

Challenging The Status Quo:

The Journey From a So-So School to an Effective One

BY MICHAEL G. ENGLAND



Pastor Mark Johnson (left) and Principal Michael England



South Bend Junior Academy faculty

We Were There—South Bend Junior Academy Then

South Bend Junior Academy (SBJA) is located in South Bend, Indiana, and is supported by one constituent church. The grade levels in this three-teacher school are kindergarten through second grade, third through fifth grade, and sixth through eighth grade. Enrollment varies from 45 to 50 pupils.

In 1994, the school faced two major problems: declining enrollment and nonpayment of tuition. To discuss ways to resolve these problems, the SBJA board established, at the recommendation of Pastor Mark Johnson, the School Study Committee (SSC). The result was a joint venture between the board and the school, a vital partnership in the SDA school system. At SBJA, the SSC consisted of three church-board members, three school-board members, and the pastor, who acted as chairman. The team set out to study three areas of the current system: (1) windows of opportunity, (2) strengths, and (3) weaknesses. They also sought to define what changes needed to be made and how to bring them about.

Windows of Opportunity

The SSC identified several questions that needed to be answered before they could address the subject of change:

1. Who are our potential students, and what are their needs?
2. Once we have answered question No. 1, how do we find the students and meet their needs?
3. What corporate vision is shared by the school board, staff, parents, and church family?

Strengths

Some of the major strengths that the SSC identified were as follows:

- Seventy-five years of strong commitment to Christian education.
- A dedicated teaching staff.
- A church constituency that financially supports the school.
- An excellent, centrally located school plant with the capacity for growth.
- The public sector's interest in effective Christian education.

Weaknesses

The SSC identified the following major weaknesses:

- The school board functioned only in an advisory capacity. This group needed to take the lead in planning, reviewing performance, and requiring accountability.
- The Home and School Association was not functioning. Therefore, there was no arena in which parents and teachers could interact.
- There was no visible, dynamic spokesperson to serve as liaison between the school and the community.
- School spirit was lacking.
- Academic performance was perceived as mediocre.
- The school board and the teaching staff did not communicate with each other.

The major obstacle to overcome was the adversarial relationship between the school board and the teaching staff. In its advisory capacity, the board members charted plans that the teachers did not take seriously because they saw no value in making the changes. They perceived the board's suggestions as creating more work for them without any resulting benefits. Through a series of four meetings, the SSC consulted with staff, students, parents, and church members to draft a mission statement that everyone could uphold.

At this point, we must stop and consider the key role that certain people play in making a paradigm shift in an SDA school. In the case of SBJA, the pastor and the school-board chairperson were the catalysts that jolted the church board, school board, and church

We selected for immediate action the suggestions that could be most readily implemented.

family out of their comfortable status quo into the slightly uncomfortable but more dynamic uncertainty of continual self-renewal and self-improvement.

On a continuing basis, beginning with the establishment of the SSC, Pastor Mark Johnson has identified visionaries who are dedicated to Christian education, and has sought to have these individuals nominated to serve on the school board. The school board now consists of a psychologist, computer programmer, computer engineer, public school teacher, retired teacher, student teacher, executive secretary, periodon-

tist, and physician. The chair, Mariellyn Hill, is the administrator of a retirement center where she supervises more than 200 employees. In addition to managerial skills, she has had extensive experience in staff development and is adept at designing plans and carrying them out successfully. As a group with a common goal, the board members bring with them a wealth of personal experiences, professions, and opinions as they consider school-related issues.

The SSC enlisted the aid of nearby Andrews University, in Berrien Springs, Michigan, in getting to the core of SBJA's problems. To that end, William Green, professor of teacher education and chair of the department of teaching and learning, and a team of researchers did extensive interviews with the school's teachers and administrators, as well as several students.

Three recurring themes became apparent: (1) Declining enrollment was the root of the school's problems; (2) conditions at the school often left teachers feeling isolated; and (3) the school lacked a clearly stated and understood mission. These issues were addressed during the 1994-1995 school year.

The SSC's role ended at this point.



Michael England helps students with concept-mapping.

The members had done an excellent job of defining the problems so that they could be addressed.

The Journey Continues

When I became principal in August 1994, I felt overwhelmed by the needs: arranging for building repairs, revising the curriculum, developing and implementing a staff-development plan, marketing the school, developing and implementing a way to communicate effectively with parents and constituents, writing a school handbook, adding computer technology to the

programs are in place. A strong home-and-school program unites the home, school, and church and helps parents develop a positive working relationship with the teachers. The financial base is solid, and the conference fully supports the new program. We are at the end of a long journey.

That was the four-year projection. Now, how could we actually make that vision a reality? We were ready to take the second giant step.

Change comes slowly, especially in the beginning. The pastor, school-board chair, and I took the broad view,

immediate action the suggestions that could be most readily implemented, such as scheduling time during the school year for staff development, improving communication between parents and teachers, and marketing the school's plans to constituents.

Beginning the Upward Climb

As the 1994-1995 school year came to a close, South Bend Junior Academy was well on its way to reaching the 1998 vision. By May, we had accomplished the following goals:

- We initiated a Child Study Team¹ that meets regularly to prevent and resolve academic, social, and behavioral problems that hinder student growth. The pastor and I volunteered to serve on this team, as did a psychologist, physician, social worker, and teacher, a combination that provides the multidisciplinary approach necessary for problem-solving. The team recommends courses of action, then presents them to the school board, which typically approves them. This method alleviates much of the pressure that would otherwise fall on the teacher, principal, school-board chair, and pastor.

- We invited professors from the School of Education at Andrews University to present new findings about the learning process. After each session, the speakers took questions from the students, parents, and teachers in the audience.

- We purchased five new computers with built-in CD-ROMs for the upper grades. We put in an additional telephone line to access the Internet. During the winter, we sold fruit to raise funds for a television and VCR for each classroom, and a cable-TV connection.

- We wrote and published a new school handbook.

- We installed air-conditioning.

Reaching Greater Heights

One of our primary goals was to move from a teacher-centered school to a student-centered one. Accordingly, during the second year of our four-year plan, after meeting some of our other objectives, we focused on staff development. The key to student growth is ed-



Eighth-grade algebra students use math manipulatives.

classrooms, and holding strategic-planning meetings. The school-board chair, pastor, and I met to formulate a four-year plan to accomplish these goals.

First, we visualized what we would see when we walked into South Bend Junior Academy in autumn 1998:

The learning environment is colorful and comfortable. The rooms have brightly painted walls, and murals decorate the hallways. The students are enthusiastically interacting with one another as they work together at tables and learning centers. There are five computers in each classroom. Another teacher has been hired to accommodate the increased enrollment, and volunteers from the church community teach mini-courses such as cycling, cooking, sewing, and gymnastics. Outreach pro-

grams are in place. A strong home-and-school program unites the home, school, and church and helps parents develop a positive working relationship with the teachers. The financial base is solid, and the conference fully supports the new program. We are at the end of a long journey. We took our draft to the board in November and met with the teaching staff in December. Our purpose for the December meeting was threefold: (1) to share our ideas; (2) to discuss issues, strategies, concerns, and initiatives; and (3) to anticipate potential problems in implementing the plan. With a six-foot-long submarine sandwich to sustain us, we were ready to begin.

We formed three subgroups: curriculum and instruction, plant maintenance and custodial services, and recruitment. The subgroups met independently for one hour, then rejoined the larger group. As each subgroup reported, the ideas were recorded on large sheets of paper. We then selected for

ucator growth. When teachers and staff work together, they grow together and the school is more successful. For example, when teachers join study groups and take part in peer coaching, the proportion of teachers who transfer the content of the training to classroom practice is 75 to 90 percent. When the entire faculty is required to take part, however, the transfer rate approaches 100 percent.² Without study-group peer coaching, the implementation rate for even enthusiastic volunteers can be very low. But when the entire workplace is actively involved, the camaraderie provides powerful social support for teachers to change the curriculum and practice new strategies.

The school board and teaching staff identified three requirements for reaching our staff-development goals: (1) Time had to be allotted during the school day for staff training (after-school and weekend hours were not even considered); (2) all staff members had to be held accountable for implementing the techniques that they were learning (implementing cooperative learning in the classroom was the first task of the study groups); and (3) allotting \$2,100 in the budget for professional growth seminars.

We delayed the start of school by a week to gain the necessary time to structure the coming year's plan. During that planning period, the teachers and other staff defined the cooperative-learning strategies they would use and developed specific activities. The theme for the school year, "Chain of Friendship," was chosen to create school spirit while increasing cooperation among the students. Whenever a student did a kind act for another student, the person who performed the act described it on a strip of paper that became a link in a chain. The classes combined their chains into one long one, which is periodically displayed at the church.

After spending five days setting the stage, the staff set aside one full day a month to plan, practice, and share cooperative-learning strategies. The teachers kept a record of when they used each strategy or technique to serve as a



School theme banner

basis for discussion, as well as a measure of accountability.

Cresting the Hill

Parents, teachers, and staff were excited yet somewhat apprehensive when we began to implement the new plan. Several people cynically asserted that this was just a passing fad, not a permanent solution. Surprisingly, most of the opposition came from the students—especially those in the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades, who had not previously been involved in a variety of teaching activities and strategies and who perceived themselves as guinea pigs in the change process. Getting the cooperation of the school board, the church board, and the constituency was easy compared to getting the support of these students! Where the adults saw a navigable road with twists and turns, the students saw only the potholes.

During the second year, however, as

Future Plans—1996-1997

- Continue to evaluate and refine the 1995-1996 initiatives.
- Recruit an additional 10 students.
- Initiate outreach ministry programs.
- Add life-sports and winter-sports programs.
- Use the Dimensions of Learning framework throughout the school.
- Acquire three more computers.

Future Plans—1997-1998

- Evaluate previous initiatives and make changes if necessary.
- Recruit an additional 10 students.
- Add another full-time teacher.
- Use integrated thematic instruction and models of teaching throughout the school.
- Acquire three computers.

they saw the results of the changes, the students began to come around. Now they are cooperating, the teachers are inspired to try new strategies because of the effectiveness of the staff-development program, the parents are supportive, and school spirit is positive.

We have made great strides along the path to our 1998 vision of the ideal school. We have gained the cooperation of teachers, parents, staff, the school board, and the church board. We have moved the school into the age of technology. We have set a course based on the answers to our initial questions. And throughout our journey, the Indiana Conference has given us the support and freedom that we needed to try new and innovative techniques.

Our mission statement is posted in every classroom and is regularly reviewed by students and staff. Student input reassures us that we are indeed following the path of our mission, and surveys of parents help us assess our performance. In addition, each weekly church bulletin contains current school news, so everyone knows that SBJA is an upbeat, caring place.

We must continue to remind ourselves of our mission and to evaluate our performance to stay on course. Teacher training, school organization, and administrative hierarchy can be designed to either maintain the status quo or challenge it. We have chosen to face the challenge. By involving everyone in the process of change, we have developed an effective, self-renewing program to reach our goals. ☺

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