. They may browse through materials, read with a friend, or write in journals.

Teachers take real-time assessments of student performance, known as running records, by sitting next to a child as he or she reads aloud from a one-page text and recording the errors. The teacher then calculates the percentage of words read correctly and compares that to a predetermined standard. The score indicates the level at which the student reads. If it is not up to grade level, the teacher directs the student to the leveled classroom library books for more practice. The test is repeated every two weeks, at which point the student hopefully is ready to move to the next level.

Leveled books are books geared to a specific level of reading skill and comprehension. Before Achievement Plus and the Literacy Initiative embedded in Saint Paul's Project for Academic Excellence, Saint Paul Public Schools used basal series textbooks that required all children to be on the same page at the same time—literally. Now, teachers use the results of running records to direct students to the material most appropriate for them at the time. Every classroom has a library of books organized by reading level. When teachers meet individually or with small groups to give guided instruction, they use the leveled books. In addition to allowing children to work at their own pace, the practice of designating levels keeps children focused on where they are now and what they need to accomplish by the end of the school year.

### ***The Workshop Approach***

America's Choice uses the workshop format to teach reading, writing, or math; Achievement Plus schools use the approach to teach all subjects. The daily, hour-long workshops occur in the classroom. Regardless of the topic, all workshops begin with a mini-lesson lasting about 10 minutes, during which the teacher explains a specific skill or content and reinforces skills presented previously. Students then work individually or hold one-on-one "conferences" with the teacher, followed by group work or reading and a brief session in which students share what they learned. Students learn to connect ideas across documents by reading several works by the same author or studying a specific genre of writing such as memoir or narrative.

The workshop format helps students build a solid foundation of skills and craft by emphasizing the importance of reviewing, revising, and editing a product until it meets the standard. Workshops also expose children to complex thought processes and reinforce concepts in many different contexts until they become second nature. In that sense, Harvey observes, "The America's Choice design was able to demonstrate for our teachers that all children are capable of doing very rigorous work."

### ***Writing Journals and Reading Logs***

As part of the reading workshops, students keep a personal log of their questions on and reactions to what they read. Teachers and students review the log entries to see how the student's understanding of written material has improved. To develop "a habit of writing," students also keep journals in which they write daily.

## **SPPS MODIFICATIONS TO AMERICA'S CHOICE IN ACHIEVEMENT PLUS SCHOOLS**

Three elements are nonnegotiable: the workshop structure, the behavioral model, and the frequent assessments of students. SPPS has made the following adjustments, however:

- Staff development is delivered to the whole school, not one class at a time, and to everyone including support staff, specialists, and classroom teachers.
- SPPS implemented the model in small increments. For instance, staff worked only on Writer's Workshops for an entire year.
- SPPS decides which training topics should be addressed at various times, based on teachers' development.
- The state assessment is used to set school and classroom targets, in place of the criterion-referenced exam used by America's Choice.
- Teachers help deliver staff development to their peers.
- Students receive incentives and recognition for positive behavior.
- The material used in study groups is selected by school-based design and literacy coaches.

### ***Routines, Rituals, and Artifacts***

Rituals and routines give Achievement Plus schools disciplinary structure. In addition, Achievement Plus schools' classrooms prominently display certain "artifacts" related to the standards. These include: the list of standards; rubrics for evaluating student work; a classroom library organized by reading level and by author, genre, or topic; charts and posters that describe mini-lessons from previous workshops; and collections of students' written work. Classrooms also develop "word walls," a permanent reference list of words that children are studying. Displaying these artifacts ensures that students know exactly what they are expected to do and how their work will be judged.

### ***Principles of Learning***

The academic standards embraced by Achievement Plus complement nine Principles of Learning developed by the Institute for Learning, SPPS' partner in developing strong school leaders. Those principles form the nucleus of Saint Paul's Project for Academic Excellence, the vehicle for taking certain reforms of Achievement Plus schools to scale district-wide:<sup>8</sup>

1. **Organizing for effort**—Everything within the school is organized to support the belief that sustained and directed effort can yield high achievement for all students.
2. **Clear expectations**—Clear standards of achievement and gauges of students' progress toward those standards offer real incentives for students to work hard and succeed.
3. **Fair and credible evaluations**—Tests, exams, and classroom assessments must be aligned to the standards of achievement for these assessments to be fair. Grading must be done against absolute standards rather than on a curve.
4. **Recognition of accomplishments**—Progress points are articulated so that, regardless of entering performance level, every student can meet the criteria for accomplishments often enough to be recognized frequently.

5. **Academic rigor in a thinking curriculum**—In every subject, at every grade level, instruction and learning must include commitment to a knowledge core, high thinking demand, and active use of knowledge.
6. **Accountable talk**—Accountable talk means using evidence that is appropriate to the discipline and that follows established norms of good reasoning.
7. **Socialized intelligence**—Intelligence comprises problem solving and reasoning capabilities along with habits of mind that lead one to use those skills regularly. It is a set of beliefs about one's right and obligation to make sense of the world and one's capacity to figure things out over time.
8. **Self-management of learning**—Students manage their own learning by evaluating feedback they get from others; by bringing their own knowledge to bear on new learning; by anticipating learning difficulties and apportioning their time accordingly; and by judging their progress toward a learning goal.
9. **Learning as apprenticeship**—Mentoring and coaching enable students to undertake extended projects and develop presentations of finished work, both in and beyond the classroom.

### **Professional Development**

Professional development and special resources were not part of the original plan for Achievement Plus; that emphasis evolved after the America's Choice School Design became the model for improving curriculum and instruction. Today, teachers in two Achievement Plus schools are paid for 10 extra professional development days. Five of those days are spent the week before school opens, when teachers learn strategies for conducting reading and writing workshops. The remaining days are parceled out two or three hours at a time, every other week, for special training sessions.

Participation in staff training is mandatory for teachers in Achievement Plus schools, and the extra

<sup>8</sup> Saint Paul Public Schools. (September 2002). "Saint Paul's Project for Academic Excellence Literacy Initiative."

time commitment is specified in their contract. This means that everyone—from classroom teachers to specialists—hears the same message at the same time and has the same expectations, which makes it much easier to hold everyone accountable for success.

The professional development that undergirds Achievement Plus is shaped by five assumptions held by Harvey and Lamb (see box at right). District leaders make training rigorous, fun, and productive. Many sessions are led by well-known national experts, and they are working meetings rather than lectures. For instance, educators who are learning to teach a specific genre of writing will write and discuss their own samples, and teachers participating in intensive Literacy Institutes learn how to analyze a student’s literacy level by reviewing student work. Teachers leave most training sessions with a pile of trade books and the tools they need to use new practices in the classroom.

As balanced literacy took root in Saint Paul, the district restructured all professional development around the skills needed to assess and teach literacy, such as how to take a running record while a student reads at a specified level. Until SPPS adopted a standards-based approach, those assessments were done only by special Reading Recovery teachers, but in 1999 SPPS had its 75 Reading Recovery staff teach their colleagues how to determine a book’s level of difficulty and take running records themselves.

To prepare for the new instructional model, SPPS videotaped exemplary teachers in their classrooms and made the tapes widely available. Teachers observed their colleagues conducting running records and could ask questions while the work unfolded. The schools’ administrators and literacy coaches received training and principals attended sessions on how to help children become independent readers and how to use the previous year’s test results to form instructional plans.

### **Continual Analysis and Use of Data**

Teachers in Achievement Plus schools constantly try to answer the question, “How do you know what you know?” For validation, they examine data from test-

ing, observations, and diagnostic assessments. The information helps define the strategies teachers use, which presumably leads to a continuous cycle of learning and refining.

The strong data orientation in Achievement Plus schools is evident in the very selection of an instructional model based on research and evaluation of best practices. It also is evident in school and classroom behaviors. Teachers collect data frequently through running records and use it to guide instruction. Students analyze and chart data on their own performance. Grade-level achievement charts are displayed in every classroom and throughout the

## **ASSUMPTIONS BEHIND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN SAINT PAUL PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

- Professional educators should be in charge of their careers, not moved around “like chess pieces,” and the central office should do everything possible to facilitate that autonomy.
- Each school has its own culture, and the people who work there must want to work in that environment.
- School staff often play more than one role in the building. A teacher may also be the school’s technology resource, for instance, or the person in charge of developing afterschool clubs—so filling a staff vacancy involves more than simply filling a gap in a classroom.
- School culture must embrace the concept of continuously learning from one’s colleagues. Instead of mandating training on specific topics, SPPS encourages teachers to identify the topics on which they want additional training.
- To make the above assumptions pay off, teachers need opportunities to learn and apply new skills.

building to keep students and teachers focused. Teachers analyze the previous year's test scores of incoming students to see what their strengths and weaknesses are, and they track the current scores of students from last year to learn which instructional strategies worked and which didn't.

Additional data come from evaluation of Achievement Plus. Evaluation of Achievement Plus has been an important aspect of the initiative since its inception. Achievement Plus collaborators and supporters were interested in understanding the effectiveness of the initiative, particularly in improving student performance. An evaluation plan was developed and data have been gathered at Dayton's Bluff since the first operational year of the initiative (1997–98). Data collection includes surveys of students and school staff, achievement test results, and information from school and Achievement Plus records.

In its early stages, the initiative was evaluated by an independent evaluator and Wilder Research Center. Surveys captured data on an array of indicators, and the evaluators reported findings so frequently that district and school leaders felt inundated. Maria J. Lamb's arrival, which coincided with the end of an evaluation grant period, offered a chance to restructure the evaluation around a strategic plan and to narrow the evaluators' focus to the three key strands of Curriculum, Extended Learning, and Learning Supports. Evaluation expenses dropped to a third of their former cost, and the evaluators limited feedback to quarterly reports that SPPS and Achievement Plus could incorporate more easily into mid-course corrections.

Evaluation results have been reported regularly over the past six years on student academic achievement in reading and mathematics, school day attendance, school climate (as rated by students and school staff), staff opinions of Achievement Plus, participation in the Extended Learning program, and Learning Support services. No clear pattern of progress in student performance was seen at Dayton's Bluff in the first four years of Achievement Plus. However, major improvements emerged in the

fifth and sixth years (2001–02 and 2002–03), especially in student academic achievement, attendance, and school climate:<sup>9</sup>

- **Academic Achievement**—State test results (Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments) revealed major improvement in reading and math achievement by Dayton's Bluff students for third- and fifth-graders from 2001–02 to 2002–03. The average percentage of Dayton's Bluff students (who remained in the school during the year) scoring in the proficient range in reading and math across third and fifth grades rose from 22 percent in 2001–02 to 54 percent in 2002–03.

Students' scores improved substantially on the achievement test used by the school district (Metropolitan Achievement Test) between 2000–01 and 2001–02. The percentage of Dayton's Bluff students (who remained in the school during the year) scoring average or above increased by 11 percentage points in reading and by 12 percentage points in math. The district changed achievement tests in 2002–03, from the Metropolitan Achievement Test to the Stanford Achievement Test, making progress from 2001–02 to 2002–03 difficult to determine since the tests are not directly comparable. However, an analysis of results over the year suggested improvement in both reading and math. Specifically, the Dayton's Bluff students had higher growth on average in reading and math than similar students attending other schools in the district. In spring 2003, 63 percent of Dayton's Bluff students scored average or above in reading, and 70 percent did so in math, compared to the national average of 77 percent.

- **Attendance**—Student absenteeism at Dayton's Bluff dropped for two years in a row. The percentage of students absent 10 or more days declined from 36 percent in 2000–01 to 26 percent in 2002–03. The percentage absent 15 or more days declined from 22 percent to 11 percent over the same period.

<sup>9</sup> Achievement Plus. (September 2003). "Achievement Plus Interim Grant Report for The McKnight Foundation."

- School climate**—Each spring students and staff are asked to rate how the school is doing in a variety of areas such as order and discipline, equity and fairness, student achievement motivation, interpersonal relations, leadership and decision-making, parent involvement, school building appearance, and school-community relations. Student school climate ratings declined during the first four years of the initiative but rose in 2001–02 and 2002–03, although they are still below the national average.

Dayton’s Bluff staff ratings of school climate improved sharply from spring 2001 to spring 2002 after declining the previous three years. The improvement from 2001 to 2002 was maintained in 2003. Staff ratings of school climate at Dayton’s Bluff now slightly exceed the national average. Large improvements in staff ratings have been seen in the areas of order and discipline, student achievement motivation, staff expectations of students, principal’s leadership, school building appearance, and school-community relations. Staff ratings of the impact of Achievement Plus have also improved over the past two years. The proportion who agree that Achievement Plus programs and strategies help increase student achievement rose from 38 percent in spring 2001 to 80 percent in spring 2003.

- Extended Learning**—During the 2002–03 school year Dayton’s Bluff offered Extended Learning both before and after school. The morning program was offered five days a week and the afternoon program was offered four days a week. In the second half of 2002–03, daily attendance averaged 22 students in the morning program and 151 in the afternoon program. About half of the students enrolled in the morning program attended 80 percent or more of the time, while two-thirds of the afternoon students did so.

One of the goals of Achievement Plus is to increase the regularity of Extended Learning participation among students with below average academic achievement. The goal is that 40

percent of such students will attend regularly (i.e., at least 80 percent of the time). Results showed that 26 percent of students with below-average achievement attended Extended Learning during the first half of 2002–03, while 39 percent did so during the second half of the year, almost meeting the goal.

- Students’ personal and social well-being**—Students’ responses on surveys that measure school climate showed a slight improvement in interpersonal relations between 2002 and 2003; on a resiliency index, Dayton’s Bluff students showed adequate levels of self-concept, positive outlook, self-efficacy, and cooperation/contribution measures. Self-control, assertiveness, confidence, and family measures received positive responses 54 to 73 percent of the time, which was close to the benchmark of 75 percent. All kindergarten students who needed them received immunizations, 98 percent received physicals either through their own provider or the nurse practitioner at the site, and 87 percent received dental screenings. These services were offered to all students.
- Students’ contribution and citizenship**—Ninety-four percent of Dayton’s Bluff students who regularly attended Extended Learning participated in at least one community service activity. Student ratings of school climate were low compared to a national sample but slightly higher than the school’s previous scores; in 2003, 27 percent of students surveyed rated Dayton’s Bluff as welcoming, orderly, and safe.
- Family support**—Dayton’s Bluff had 15 partnerships in 2003 that gave families access to resources that met their basic needs. About 1,760 people attended family activities at the school. The Family Resource Center served the families of 432 students; the nurse practitioner served 108 students with services such as immunizations, physicals, treatment for illness and injuries, and asthma management education; the mental health provider served 70 students; and 126 students received direct dental services, in addition to the screenings offered to all students.

Over 80 percent of the parents attended parent-teacher conferences in the fall and spring.

## Accountability

One of the keys to Achievement Plus' success is a sense of accountability for children's success that is shared at many levels of authority. At the district level, Superintendent Patricia A. Harvey has been a vocal proponent of the school reforms needed to help all children succeed. Chief Education Officer Maria J. Lamb has direct accountability for shaping the Achievement Plus model, and Chief Accountability Officer Margo Baines tracks the participating schools' progress. All three leaders have put themselves on the front lines of accountability in their relations with community members. During the contentious period of Dayton's Bluff's restructuring, for instance, Lamb and Baines attended site council and community meetings to reassure participants that SPPS cared about their children and would do everything possible to make the reforms as painless as possible.

Baines' role in figuring out what the school district needs to do better has meshed well with Lamb's drive to make Achievement Plus more effective. In 2000–01, when it was clear Achievement Plus had derailed at Dayton's Bluff, the two officers' united front on accountability helped to turn things around. While Lamb focused on flaws in the implementation of a standards-based curriculum, Baines compiled data on student demographic characteristics, attendance, and test scores and ascertained the amount of federal compensatory funds flowing into the school. Jointly, Lamb and Baines were able to mobilize staff from various SPPS departments—testing, school operations and facilities, special education, second language learning, Title I, nutrition services, school nurse support, counseling, and social work—to visit the struggling school and assess its problems.

At the school level, Achievement Plus principals are expected to take responsibility for creating a culture that values the standards and practices of balanced literacy. Thus, for example, they post the “Twelve Rules of Writing” throughout the school and urge students to participate actively in school-wide book

clubs. Achievement Plus principals also take responsibility for understanding and enforcing classroom rituals and routines.

Across the schools, a sense of professionalism for all adults has been infused into the culture. Notes Achievement Plus' Andrew Collins, “Von [Sheppard]'s opening remarks to staff were that people have to collaborate, that we will all be held accountable to the same standard. When you are in this building you are a professional, and if someone has a criticism you take it professionally.”

## Building-Level Flexibility from District Policies

All Saint Paul public schools have some autonomy from the district, but Achievement Plus schools have used their flexibility especially well to create or protect components of the initiative that are crucial to its success. School-level autonomy in Saint Paul dates from 1999, when teachers were negotiating a new contract with SPPS. Teachers wanted to protect the tenure system and control their own placements, and in an effort to support this type of shared decision-making Superintendent Harvey agreed that if a school's teachers reached consensus on something (with very few exclusions) they could take the action they wanted.

That agreement worked to the advantage of Achievement Plus when the district needed to build in extra time for teacher development at Achievement Plus schools, reorganize staff who did not support the district's agenda, or be exempted from a district policy for summer school placements that sent non-America's Choice students to Achievement Plus schools.

SPPS demonstrated flexibility in two other crucial ways. First, when Maria J. Lamb became Executive Director of Achievement Plus she was allowed to position herself outside SPPS but had unprecedented access to Superintendent Harvey and unusual authority over an SPPS program. That staffing structure was crucial, Lamb says, because it provided the time needed to focus on the curriculum, outcomes, and staff alignment. When Lamb became SPPS' Chief Educational Officer it would have been understand-

able to delegate responsibility for Achievement Plus to a deputy, but by giving her the flexibility to retain Achievement Plus leadership the district sent a message that the initiative and its success matters.

Second, SPPS capped Dayton's Bluff enrollment at 450 students—a special waiver that is hard to grant in a district where parents are supposed to be able to choose their children's school. The cap was essential, Lamb says, because it prevented the school from being inundated while still in a fragile stage of development. The district's student placement center, which reports to Margo Baines, now gives enrollment preference to children from the Dayton's Bluff neighborhood and their siblings. When the school reaches capacity (as it did in 2002–03), the district transports the remaining children to other schools.

The cap was difficult to enforce at first, because some parents enrolled their children at the school and bypassed the placement center. School officials now call the placement center when a request comes in rather than automatically enrolling the student.

## Extended Learning Opportunities

Through its Extended Learning services, Achievement Plus seeks to provide “a seamless transition from the school day's instruction to additional tutoring and academic instruction, as well as enrichment activities that let students engage in hands-on learning.”<sup>10</sup> At first, Achievement Plus brought a dizzying array of options into the school through partners as diverse as Camp Fire Boys and Girls, the Hmong Minnesota Pacific Association, and the Minnesota Extension Service.

“Our focus began with providing programming that covered the calendar. We wanted to get as many kids through the doors as possible,” recalls Andrew Collins, Director of Extended Learning. “There was a lot of excitement about Achievement Plus just on the merits of the collaboration and the partners' ability to come together and commit resources to the schools. It was an unprecedented public and private initiative, and that excitement kept programming going in the beginning.”

<sup>10</sup> Achievement Plus. (2000–01). Annual Report.

Despite the value of many Extended Learning partnerships, in 1999–2000 Achievement Plus leaders realized that the vast array was distracting people and financial resources from the overarching goal of school improvement. Achievement Plus staff reevaluated the Extended Learning program, asking how they and their instructors could support classroom teachers.

At first, they thought Extended Learning might purchase or develop a curriculum that supported the school-day program. Achievement Plus staff consulted with classroom teachers and experimented with several options, but they couldn't settle on a package. “Things were changing in the district and school at a rapid pace. We kept evolving, but not really in a meaningful way. We were just changing for change's sake,” Collins says. Worst of all, each teacher and classroom was at a different point instructionally.

Then Maria J. Lamb came to town, bringing a sharper focus on standards-based curriculum and instruction. Suddenly teachers began asking Extended Learning for help tied to specific standards, and the program had a place at the table for children not meeting the standard.

Today, the Extended Learning program uses a similar approach as the school day for behavior management and the workshop model for academic activities. That alignment with the school day makes it easier for Extended Learning to recruit teachers, who can use the after-school program to give students an extra 45 minutes of academic reinforcement. Programs run by non-school staff are better aligned with the priorities of the regular school day, too. For example, after-school tutors coordinated through the East Side Learning Center sponsored by the School Sisters of Notre Dame working at Johnson Achievement Plus Elementary School talk with classroom teachers about their pupils' strengths and weaknesses and use many of the same books and strategies to help the children learn.

Extended Learning operates Monday through Thursday from 3 to 5:30 p.m., about 100 days per year. A typical after-school day at Dayton's Bluff starts with a snack in the cafeteria, where teachers

pick up their students. The program then shifts to classrooms, where children participate in writing, reading, or math workshops. Currently, children who perform below standard in word study skills or reading comprehension go to the same after-school class, where the teacher focuses on that specific skill for two to four weeks before rotating through other instructional areas. The second half of the program is devoted to voluntary homework completion, tutoring, and enrichment activities selected by the students. “We’ve offered everything under the sun,” Collins says: games, arts and crafts, dance, drama, floor hockey, swimming at the YMCA, ice skating, drumming, knitting, cooking, ecology, and service learning. Classroom teachers can choose to work in the Extended Learning programs along with college work-study students and independent contractors (paid by Achievement Plus and the 21st Century Community Learning Center grants).

Collins monitors the quality and consistency of Extended Learning services, ensures that people at each site understand the program, shares good practices across sites by participating in biweekly staff meetings, and constantly visits the schools to talk with principals and school staff. Although Extended Learning has an overall strategic plan, each site (which has its own assistant coordinator/director) also develops a tailored plan.

## Learning Supports

From the beginning, Achievement Plus partners recognized a need to reconnect the schools with their communities in ways that helped children and families reduce barriers to learning. These learning supports include Family Resource Centers, health services and referrals, mental health counseling and referrals, tutoring, and other “safety net” services. For the most part, Achievement Plus creates and manages partnerships to make those services available rather than providing them directly.

Achievement Plus also adapted the Adelman and Taylor framework, developed by UCLA and widely used across the country. This framework is not so much a model as a way to think about serving individual students and improving education systems;

it puts direct services and supports that reduce learning barriers on equal footing with academic curriculum.

The framework focuses on six areas of support: crisis and emergency assistance, parent involvement in education, community involvement in supporting the work of schools, direct services (e.g., diagnosis, individual and group intervention, and prevention), support for teachers (e.g., one-on-one consultations or training by mental health professionals), and support for transitions between schools or grade levels.

The framework calls for a school Resource Coordinating Team to identify supports that already exist in the school, identify gaps and points of overlap, figure out how to reallocate resources, and coordinate service providers. Its members include the principal, Extended Learning coordinator, design coach (i.e., curriculum coordinator), Family Resource Center director, school social worker, and Achievement Plus’ Director of Extended Learning and Director of Student and Family Support. Their combined effort is impressive. In 2002–03, for example, the group at Johnson Achievement Plus Elementary School identified a gap in after-school mathematics support for older students, wrote a grant application, and obtained funding from the school site council to expand a program that could fill the gap.

An Achievement Plus partnership initially provided a counselor and family outreach worker at each of three participating schools. Due to budget cuts at that partner agency, however, those services were scaled back. During the 2003–04 school year, Dayton’s Bluff had a part-time staff person for an early-intervention program and a full-time counselor for Project Kofi (see p. 28) but no licensed therapist or family outreach worker. Johnson Achievement Plus Elementary School had a full-time licensed therapist, a full-time family outreach worker, and a part-time staff person for the early-intervention program.

Achievement Plus offers the following learning supports through collaboration with Wilder Foundation:

- **Project Kofi** serves African-American males in grades 4–6 at Dayton’s Bluff and grades 3–8 at Monroe. Through support groups, social skills training, recreation, and culturally focused activities it builds self-esteem and emphasizes the importance of school success. Kofi counselors consult with teachers and work with families as well as students.
- At Dayton’s Bluff and Johnson Achievement Plus Elementary School, the **Primary Mental Health Project** targets children in kindergarten through third grade who show risk for poor school attachment. Using a model developed by the Children’s Institute at the University of Rochester, staff meet individually with selected students for 30 minutes outside the classroom, once a week for one semester.
- A **Therapist** at Johnson Achievement Plus Elementary School provides screening for Achievement Plus students for mental health and social needs as requested, including depression and Attention Deficit Disorder, and recommends follow-up; provides individual, group, and family therapy; provides classroom sessions focusing on social skills; consults with teachers on crisis plans; and observes students in the classroom. She makes presentations on mental health issues to school staff and responds to requests for assistance with classroom issues, such as violence prevention or anger management. The therapist may screen students who are frequently suspended, absent, or disciplined for underlying problems. She also helps teachers interpret the implications of students’ mental health diagnoses.
- A **Family Outreach Worker** at Johnson Achievement Plus Elementary School makes home visits to parents whose children are struggling in school or at home, at a teacher or parent’s request. She makes referrals to medical services; helps enroll children in insurance plans; conducts workshops for parents and teachers that explain children’s medical conditions and medication; teaches parenting skills; consults with teachers on individual students; works with anx-

ious children on relaxation techniques; and provides classroom sessions focusing on social skills.

Achievement Plus offers the following learning supports through collaboration with various partners:

- The **Eastside Family Center**, through the East Side Neighborhood Development Company, operates the Family Resource Center at Dayton’s Bluff and Johnson Achievement Plus Elementary School. The centers offer resources, referrals, and programming for students and families. Nine community connection workers are based at Johnson Achievement Plus Elementary School and split their time between that school and Dayton’s Bluff to operate the Family Resource Centers located at each school. The Centers provide evening child care and transportation so parents can attend English language classes, school conferences, and ongoing language specific groups. Outreach workers respond to walk-in questions, assess needs, and help families research solutions. The Centers also offer parent education programs and collaborate with the schools on family involvement activities.
- Partnerships with institutions of higher education bring adult role models into the school to give individualized assistance and to expose students to college and career options. At Dayton’s Bluff, for example, **Metropolitan State University** (a community college located a few blocks from the school) arranges for its students, staff, and alumni to read with K–3 students and others who read below grade level. The literacy program is popular with Metro State students, who receive academic credit for their effort, and two months into the 2003–04 school year organizers had already recruited 15 tutors.

Metro State also sponsors a Running Start program for first-graders, who read 21 books during a 10-week period; university students and staff tutor them and host a celebration at the end. A College for Kids program brings fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-graders from Dayton’s Bluff and Johnson Achievement Plus Elementary School to the university campus to “register” for classes,

attend hands-on classes taught by university faculty and students, visit a career fair, and attend a “graduation” ceremony hosted by Metro State’s president. Through another program, university interns help older Dayton’s Bluff students identify issues and solutions in their community. One student group collected more than 800 pounds of food for the local food pantry, where students also volunteered their time.

To facilitate these activities, Metro State staff maintain a small office at Dayton’s Bluff. A staff member is at the elementary school every day. They serve on school committees and teams for community partnership, environmental action, and family involvement—topics that integrate with the things they are already doing.

- **The Community Design Center of Minnesota**, a small nonprofit group that works to revitalize neighborhoods and community organizations, has worked with Dayton’s Bluff Elementary School since 1990. Center staff helped to develop a children’s aerobics class and drum corps at the recreation center and secured scholarships for children to attend programs at the Science Museum of Minnesota. Driven by concerns about children’s health and nutrition, the Center helped create a community garden on a vacant lot near the school and is now establishing four neighborhood “wetlands” to clean runoff water before it flows into the Mississippi River. In collaboration with Metro State, Center staff hold 20 family nights at Dayton’s Bluff during which families cook, eat, and read together.

## PARTNERSHIPS AROUND PHYSICAL INFRASTRUCTURE OFFER ONE TYPE OF LEARNING SUPPORT

Achievement Plus formed two major partnerships that greatly influenced the programming and physical structure of two Achievement Plus schools. Dayton’s Bluff had long shared its property with the city’s Parks and Recreation Department, which maintained a small cinder-block building, playground, and parking lot on one corner. Eventually the recreation department wanted to expand its facility, and state money became available for a youth theater on the site. Those developments occurred just as Achievement Plus was emerging and prompted a decision to expand Dayton’s Bluff as one facility serving both the school system and recreation department. The renovated building has air conditioning, upgraded classroom technology and interior walls, an enclosed library, an 8,900-foot expansion to the school for a new entry and the youth theater, and the 12,000-foot recreational center.

Johnson Achievement Plus Elementary School’s partnership with the East YMCA similarly grew out of mutual interests. In 1997–98, YMCA President Tom Brinsko was looking for a way to revitalize the

organization’s image and reanchor it in the neighborhood. The previous Y was dilapidated and the organization needed a financial infusion. Building on conversations begun earlier by his predecessor and Wilder, Brinsko turned to Tom Kingston for help on both counts. Kingston, meanwhile, wanted a partner who could truly augment the school’s learning opportunities.

Collaboration on the construction of Johnson Achievement Plus Elementary School and the new YMCA did not always go smoothly. Although the state and the YMCA contributed money, the school district raised funds through bond issues, and the county pledged additional support, the project was plagued by cost overruns. When funding fell short, SPPS made up the difference. The final product is impressive, however, and is actively used by 1,250 student, family, or community members. A YMCA employee, stationed on the school side, serves as Extended Learning director for Achievement Plus. Johnson students use the Y for gym activities and swimming lessons; and school leaders and teachers use the YMCA facilities for training.

## IV. Key Components at Dayton's Bluff

In addition to the core components of all Achievement Plus schools, collaborators at Dayton's Bluff identified the following elements as crucial to their success: (1) Strong building-level leadership; (2) efforts to nurture and protect a "teachable environment," (3) appropriate staffing, (4) professional development and extra support for teachers, and (5) a team approach.

### Strong Building-Level Leadership

When Patricia A. Harvey and Maria J. Lamb realized that Dayton's Bluff could not improve without a new principal, they sought a candidate who would not only improve instructional practices but also show respect for the long-disregarded students by holding them to high expectations. They decided to look beyond the usual pool of experienced school administrators to find someone with very specific qualities: unstinting passion and commitment, a belief that change was possible and a desire to be part of it, the ability to foster teamwork, and the ability to inspire students and teachers.

Several schools were seeking principals at the time, and each site-based team sent the superintendent a list of their top choices. At five schools, the same name surfaced somewhere in the top three choices: Von Sheppard. It was a nontraditional choice, because Sheppard was the assistant principal of a secondary school. But in that role Sheppard, a former athlete, had perfected an image that was simultaneously imposing and gentle. As a successful African-American male, he was a welcome role model to students accustomed to schools headed by Anglo women. And with teachers, he proved humble about his lack of knowledge on some aspects of education theory. "He takes it upon himself to learn things he hasn't been exposed to," says one close colleague.

Harvey had had her eye on Sheppard for some time, but before offering him the Dayton's Bluff job she emphasized how hard it would be to restart the school on the right track. News reporters descended

on the school weekly. Community representatives wanted immediate attention. Sheppard would need extensive professional development. Even though most of the staff had been selected, there were still vacancies to be filled. And the Achievement Plus partners who had invested a lot of money in Dayton's Bluff needed reassurance that the reorganization would succeed. Despite the challenges—or perhaps because of them—Sheppard asked to be sent to Dayton's Bluff, where teachers now describe him as part principal and part coach.

Assistant Principal Yolanda Murphy, an experienced teacher, coach, and assistant principal, joined Dayton's Bluff in 2001 after she grew tired of working in suburban schools. She wanted to focus on high-risk children, and Dayton's Bluff certainly had plenty of them. Murphy instantly felt at home. Like

### LEADERSHIP STRATEGY FOR DAYTON'S BLUFF

- Know what others before you have done.
- Have a vision for change and be able to articulate it to staff and community members.
- Celebrate small and large successes.
- Treat all teachers like superstars; they will rise to the occasion.
- Constantly work to motivate the people around you.
- Remember that "it's about the kids, not us."
- Demonstrate what collaboration and teamwork mean.
- Give teachers opportunities to design and lead professional development as well as receive it.
- Treat everyone with respect.

Sheppard, she was a former athlete and coach who had learned to build teamwork and consensus. Sheppard became Dayton's Bluff's inspirational leader and visionary; Murphy became the onsite architect of the structures and procedures that would make that vision a reality.

A cornerstone of Sheppard and Murphy's shared leadership is their vow always to present a united front. "If people approach one of us asking questions about the other person, we tell them to ask the other person directly so they can't pit us against each other. If we have disagreements, we never discuss them in front of the teachers or kids," Murphy says.

## A "Teachable Environment"

Von Sheppard describes a teachable environment quite simply as one in which teachers can teach and students can learn. For a first-time principal, however, the task of creating that environment in a troubled urban school, with just weeks to go before the first day of school, was anything but simple.

Accompanied by a community organizer, Sheppard went knocking on neighbors' doors. He introduced himself and told people that things were going to change, that he believed in their children, and that when they visited his office they would be welcomed. Sheppard told his secretary that all visitors were to be helped as quickly as possible and with a smile. "A lot of parents in this neighborhood are not treated well when they go into corporations or stores," Sheppard explains. "Good customer service is crucial. It sets the tone for the rest of the visit."

Sheppard also spent time getting to know the newspaper and TV reporters who peppered him with questions. He told them he would have a building full of "superstar teachers"—and when the teachers heard that, they had no choice but to rise to the challenge.

Sheppard credits the rituals and routines inherent in America's Choice with helping to create a teachable environment because children know what to expect from classroom to classroom and from year to year. The workshop model also fosters a healthy learning

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*"We made the decision to bring teachers to Dayton's Bluff who were as committed as we were to transforming the school."*

—Maria J. Lamb  
Saint Paul Public Schools

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environment by keeping students focused on academically rigorous work, which tends to calm them down, and by giving them frequent opportunities to share their thoughts.

Assistant Principal Murphy plays a strong role in maintaining a teachable environment. As the person in charge of scheduling, she looks for the times of day when the most disruptions occur and tries to restructure them so children don't have opportunities to make bad choices (or are "corralled" into making good ones). She begins every school day at the top of the entrance stairs, greeting each child by name and dispensing hugs and reassurance. Students who enter before school starts may sit along the main wall reading or completing homework, and Sheppard or Murphy often chat with them there.

Murphy assigns the special education social worker and school counselor to early morning hall duty so they have a chance to catch problems early, and the specialist for emotionally or behaviorally disturbed children monitors the breakfast room. "We try to help kids make a smooth transition from a possibly traumatic morning at home to a good school day," Murphy explains. Being greeted by the welcoming committee also sends a message to all children that adults care about them and want them in school. "That's half the battle of getting them in on time," Murphy says.

## Appropriate Staffing

Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of Dayton's Bluff turnaround story is the virtually total change of staff that occurred in 2001–02. Prior faculty members weren't necessarily bad teachers, observers say, but they had trouble understanding or committing to the standards-based model and/or the more open relationship with parents and community members that Achievement Plus entailed. Many preferred to teach the way they had always taught, and some

viewed their classrooms as private kingdoms over which they should have sole authority. With only a few classrooms using America's Choice, the school couldn't produce a critical mass of students familiar with the literacy-building concepts.

SPPS and Achievement Plus leaders therefore decided to change the staffing of Dayton's Bluff to ensure that the school was populated by people who weren't afraid of change, could alter the way they think and act, could work as a team, and were committed to

## A TEACHABLE ENVIRONMENT MAKES A DIFFERENCE

**Rachel**,\* whose third-grade son has trouble managing his anger, likes the fact that Dayton's Bluff students are no longer allowed to tease and bait each other. She also appreciates the faculty's firm but polite handling of her son when he acts out. "They don't yell at him. They talk to him like a person," she says. After years of finding or dodging trouble, the boy has found a talent for words and dreams of becoming a professional writer. When Rachel told a teacher she had found a therapist to help her son with anger management, the teacher agreed to have him evaluated at school so he might receive services there, too. If that happens, Rachel says, she might be able to use the outside therapist "for family stuff." At any rate, she continues, "Now that I've got people here who are going to help me, I don't feel alone. I think it's brought my blood pressure down."

**Audrey's\*** son, a sixth-grader, has attended Dayton's Bluff since kindergarten. Although he read below grade level for several years, the school's literacy-intensive activities have brought him almost up to standard and he now reads at home every night. Audrey has also found support at the school's Family Resource Center during various ups and downs in her life. When she was out of work, she used the Center's phone and job listings to find new employment, and she crafted a resume on the Center's computer. When the poor

condition of her apartment triggered the children's asthma, Audrey sought help from Center staff. Within a week, they had helped her locate and move into in a better-maintained apartment.

**Rachel and Audrey** tick off a litany of small courtesies shown by the school that add up to a big improvement in parent-school relationships. They're allowed to eat breakfast with their children in the cafeteria, which sets a positive tone for the school day. Staff learn which child belongs to which parent, and at the end of cold days they let the kids wait indoors until the right car pulls up. Teachers call home to check on sick students. Teachers and administrators explain about the standards that students must meet and enlist parents' help in reinforcing the message.

Last year, when a group of fifth-grade boys became disruptive, the principal called a conference for parents, children, and teachers and gave everyone a chance to express him or herself. And when classmates teased Audrey's son about his weight and he responded aggressively, the principal intervened with empathy and practical advice. That positive attention "gave my son security about himself," Audrey says.

*\*Names have been changed.*

the program design. Clearly, a nearly wholesale restaffing would not be popular with teachers. But the planners had three factors working in their favor. First, SPPS had a long-standing, positive relationship with the Saint Paul Federation of Teachers. Union leaders and district administrators share a belief that low-performing schools reflect badly on teaching, and neither wants that to happen.

Second, SPPS had a provision in its labor contract that established an imaginary “experimental zone” around the three Achievement Plus schools. The zone had no legal basis, but it represented an agreement among the district superintendent, area superintendent, and teachers’ union that SPPS could make changes in the Achievement Plus schools without repercussions or fears they would lead to similar changes district-wide unless they proved successful.

Third, SPPS had Richard Kreyer, the district’s head of human resources and a skillful labor negotiator. Kreyer reminded union leaders of Dayton’s Bluff’s dire standing in the city’s accountability system. He praised some of the school’s teachers but noted that others did not support the selected reforms—and even those who embraced the model would need much more professional development to make it work. Kreyer asked to increase the work year for Dayton’s Bluff teachers to incorporate 10 additional staff development days annually (with a waiver stipulating that those days would not count toward tenure). Because the plan would increase the work year, all teaching jobs would have to be reposted and teachers would have to reapply. In doing so, the teachers would consciously commit to the principles of Achievement Plus and to standards-based curriculum and instruction. Current teachers could interview for their jobs, but they would compete against other candidates. Teachers who didn’t stay at Dayton’s Bluff would choose or be moved to another Saint Paul school.

The union was skeptical. If it proved successful to “shut down” a school and force teachers to reapply, wouldn’t principals everywhere try to do so? And if it succeeded, wouldn’t people take it as proof that the school’s past failures belonged to the teachers?

Kreyer had an answer: the principal would also have to reapply, so it would be clear that this was a complete reorganization of an unusually troubled school.

“We didn’t talk about closing down and reconstituting the school but rather about changing the job requirements,” Kreyer notes. “We didn’t say we [replaced] people because they were bad teachers, we said we were hiring people who were excited about the philosophy of the school. We didn’t berate the people we didn’t select; people could walk away with their heads held up.”

A team composed of Maria J. Lamb, district human resources and administrative representatives, parents, community representatives, and teachers interviewed and selected the new staff. They left some positions open so the incoming principal could hire people who fit his style and were loyal to him. On the last day of the existing contract, teachers learned whether they would be returning in 2001–02.

That summer, school and Achievement Plus staff swept through the school preparing a welcome for the new staff. They pulled down curtains to let the light stream in. On Achievement Plus’ dime they ordered rugs, easels, bookshelves, books, and hundreds of plastic bins to organize teaching materials. They installed bulletin boards and covered them with bright purple paper. Finally, the week before school started, the entire school staff met for five days of bonding and professional development.

In a room at the newly opened Johnson Achievement Plus Elementary School site that had a spectacular view of the city, teachers sat around circular tables covered with white linen. A national consultant led an exciting session on writing instruction, and the new principal gave an inspirational speech. Through it all Maria J. Lamb kept an unusually low profile. “It was clear that I had done my job and needed to step aside. The new administration needed time to create their own culture and community,” she recalls. For his part, Von Sheppard set the tone for the staff by making it clear he would not tolerate the “toxic attitudes” that had prevailed among teachers.

## Professional Development and Extra Support for Teachers

After the staffing reorganization, two-thirds of the teachers at Dayton's Bluff were first-time or inexperienced teachers who needed guidance and support—and even the remaining veterans needed extra training on the model for standards-based curriculum, assessment, and data analysis.

The added professional development that Dayton's Bluff teachers received came through Achievement Plus. In 2001–02, the content and format of training was determined either by America's Choice (which provides three years of teacher training for sites that purchase the model) or by Maria J. Lamb. Thus, for example, when Lamb observed teachers having trouble with classroom discipline she arranged for training sessions in Responsive Classroom techniques, paid for by Achievement Plus.

The school's literacy and (curriculum) design coaches, meanwhile, had control over five additional days of on-site professional development. At first “every room was a model classroom,” says the design coach, who demonstrated and observed practices throughout the school. As soon as possible, however, she shifted from one-on-one coaching to group sessions to reach the largest possible audience. A 12-year veteran of Dayton's Bluff as a classroom and Reading Recovery teacher, she spent much of 2001–02 building new relationships with staff, setting high expectations, and teaching the workshop structure.

In the summer 2002, the district sponsored a Literacy Institute at Johnson Achievement Plus Elementary School that teachers from all three Achievement Plus schools attended. Dayton's Bluff's literacy coach and design coach followed up with on-site guidance and support.

The professional development provided by America's Choice, which ended in 2002–03, was replaced by capacity-building activities embedded in the district's new Saint Paul's Project for Academic Excellence under the Office of Instructional Services. SPPS invested in strengthening school leadership by sending Von Sheppard to leadership institutes, spe-

cial sessions at the Institute for Learning in Pittsburgh, and district-wide training sessions for new principals. Maria J. Lamb also opened Dayton's Bluff to visits from teachers across the district who needed to observe good literacy practices in action.

The design and literacy coaches now spend two hours every other week training staff on such topics as examining student work and test results; developing grade-wide lesson plans; taking a running record; assigning reading levels to books; creating a standards-oriented bulletin board; and teaching test-taking strategies. They research best practices for the topic, present them to staff, and walk around the room giving tips as teachers practice the techniques. They also ask teachers who develop their own good practices or who attend conferences outside the school to lead training sessions.

## Team Approach

Teachers at Dayton's Bluff work in pairs, usually matching an experienced teacher with a new one. Teaming is useful because America's Choice does not prescribe a curriculum, just an overarching instructional model. Together, the teachers identify what students need and how best to give it to them.

The team concept extends to grade-level meetings, where teachers create a learning plan for every child (similar to the Individual Education Plans devised for children in special education programs). Then, with help from the literacy and design coaches, they select strategies to help the student(s) move ahead—at a personal level, at the whole-grade level, and within specific programs, such as Extended Learning—and develop lesson plans.

## Costs

The people involved in turning around Dayton's Bluff are fond of saying that the main cost is in human energy and relationship building, but the financial expense has also been substantial. Major cost categories for Achievement Plus include:

- Extra professional days for teachers
- Salaries for staff and instructors in the Extended Learning program

- Dental, health, mental health, family support, and community outreach services (much of which are borne by the agencies that provide them)

To pay for these components, SPPS and the Wilder Foundation had to blend funding streams for academic and family support services, which required

some fiscal flexibility. When Achievement Plus began, Achievement Plus schools cost 15 to 16 percent more to operate than other schools, on average. Now that the spectrum of services has been pared down to a manageable size, Kingston estimates that the annual cost of an Achievement Plus school is about 9 percent more than the average budget.

# V. Looking Back: Lessons and Observations

It is too early to declare complete victory at Dayton's Bluff Achievement Plus Elementary School. Test scores are improving notably but not in all subjects and grades, and they may rise and fall many more times as the school tries to institutionalize and sustain its early success. Still, the future looks very bright. As attention now turns to how Achievement Plus might help other schools in the district, the Dayton's Bluff experience has several lessons to offer about necessary strategies, opportunities, and resources; turning points; and the value added by the initiative.

## Necessary Strategies, Opportunities, and Resources

What does it take to successfully implement an initiative like Achievement Plus in a struggling public school? Collaborators involved with Dayton's Bluff offer the following advice:

### *... For Initiative and Program Design*

- **Base the reforms on standards and proven practices for achievement and behavior.** Clearly articulated standards, and research-based practices, help students understand expectations and organize their efforts toward a goal, and they ensure consistency across classrooms and grade levels.
- **Focus first on curricular reform.** The school must have a strong, comprehensive, cohesive educational model, and teachers and administrators must understand the model and believe strongly in its effectiveness.
- **Make sure each component aligns with an overarching strategy.** All programs and services within the school—including but not limited to the education reform initiative—must be completely aligned with the district's action plan and must support every element of the action plan.

- **Use Extended Learning opportunities to extend and reinforce the initiative's reach.** Align after-school practices with those used during the school day to maximize their impact.
- **Go with the flow.** Especially in Extended Learning programming, be flexible about altering hours of service, training procedures, instructional models, and other features as the school's own programming changes.

### *... For Staffing and Leadership*

- **Secure top-level support for the planned reform.** Make sure the district superintendent is fully and actively committed to the initiative; embed the strategy in the district's action plan.
- **Hire caring teachers and staff who are committed to the instructional model and have expertise in their content area.**
- **Hire strong, but not necessarily traditional, principals and train them as front-line instructional leaders.** Principals must stand behind teachers when they are challenged, communicate well, foster teamwork and cohesion, and hold the line on expectations.
- **Provide extensive professional development on the standards** and how to shape instruction around them, for both teachers and school administrators. Help teachers learn, experiment with, and discuss the best instructional practices for achieving the standards. Form close relationships with the people who understand the curriculum and are responsible for teacher training, such as literacy and design coaches, because they are an important conduit to the classroom.
- **Give leaders as much freedom as possible to implement new, innovative strategies.**

### *... For Initiative Management*

- **Establish clear lines of authority** and give the authority real “teeth.” Someone has to be designated to make tough decisions about the initiative, and that person needs the status and latitude to enforce them. A partnership committee may discuss issues and solutions, but it is a single leader who calls the shots.
- **Allow an agent outside the school system to spearhead and champion the model in the beginning** but work to embed leadership in the school system as the initiative matures.
- **Intervene with troubled schools early, before drastic steps are necessary.** Create a school district and community that are alert to the problems and committed to creating the best possible environment for teaching and learning.
- **After the start-up period, make sure the budget is aligned with realistic, long-term financial expectations.**
- **Keep lines of communication open.** Be willing to participate in every meeting to which you are invited. Explain how the changes you seek will benefit everyone.

### *... For Broad Ownership and Buy-In*

- **Make sure everyone buys into the selected model for curriculum and instruction—** principals, teachers, students, and parents.
- **Give all essential stakeholders a place at the table and an authentic role to play.** At the same time, recognize that all participants don’t necessarily have an equal stake in the initiative. It is unrealistic to expect that all partners and stakeholders will play equally active roles at all times.
- **Begin community discussions without a final plan.** Community members need to help identify the problem, devise a solution, and develop the agenda in order to feel that their effort is making a difference. Involve community and district councils early on, and urge them to share the concept with their constituents.

- **Make sure community groups are invested in the partnership.** “We care about these kids. Our focus is on engaging children in their community in a meaningful way,” states one nonprofit director.
- **Cultivate the support of “influential elites” and public champions** such as the mayor, county manager, school superintendent, and deputies of public agencies so the initiative becomes (and remains) a priority for them. Constantly supply them with information and opportunities to get involved.
- **Help collaborators and stakeholders visualize very concretely what the possibilities for improvement are.** It’s hard to accept responsibility for something one can’t envision, and without personal commitment it is very difficult to achieve lasting results.

### *... For Partnerships*

- **Be strategic about partnerships.** “Full-service” doesn’t mean bringing every available service into the school. Clarify each partner’s goals and make sure they are well aligned. Secure the support of leaders at the top of the partnering organizations.
- **Treat everyone, but especially teachers and union representatives, with respect.** Educators are crucial allies. As one district administrator notes, “These 42,000 kids are taught by 3,600 teachers. If we can’t get the teacher leadership to support [changes], we’ve lost the people who actually touch the kid.”

### *... For Expansion Beyond Initial Sites*

- **Translate site-specific reforms into strategies that can be expanded across the school system.** Don’t expect the model to be replicated wholesale, however. Design and evaluate the reform in such a way that specific strategies and impacts can be reproduced, understood, and embedded in district-wide systems.

## Turning Points

Looking back on the path Dayton's Bluff Achievement Plus Elementary School took to a teachable environment, with all that entails, several turning points are apparent. Beginning after the arrival of Superintendent Harvey, the stages and events that significantly defined or altered Achievement Plus are as follows:

- 1. Refinement of the Achievement Plus initiative and recruitment of Maria J. Lamb (1999–2000).**

The decisions by Tom Kingston and Patricia A. Harvey to reframe the Achievement Plus executive director's role, hire Maria J. Lamb for the post, and enforce a more rigorous, uniform application of the standards-based curriculum marked a major shift in leadership dynamics. Achievement Plus became a school-driven project with the Wilder Foundation concentrating on fundraising and complementary work, such as the housing redevelopment effort around Johnson Achievement Plus Elementary School. With the physical renovations complete and Achievement Plus firmly focused on academic matters, the city and county partners also dropped back to a passive support role. The new arrangement soon demonstrated that widespread school reform flows from academic improvement. Kingston's insistence on the changes rocked the Achievement Plus partnership temporarily but in the end probably prevented the initiative from dying on the vine.
- 2. Agreement between SPPS and the teachers' union to install new staff at Dayton's Bluff (2000–01).**

Everyone agrees that Dayton's Bluff could not have turned around without having a new principal and teachers. The restaffing process could have been very contentious and hostile, however, which might have derailed the entire initiative. The administration's careful handling of the message on the need for change, and its collaborative stance toward the union, defused that potential.
- 3. Enforcement of behavioral standards in classrooms and throughout the school building (2001–02).**

By immediately establishing a chain of command in the school and making it clear that adults, not children, ran the building, Von Sheppard and Yolanda Murphy set the tone for reform. At the same time, they sent a strong message that the adults were there because they cared about the children. When students complained about the changes, administrators talked with them about why people weren't happy and why they were trying to do things differently. That effort helped turn the tide of resistance.

Adoption of the Responsive Classroom model of classroom management had a similar effect. Under that model, by the time a student reached the principal's office and was sent home the student had had half a dozen opportunities to alter his or her behavior. "When parents realized that, they understood we were trying everything within our power to help their child learn," Sheppard says. "That's when we got parents on our side."
- 4. Transfer of Maria J. Lamb to a leadership position within SPPS (2001–02).**

When Maria J. Lamb became Chief Education Officer for SPPS, some of her elevated status rubbed off on Achievement Plus. As the district's head of curriculum and instruction, professional development, special education, and English Language Learner programs in addition to Achievement Plus, she has a lot on her plate—but she also has a unique chance to promote the initiative very publicly and to infuse its values into almost everything that happens in schools. Just as importantly, Achievement Plus is now as firmly embedded in the school system as it could possibly be, which gives it the greatest chance for sustainability.
- 5. Teachers report several turning points:**
  - Opening week 2001–02, when they walked into a newly rejuvenated and well-stocked school. "We felt we were on a fresh page, a new beginning.

That helped convince us that it was going to work, that we weren't building on layer of layer of bad stuff," says one teacher.

- When children's behavior improved. Teachers started to say, "OK, I can teach now," and they focused on academics rather than discipline.
- After all teachers received training on writing instruction. "That's what got us on the same page," a teacher says. "When children see the same thing in each class it gives them unity, familiarity, a sense that they can do it."
- When the 2001–02 test scores were published and people realized that Dayton's Bluff students had the largest gains of any school in the district.

### **Value Added by Achievement Plus**

The leadership, financial support, and social capital that the Achievement Plus initiative provided was integral to the turnaround of Dayton's Bluff. It made

many things possible, from staffing and training to extensive classroom libraries. When the reorganization of Dayton's Bluff produced a building full of new faces, Principal Von Sheppard turned to Andrew Collins, Achievement Plus Director of Extended Learning, for guidance. "He played a key role in my understanding of the lay of the land—Achievement Plus, the community, the key players," Sheppard says. "It was our ability to think creatively and innovatively with Achievement Plus that moved us forward." On a more abstract level, Achievement Plus demonstrated that entities other than the school system play an important role in enhancing educational settings for young children and their families.

Some community players questioned the prominent role of the Wilder Foundation in Achievement Plus, suggesting that the organization is focused more on social services than education or community empowerment. But even those observers concede that Wilder's powerful position in the city was a crucial force behind the initiative.

## VI. Looking Ahead: Challenges and Opportunities

The implementation of Achievement Plus looks very different across the three schools. At Dayton’s Bluff Achievement Plus Elementary School, which restarted its participation in the initiative with a cadre of teachers committed to the work, improvement has been almost palpable. At John A. Johnson Achievement Plus Elementary School, which started from scratch and was designed as a demonstration site, success has been tempered by the pressures of being a school constantly on display. And at Monroe Achievement Plus Community School, where Achievement Plus attempted to change the practices of a veteran and confident faculty, progress has been much slower.

The best features of Achievement Plus are spreading to other SPPS schools. “We now have all K–8 district schools coming together around the instructional strategies we honed in the three Achievement Plus schools,” Patricia A. Harvey noted in a videotaped story on the initiative. The Saint Paul school system has embraced the concept of intensive professional development for teachers and principals, which will continue to give Achievement Plus a boost. But the students and their families continue to be very needy, and diminishing public resources will inevitably affect the schools. Dayton’s Bluff now has momentum, and no one wants to stand in its way. But even as the school has become more than the sum of its parts, some nagging questions remain. Are the changes sustainable? Does the Achievement Plus concept have “legs”? And can it be grown into a district-wide initiative?

Teachers on the front lines of Dayton’s Bluff say the changes feel deep but still fragile. “A negative attitude could come back very quickly,” one says. The teachers worry that Von Sheppard’s success will lead him

to another job, and without him the school will revert to its past. Others share the same concern about Maria J. Lamb. Sheppard and Lamb insist the changes will stick, but not without continued leadership and professional development and support for the students and their families.

Lamb observes that it takes at least three to six years for school reforms to become self-sustaining. Achievement Plus will need to keep its leaders, partners, and resources on board at least that long to ensure success. In particular, the initiative will need to keep challenging and developing teachers, Lamb says.

Maintaining the necessary level of funding may be the most difficult challenge to sustainability. Current economic conditions have made the philanthropic community more fiscally conservative. Consequently, Achievement Plus leaders will have to make hard decisions about what to continue in the future. Some community partners have already eliminated some of their positions located at the schools, including much-needed mental health counselors, in response to budget cuts.

Tom Kingston hopes to package and market the Achievement Plus concept so it does survive indefinitely. Meanwhile, the standards-based instructional model—including the use of workshops, writing journals, and professional development—has spread from the Achievement Plus schools to all SPPS elementary and middle schools through Saint Paul’s Project for Academic Excellence. A principal who has experienced firsthand what Achievement Plus can do now speaks for many when he says, “What’s happening here is much more than a reform model. It’s a way of life.”

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