



CREATING A SCHOOL FOR THE FUTURE

John A. Johnson Achievement Plus Elementary School: A Case Study

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About the Author

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Introduction

Educators and politicians often describe schools as the hub of a community, but rarely does a school play as central a role in neighborhood revitalization as John A. Johnson Achievement Plus Elementary School (Johnson Elementary), located on the East Side of Saint Paul, Minnesota. Once decrepit, Johnson Elementary reopened in the 2000–01 school year as the third site of Achievement Plus, a public-private collaborative to establish high-quality, comprehensive, family-supportive community schools. For that to happen, however, the Saint Paul Public Schools system (SPPS) and its partners had to move or demolish 61 homes, relocate 87 families, reroute city streets, and redesign the school virtually from scratch.

The path of progress for Johnson Elementary could have been strewn with neighborhood strife and hardship. Happily, it wasn't. Many displaced residents ended up in better housing than they had before the project began. Many residents played very active roles in the planning process and saw their preferences not only honored but also given

precedence. Some discovered new skills and have gone on to professional careers in community development. And the school has become a district-wide beacon for student learning and teacher professional development.

The story of Johnson Elementary's renewal, therefore, is inextricably linked with the story of the East Side's revitalization. **Chapter I** of this report outlines the community, school, and district contexts that influenced the 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 Achievement Plus, including its principles, strategies, choices, and actions. **Chapter IV** examines additional components that were especially relevant at Johnson Elementary. **Chapter V** explains the lessons that emerged as this school began to influence the district, and **Chapter VI** looks at the challenges and opportunities facing the school, district, and initiative today.

JOHN A. JOHNSON ACHIEVEMENT PLUS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL THEMES

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. A school can create a neighborhood hub where none previously existed.

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.

Strong leadership is essential to improving both schools and school districts. Such leadership is focused, consistent, inclusive, respectful, collaborative, and committed. It includes both high-level and grassroots engagement.

Successful schools have high expectations for both achievement and behavior, and they apply those expectations to everyone—students, teachers, building administrators, and parents.

Educators need extensive professional development to implement the type of curriculum and instructional model that produces good results. A school devoted to demonstrating best practices plays a role in professional development that can influence school reform far beyond the school's own walls.

Neighborhood residents, institutions, and other resources can enrich a school immeasurably, and their deep involvement in school improvement paves the way for community revitalization.

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

Neighborhood History and Demographics

Johnson Elementary is located in Saint Paul's Payne-Phalen neighborhood, one of the oldest communities in the city. Just to the south, downhill and along the railroad tracks, is a flat area gouged from the earth by glacial runoff. It marks the beginning of Swede Hollow, the first home of many Europeans who immigrated to the Twin Cities in the late 1800s. The conditions they found were poor—most of the Hollow's homes were shacks without running water or insulation against frigid winters—but they were close to industrial jobs for which limited education and English skills were not a barrier.

Germans followed the Swedes and Italians. Over the next century the neighborhood was home to a steady stream of new Americans seeking jobs at Stroh's Brewery, a Whirlpool refrigerator factory, and more recently a 3M manufacturing plant. In the 1980s, the neighborhood diversified even more as Southeast Asian and Mexican immigrants arrived. Today, the community is half Asian (mostly Hmong), 24 percent Anglo, 12 percent Latino, 12 percent African American, and 2 percent Native American (the largest Native American concentration in the city). Seventy-five percent of the school-age population is composed of children of color.

Unfortunately, the big factories that lined the railroad tracks eventually closed. Between the mid-1980s and late 1990s, more than 2,500 industrial jobs left the neighborhood. Residents became poorer; the U.S. Census reveals an 800 percent increase in child poverty between 1980 and 1990.

There was little to draw people with money to Johnson Elementary's neighborhood. Payne Avenue, which had long been the most vibrant commercial street east of downtown Saint Paul, took a hard hit when suburban shopping malls sprouted up in the 1970s. The houses were old. Children grew up and moved away, their parents died, and the houses were

sold to absentee landlords. Sometimes the houses stood vacant for months, attracting vandals and rodents from the brewery's grain elevators. Some houses burned down, and their lingering rubble was a graphic reminder of the neighborhood's decline.

After a long wait, however, the East Side is being revitalized:

- Johnson Elementary opened in 2000–01 and is giving a new generation of students, families, and teachers a safe and challenging learning environment.
- Thanks in large part to work by the nonprofit East Side Neighborhood Development Company (ESNDC), several Latino businesses opened in the early 2000s, including a *mercado* with a restaurant/catering company and eight small shops.
- The Amherst H. Wilder Foundation spearheaded the creation of an Opportunity Housing Investment Fund (OHIF), which aims to improve the quality, availability, and affordability of housing around Johnson Elementary. OHIF, capitalized by investments from individual “social venture partners” and the Katherine B. Andersen Fund of The Saint Paul Foundation, is expected to help rehabilitate or create 75 housing units in five years.
- Several stakeholder groups—ESNDC and other community-based organizations, the city council, a social service agency, local developers, 3M, the city's Planning and Development Department, and the Saint Paul Port Authority—joined forces to build the Phalen Corridor, a major roadway connecting the neighborhood to Saint Paul. The Corridor, one branch of which opened in late 2003, is expected to attract industrial development as well as provide transportation.

Those recent developments leave residents and observers feeling that the East Side is on the upswing, but it still has a long way to go.

School Characteristics

John A. Johnson High School, named after Minnesota's 16th governor, opened at 740 York Avenue in 1911. It served the neighborhood until 1963, when a new Johnson High School was constructed nearby and the old building closed. For a while, the school was boarded up. Then the district used a small section for offices and storage of unused office and classroom furniture, until the Achievement Plus renovation. The school reopened as Johnson Elementary in fall 2000 with 207 students, 111,967 square feet of space. An adjoining YMCA, with two full-size swimming pools and other amenities, opened in summer of 2001.

Today, Johnson Elementary serves about 420 students in prekindergarten through sixth grade. To accommodate a full array of educational, family, and community activities, the building is open early and late during the week and on some Saturdays for community events.

Unlike Dayton's Bluff and Monroe elementary schools, the other two Achievement Plus sites in Saint Paul, Johnson Elementary was an Achievement Plus school from the day it opened. Thus classroom teachers were selected in part because they were committed to standards-based curriculum and instruction. The YMCA facility incorporated into the school's design gives Johnson Elementary built-in opportunities for the Extended Learning component of Achievement Plus. Partnerships with ESND and the Wilder Foundation provide on-site staff to help families find and purchase local housing. And the Eastside Family Center, a program of ESND, helps parents obtain food, housing, clothes, employment, and adult education, and meet many other needs.

Johnson Elementary serves as a district-wide standards-based demonstration site for literacy, so its teachers receive training in instructional strategies and then share their knowledge with visiting teachers. For that reason, Johnson Elementary has

special rooms available for teacher training, conferences, and workshops.

School District Context

The Saint Paul Public Schools has 100 public school sites serving more than 42,000 students. Several factors within that school environment influenced the course of change for Johnson Elementary, including: (1) the arrival of a new superintendent of schools in 1999, which gave the city, school leaders, and other stakeholders a chance to rethink their approach to education; (2) the arrival of a new executive director for Achievement Plus in 2000 who had the expertise and drive to make Johnson Elementary a showcase for comprehensive school reform and professional development; and (3) the existence of several community development

JOHNSON ELEMENTARY CHARACTERISTICS

In 2003–04, Johnson Elementary enrolled 322 children in grades K–6, plus approximately 100 prekindergarten students.

Approximately 45 percent were African American, 17 percent were Asian American, 23 percent were Anglo, 13 percent were Latino, and 2 percent were Native American. The proportion of students of color (77 percent) is much higher than for the district as a whole.

Typically, about 19 percent of all students do not attend Johnson Elementary for the full school year, due to family mobility.

Ninety-three 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). Most parents work at very low-paying jobs and struggle to stay employed.

For 24 percent of students, English was a second language.

resources—organizations, individuals, and complementary initiatives—that made it possible to link education reform to neighborhood revitalization.

Superintendent of Schools: Patricia A. Harvey

Patricia A. 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. The architects of Achievement Plus envisioned small community schools that educated children and their parents and provided an 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.

Maria J. Lamb, Executive Director of Achievement Plus

Maria J. Lamb, recruited to Achievement Plus in 2000, was an especially good match for Johnson

Elementary. She came with a strong background in standards-based curriculum and instruction and in professional development—two cornerstones of Johnson Elementary’s design—and a willingness to take the risks needed to help the school and community achieve their finest potential.

An educator, school administrator, and well-known reformer of public education, Lamb had established a high-achieving school in the Fort Worth (Texas) Independent School District that earned wide recognition and helped shape the philosophy of the nationally implemented school reform project known as New Standards.

When Patricia A. Harvey and Tom Kingston, President of the Wilder Foundation, approached Lamb about the job, she insisted on seeing Johnson Elementary first. When she toured the gutted building, saw the vacant lots surrounding it, and heard about the plans for a state-of-the-art YMCA, she was hooked. “It interested me beyond my educational background,” Lamb recalls. “It was a huge facility with a great future. I thought, ‘Wow—they are bringing all these resources together to create a place for multigenerational activities. This school really can be the hub of the community.’”

A Climate Conducive to School-Community Revitalization

Saint Paul’s East Side was poised on the edge of community rebirth when Johnson Elementary was chosen as the site for a third Achievement Plus school. Indigenous leaders like Michael Anderson, Executive Director of ESND, had paved the way by restoring many crumbling storefronts and helping residents launch small businesses. State Senator Randy Kelly, who would later become Saint Paul’s mayor, was a native of the community and considered its redevelopment a priority. And there was a solid corps of residents who cared about their community and were actively engaged in block groups and the District 5 Planning Council. There also was a sense of urgency. If the East Side didn’t turn around soon, it would slip closer to a state of decay from which it might not return.

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.

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 charter schools as too expensive and unnecessary to create 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 was Dayton’s Bluff, the lowest performing and most impoverished school in the district. The second was Monroe, a school that needed to improve academically but wasn’t viewed as deeply troubled. The third school, identified much later as Johnson Elementary, would test how the model worked when implemented from

day one at a new school in a neighborhood with all the predispositions for failure. All schools were 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, and it quickly attracted attention and funding from city, state, and private sources, mostly local and national foundations.

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.

II. Overview of the Change Process

All three of the Achievement Plus schools—Johnson Elementary, Dayton’s Bluff, and Monroe—shared some core ingredients and strategies, including the initiative’s leadership, key players, and stages of transformation. This chapter describes those shared elements. Additional elements that contributed to the success of Achievement Plus at Johnson Elementary are explored in detail in Chapter IV, “Key Components at Johnson Elementary.”

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. 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, 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 because it provided and funded so many of the services and supports that families needed. 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 provided some support for the building and became actively involved in Achievement Plus when specific services were requested.

At first, the initiative was directed by an SPPS administrator on loan to the initiative. After two years, however, when Achievement Plus had not produced strong results, Kingston and Harvey agreed that SPPS should become the lead agency in the partnership, and Wilder offered to hire an Achievement Plus executive director who would report directly to Harvey. In spring of 2000, Harvey and Kingston successfully recruited Maria J. Lamb as executive director of Achievement Plus, and Lamb became the driving force behind the initiative.

Major Stages of Achievement Plus

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 of strategic planning, early implementation, 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 Extended Learning, Family Resource Centers, and access to health care and social services. A focus on Curriculum and Instruction was added in 2000. In 2000–01 Achievement Plus expanded to the just-remodeled Johnson Elementary.

2. Arrival of Patricia A. Harvey

When Superintendent Harvey arrived in 1999, she focused the school district on eight core strategies:

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 Elementary, 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 Johnson Elementary.

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 Elementary opens as the third Achievement Plus school.
- The organization and management of Achievement Plus are restructured.
- Two Achievement Plus schools begin implementing America's Choice.
- YMCA opens at Johnson Elementary 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 Elementary, 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.

(1) Fostering new leadership through extensive **training and professional development**; (2) emphasizing **research-based, proven practices** for instruction in core academic areas; (3) empowering schools and communities through **site-based decision-making councils**; (4) developing and enforcing a **framework for school- and district-wide accountability**; (5) holding all students to **high standards** for academic achievement; (6) seeking **input from community stakeholders**, frequently and with respect for diverse opinions; (7) **using data** to analyze strengths and gaps for individual learners, classrooms, grade levels, schools, and the district overall; and (8) **establishing partnerships** that make necessary services and supports easily available to children and their families, and align the services with schools' educational priorities.

Achievement Plus was a good vehicle for promoting those priorities. In return, the support of top administrators gave Achievement Plus a big boost within the schools.

3. Strategic Planning and Community Outreach

Harvey realized that she couldn't dictate a model for school redesign. 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 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 (for students, families, the community, and stakeholder groups); clear and accurate reporting; institutional change; and respect for and inclusion of diverse cultures. Surveys and interviews elicited feedback from students, parents, and

community members. By the end, SPPS 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 in other schools. Several potential models were identified for SPPS schools: Success For All, Core Knowledge, High Schools That Work, and America's Choice School Design. The three Achievement Plus sites selected America's Choice.¹

One feature 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. The Institute offers "current, research-based knowledge about learning processes and principles of instruction"² to the schools' instructional leaders, and its Principles of Learning (see pages 16 and 17) help guide their academic improvements.

The reforms begun through Achievement Plus have evolved into Saint Paul's Project for Academic Excellence (PAE), an overarching reform initiative that came after the selection of individual models. By 2003–04, PAE had superceded the models and become the umbrella under which they, and the Institute for Learning, operate within the district.

5. Policy Changes to Support 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, which worked with the district-wide planning group to develop strategies.

¹ 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.

² Saint Paul Public Schools. (September 2002). "Saint Paul's Project for Academic Excellence: Literacy Initiative."

6. *New Leadership for Achievement Plus*

After two years of implementation, Achievement Plus leaders grew concerned because they couldn't see dramatic improvements in children's academic achievement. A great deal of money was being spent without any logical hope that it would change the learning environment. Against the wishes of deputies in the three other partnering entities, Tom 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, and Patricia A. Harvey agreed.

Kingston and Harvey concluded that Achievement Plus needed a more rigorous, uniform, research-proven curriculum that all teachers would buy into; a more selective approach to bringing services and supports into the schools so they didn't interfere with the academic program; and a new leader. They aggressively pursued Maria J. Lamb to become the initiative's new executive director, and she accepted the challenge. Lamb was particularly intrigued by the opportunities presented by Johnson Elementary. For the next two years, Lamb worked to reframe Achievement Plus as a Wilder employee on loan to the school district, working closely with Chief Accountability Officer Margo Baines and Project Administrator Judy Neece 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 along with data gathered by Achievement Plus. The strategic plan Lamb produced for 2001–05 emphasized three areas of focus—Curriculum and Instruction, Extended Learning opportunities, and improved Learning Supports—as the ways that Achievement Plus would 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 Elementary as a demonstration site for standards-based curriculum.

- **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 initiative's financial status was Lamb's second urgent concern. Public and private funders had invested huge amounts of money: \$10.5 million for operations and \$33.4 million for capital construction between 1996 and 1999. 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 2001–02.

Lamb knew she had to attract the funding Achievement Plus 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 support 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 Student and Family Support services. Lamb met with community members to reengage them around the strategic plan, and Lamb and Harvey met with city council members.

By the time Johnson Elementary opened, Achievement Plus had already been operating at the other two schools for three years. The initiative had overcome early implementation hurdles, and Johnson Elementary could avoid costly mistakes. In particular, the Extended Learning program at Johnson Elementary was, from the beginning, more closely aligned with the instructional needs of the school day.

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

By 2003–04, Saint Paul's Project for Academic Excellence had gained momentum in improving academic coherence, standards-based curriculum and instruction, assessment, and student outcomes in all Saint Paul schools. Johnson Elementary was operating as a demonstration site for standards-based instructional practices, and Dayton's Bluff had opened its doors to observation by other educators. The Wilder Foundation continued to raise money and support for Achievement Plus but also began work on the Opportunity Housing Investment Fund to further revitalize the Johnson Elementary neighborhood.

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) extended learning opportunities; and (9) 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 in Saint Paul, she made it clear that the schools could no longer pursue a scattershot approach to education 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 study various comprehensive models and select one to adopt, which caused them to buy into the process to a greater extent. Believing that good leaders are necessary at all levels of the education chain, Harvey also fosters leaders by spreading leadership and accountability for school improvement across departments and senior staff, promoting site-based selection of teachers and principals instead of assigning staff to specific schools, and arranging for educators and administrators to serve as peer leaders.

Maria J. Lamb is an energetic, persuasive woman with a passion for school reform. 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 for improved 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 and the respect of many public, private, and philanthropic sectors in the Twin Cities. 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 early 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. For Johnson Elementary, Kingston's leadership was especially important. "His commitment to finding resources that ensured neighborhood participation and his understanding that a large institution like Wilder can support smaller, neighborhood-based institutions . . . were crucial to getting buy-in," says Mike Anderson, Executive Director of the East Side Neighborhood Development Company.

Patrick F. Quinn, Executive Director of SPPS Office of School Services, played a lead role in negotiating the removal or demolition of 61 homes to make room for the renovated Johnson site and overseeing the redesign and construction processes. Quinn, a trained architect, worked to make sure that the process by which SPPS secured properties around the school was not overly disruptive and

treated residents fairly. He spent countless days and evenings meeting with resident groups to hear and respond to their concerns, with architects and builders to keep the project on schedule, and with legislators and private funders to make sure that escalating construction costs could be met.

Leaders from East Side organizations and groups also played important roles. Their involvement gave the project credibility among legislators, residents, and local businesses and provided a conduit for communication with the people most directly affected.

Broad, Collaborative Ownership

Achievement Plus is both a top-down and bottom-up initiative. Nowhere was this strategy more important than at Johnson Elementary, where Lamb, Quinn, Kingston, and others demonstrated high-level commitment by spending significant amounts of time in the community. Extensive outreach through meetings, door-to-door campaigns, and events organized by the Achievement Plus Director of Student and Family Supports, Lynnell Thiel, provided a broadly inclusive forum for addressing program and site design and resolving relocation issues. Flyers that publicized the community meetings asked:

“If you could create a new school for your children and your neighborhood, what would it look like . . . be like? You do have a chance to help shape a new school on the East Side. We need neighbors, parents, service providers, and anyone who has an interest in better outcomes for children and their families to join in planning for the physical improvements, designing the programs and services inside the building, and helping to make this promising idea a reality on the East Side.”

A community needs assessment stimulated conversations with the Eastside Family Center, Boy Scouts, Salvation Army Corps, and District 5 Crime Prevention Coordinator to identify needs and programs already under way. And participation first on the site planning team and then on the site

council gave residents a way to exercise their growing ownership of the school.

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 Instruction

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].”³ When Harvey took charge of SPPS in 1999, the prevailing force behind academic improvement was the state’s Profile for 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 understand 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 standards, accompanied by explanations of the work and criteria.

³ Saint Paul Public Schools. (2000). General information sheet.

Standards for Behavior and Classroom Management

Saint Paul schools use a variety of models for classroom discipline. Two 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 receive at least two years of training in Responsive Classroom so classroom management is consistent throughout the schools.

The Responsive Classroom approach has 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 two Achievement Plus schools and the complete rebuilding of Johnson Elementary created environments of which students, parents, and teachers are proud and opened doors—literally—to facilities never before incorporated into Saint Paul schools. Johnson Elementary adjoins a full-service, state-of-the-art YMCA where the school holds gym classes and swimming lessons.

Each school has an Achievement Plus area where health and wellness services are provided. At Johnson Elementary, a colorful Hmong "story cloth" brightens the main-floor area that houses a Family Resource Center and offices for a therapist and family outreach worker, school social worker, housing advocate/case manager, and an associate who addresses school engagement issues in grades

K–3. Two training and conference rooms hold 35 to 40 people each. The East Side Learning Center, coordinated by the School Sisters of Notre Dame, provides one-on-one tutoring to about 65 students two or three times a week. The main floor also houses the district's Early Childhood Family Education center, the school's Extended Learning office, and offices for the school nurse and a nurse practitioner.

Upstairs are the Achievement Plus administrative offices, with space for the initiative's leadership and administrative staff and a comprehensive library of professional development literature and children's books used for training and coaching.

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 standards and the 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 ability 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 for education.

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 lesson. They may browse through materials, read with a friend, or write in journals.

Leveled books are books geared to a specific level of reading skill and comprehension. Before Achievement Plus and the Literacy Institutes 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 supply 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, and 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

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.

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.

Routines, Rituals, and Artifacts

Rituals and routines give Achievement Plus schools disciplinary structure. In addition, Achievement Plus school 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’s 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:⁴

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**—Teachers and students support their statements by using evidence that is appropriate to the discipline and exhibits 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

⁴ Saint Paul Public Schools. (September 2002). “Saint Paul’s Project for Academic Excellence: Literacy Initiative.”

coaching enable students to undertake extended projects and develop presentations of finished work, both in and beyond the classroom.

Professional Development

Support for professional development and special resources were not part of the original plan for Achievement Plus; that emphasis evolved after Maria J. Lamb joined the initiative as Executive Director. Similarly, Johnson Elementary was not on track to become a demonstration site until Patricia A. Harvey saw the building's potential to promote instructional reforms. But professional development and demonstration have become core components of both Johnson Elementary and the overall initiative.

Participation in staff training is mandatory for teachers in Achievement Plus schools, and the extra time commitment is specified in their contract. Teachers at Johnson Elementary and Dayton's Bluff are paid for 10 extra professional development days per school year. Five of those days are spent the week before school opens, when teachers learn strategies for conducting writing and reading workshops. The remaining days are parceled out two or three hours at a time, every other week, for special training sessions. Those provisions mean 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.

Project for Academic Excellence

As balanced literacy took root in Saint Paul, as part of Saint Paul's Project for Academic Excellence, 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 specific level. To prepare for the new instructional model, SPPS videotaped exemplary teachers in their classrooms and made the tapes widely available. The schools' administrators and literacy coaches received special training from the Institute for Learning at the University of Pittsburgh, and principals attended sessions on such topics as helping children become independent readers and using the previous year's test results to form instructional plans.

ASSUMPTIONS BEHIND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN SAINT PAUL PUBLIC SCHOOLS

- Professional educators should be in charge of their careers, not moved around like chess pieces. 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 after-school 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.
- District leaders make training rigorous 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 practicing on each other. Teachers leave most training sessions with a pile of trade books and the tools they need to use new practices in the classroom.

Today, Johnson Elementary faculty and visitors from other schools sometimes conduct learning walks. More frequent than classroom observations, however, are demonstrations. For example, a national literacy expert may coach teachers on how to teach an hour-long lesson on leveled nonfiction writing. Visitors observe Johnson Elementary staff teaching the lesson and then participate in a follow-up seminar.

In addition, a consultant and coaches from Saint Paul Public Schools' Center for Academic Excellence work with Johnson Elementary teachers to make sure that they are delivering top-notch instruction, and the Johnson Elementary site hosts several summer literacy institutes for all SPPS teachers.

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 testing, 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 diagnostic assessments and use the information to guide instruction. Students analyze and chart data on their own performance. Grade-level achievement charts are displayed in every classroom and throughout the 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. When Johnson Elementary opened in fall of 2000, a plan to evaluate the effect Achievement Plus had on student performance and other aspects of educational quality was already in

place. Data are collected through surveys of students and school staff, achievement test results, and school and Achievement Plus records.

Evaluators from Wilder Research Center have reported regularly over the past four years on student academic achievement in reading, mathematics, and writing; 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. Areas of strong performance at Johnson Elementary, based on evaluation data, include reading, writing, and math achievement between 2003 and 2004, attendance of students with below-average test scores in Extended Learning activities; teacher perceptions of school climate; and collaborations with community organizations to provide student and family support services. Potential areas for improvement include student attendance, student perceptions of school climate, and staff perceptions of parental involvement and expectations for students.

Recent data highlight the following signs of progress at Johnson Elementary:

Academic Achievement

Results from achievement tests administered to Johnson Elementary students in spring of 2004 indicate significant one-year improvements in reading and math. Results are available for two tests. The Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCA) is a state-mandated test given to third- and fifth-graders across Minnesota. Students are tested in reading, math, and writing (fifth graders only). The Stanford Achievement Test, tenth edition (SAT10) is a norm-referenced test, used in school districts across the country. SPPS administers the SAT10 annually to students in grade two and higher.

The annual results reported here are for students who stayed in the same school from fall to spring of each testing year. Changes in MCA results from year to year are tracked at the grade level but not for individual students.

Figure 1 indicates the percentages of third- and fifth-graders who are making satisfactory progress or better in reading, math, and writing as measured by the MCA. Across grades and subject areas, the proportion of Johnson Elementary students scoring satisfactory or higher grew by an average of more than 25 percentage points between 2003 and 2004, an extraordinary increase.

Third-grade results for Johnson Elementary indicated very large increases in the percentage of students scoring satisfactory or higher in reading and math. In third-grade reading alone, the increase was 58 percentage points (from 17 percent to 75 percent). In fifth-grade tests, Johnson Elementary also showed improvement.

Figure 2 shows the change in the percentage of students scoring average or above in SAT10 reading and math from 2003 to 2004. These results are for the same group of students in 2003 and 2004. The percentage scoring average or above rose in 2004 for both reading and math, exceeding the national average in reading and matching it in math.

Student Attendance

Student absenteeism has fluctuated at Johnson Elementary over the past four years, with the lowest rates of absenteeism occurring in its first year (2000–01). The percentage of students absent 10 or more days during the school year has ranged from 26 to 37 percent over the four years, and the percentage absent 15 or more days, from 11 to 16 percent. In 2003–04, 31 percent of the students were absent 10 or more days, a decrease from the high of 37 percent the previous year. The percentage absent 15 or more days was 16 percent in 2003–04, a slight increase from the 14 percent the previous year.

School Climate

Each spring, students and staff rate how well the school is doing in 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. Johnson Elementary staff ratings of overall school climate have been quite stable during the past four

years, falling slightly below the national norms. However, some changes have occurred in specific areas. Staff ratings of order and discipline were improving up until the most recent year when they dropped slightly, while ratings of parental involvement and staff expectations for students have declined over the four years.

Johnson Elementary student ratings of school climate also have been stable over the past four years, hovering slightly below national norms. Students give relatively high ratings to student-teacher relations and school building appearance, but relatively low ratings to order, discipline, and student interpersonal relations.

Johnson Elementary staff ratings of the impact of Achievement Plus have improved over time. The percentage of staff agreeing that Achievement Plus programs and strategies help to increase student achievement rose from 38 percent in spring of 2001 to 88 percent in spring of 2004.

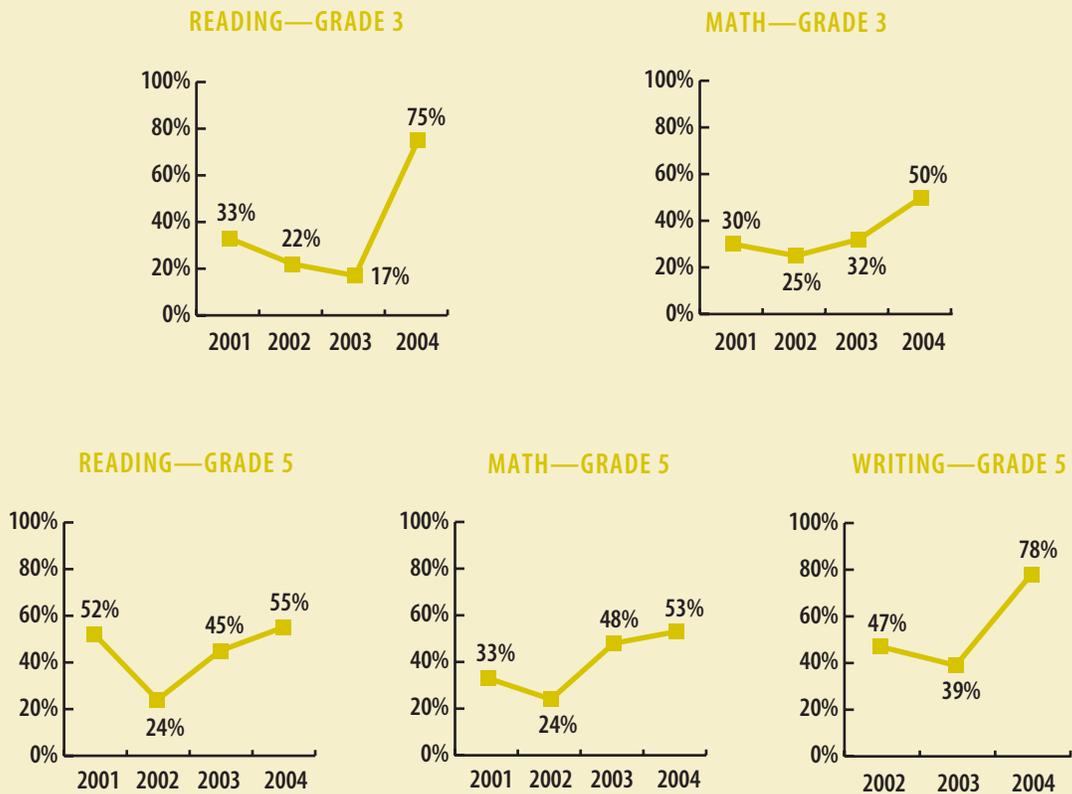
Extended Learning

In 2003–04, Johnson Elementary had an afternoon Extended Learning program that met four days a week. One of the goals of Achievement Plus is to increase Extended Learning participation among students with below-average academic achievement such that at least 40 percent attend “regularly” (i.e., at least 80 percent of the time). During 2003–04, an average of 43 percent of such students attended regularly across three sessions of the program, exceeding the goal.

Learning Supports

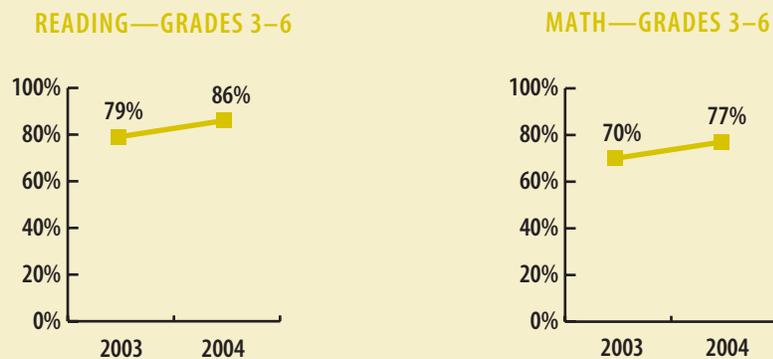
Johnson Elementary had 20 partnerships in 2004 that gave families access to resources that met their basic needs. More than 7,000 people (duplicated count) attended family activities at the school. Teacher-parent conferences were attended by 73 percent of the parents in fall of 2003 and 89 percent in spring of 2004. During 2003–04, the nurse practitioner provided services to 67 Johnson Elementary students, including immunizations, physicals, treatment for illness and injuries, and asthma management education. Mental health counselors served 64 students. Children’s Dental

Figure 1: Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment Test Results—2001, 2002, 2003, and 2004



Graphs show percentages of students scoring at "satisfactory" level or higher, per the State of Minnesota.

Figure 2: Stanford Achievement Test Results—2003 and 2004



Graphs show aggregate percentages of students at all grade levels scoring average or above average.

Services screened 91 percent of Johnson Elementary students for dental problems, and staff followed up with parents on urgent needs. All students were offered these services.

The Family Resource Center served the families of 83 Johnson Elementary students during 2003–04. Staff of the Center helped parents with health and school-related issues, and provided information or referrals to assist families in meeting basic needs, including housing. Most of the Johnson Elementary staff felt the student and family support services provided through Achievement Plus were beneficial, and some reported that collaborations with community organizations strengthened these services.

Accountability

One of the keys to the success of Achievement Plus is a sense of accountability for children’s success shared by people at many levels of authority. At the district level, Superintendent Patricia A. Harvey is 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. Both leaders have put themselves on the front lines of accountability in their relations with community members.

At the school level, Achievement Plus principals are accountable to students, parents, and community partners for fostering standards-based Curriculum, Extended Learning, and Learning Supports. They often exercise that responsibility in very practical ways. At Johnson Elementary, for example, the building is open until 9 P.M. during the week and on some Saturdays to ensure that children and parents have time to visit the Family Resource Center.

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.”⁵ At the first two sites to join Achievement Plus, the initiative brought a dizzying

array of Extended Learning options into the school. Despite the value of these partnerships, in 1999–2000 Achievement Plus leaders realized that the vast selection was distracting people and financial resources from the overarching goal of school improvement. Achievement Plus staff and Maria J. Lamb reevaluated the Extended Learning program to focus it more sharply on supporting standards-based curriculum and instruction.

At Johnson Elementary today, Extended Learning operates Monday through Thursday from 2:30 to 5:00 P.M. about 100 days per year. A typical after-school day 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.

The second half of the program is devoted to voluntary homework completion, tutoring, and enrichment activities selected by the students. Some classroom teachers work in the Extended Learning programs along with college work-study students and independent contractors (paid by Achievement Plus and a 21st Century Community Learning Center grant).

Achievement Plus Director of Extended Learning, Andrew 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 adheres to an overall strategic plan, each site (which also has its own assistant coordinator/director) also develops a tailored plan.

Learning Supports

As in many distressed areas, in the Johnson Elementary neighborhood there are pockets of poverty and related social issues that can often arise. These issues can present barriers to learning, and Achievement Plus works to help children and families overcome them. Learning Supports include Family Resource Centers, health services and referrals,

⁵ Achievement Plus. (2000–01). Annual Report.

mental health counseling and referrals, and tutoring. For the most part, Achievement Plus creates and manages partnerships to make those services available rather than providing them directly.

Service Framework

Achievement Plus adapted the Adelman/Taylor framework, developed at the University of California–Los Angeles (UCLA) and widely used across the country. This is not so much a model as a way to think about serving individual students and improving education systems.

The model 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 and grade levels.

The framework calls for a Resource Coordinating Team to recognize supports that already exist in the school, identify gaps and points of overlap, determine how to reallocate resources, and coordinate service providers. At Johnson Elementary, the team's members include the principal, Extended Learning site-based director, 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, the group identified a gap in after-school mathematics support for older students, wrote a proposal, and obtained funding from the school site council to expand a program that could fill the gap.

Partner Facilities

Achievement Plus leaders negotiated a major partnership that influenced the school's programming and physical structure:

Johnson Elementary is connected by a short hallway to the East YMCA, a state-of-the-art facility with a gymnasium, two swimming pools, cardiovascular

and strength training equipment, aerobics studio, teen center, childcare, Head Start, and preschool literacy program. Johnson Elementary students use the Y for gym activities and swimming lessons, and school leaders and teachers use Y rooms for training sessions.

Services Provided

An Achievement Plus partnership initially provided an on-site counselor and family outreach worker to each of the three participating schools. Due to budget cuts by that partner, however, those services were scaled back. During the 2003–04 school year, Johnson Elementary had a therapist, a full-time family outreach worker, and a part-time staff person for an early intervention program called Primary Project.

Achievement Plus offers the following Learning Supports through collaboration with the Wilder Foundation:

- At Johnson Elementary and Dayton's Bluff, 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 Elementary screens students for mental health and social needs as referred, 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 Elementary makes home visits to parents whose children are struggling in school or at home, after a teacher referral 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 medications; teaches parenting skills; consults with teachers on individual students; provides classroom sessions focusing on social skills; and works with anxious children on relaxation techniques.

Achievement Plus offers Learning Supports through collaboration with various providers. Below are two examples, among many, of these collaborations:

- The **Eastside Family Center**, a program of the East Side Neighborhood Development Company, operates Family Resource Centers at Johnson Elementary and Dayton's Bluff that offer resources, referrals, and programming to build relationships with students and families. Nine staff based at Johnson Elementary split their time between Johnson Elementary, Dayton's Bluff, and two other East Side schools. The Center provides evening childcare and transportation so parents can attend English-language classes, school conferences, and group meetings. Outreach workers respond to walk-in questions, assess needs, and help families research solutions.

Between July and September 2003, Johnson Elementary's Family Center recorded more than 4,500 service units (some duplication of clients).

- A **Certified Pediatric Nurse Practitioner** works at Johnson Elementary every Wednesday (paid by Achievement Plus) and one additional day every other week (paid by a publicly funded grant). Both of the other Achievement Plus schools have the same arrangement with a different nurse practitioner. At Johnson Elementary, the nurse practitioner gives physical exams to any child in need, with a special focus on early diagnosis and intervention in grades K–2. She also provides immunizations, except

for the flu; conducts sixth-grade sports physicals and gives the immunizations needed for entry into middle school; takes referrals from the team that assesses students for special education in order to rule out possible medical causes; coordinates with residents from a community clinic to educate students and parents about asthma and to develop individualized asthma treatment plans; connects families to health care providers in the community; refers uninsured families to an organization that enrolls them in an insurance plan and serves as the primary health provider until they are covered; and works with interpreters and outreach workers from the Family Resource Center to reach non-English-speaking parents concerning their children's health needs.

MENTAL HEALTH OUTREACH HELPS ENTIRE FAMILIES

The family outreach worker at Johnson Elementary finds that depression is a common problem for students and their parents. One day in 2003, a teacher dropped by to say she'd noticed Ellie* crying a lot in class lately. The outreach worker and the therapist contacted Ellie's mother and learned the girl had been sad since her father died a few years ago. After Ellie started seeing the therapist, they realized her mother was also depressed.

Eventually, Ellie obtained help from a psychiatrist, and she continues to get counseling at school. The outreach worker, who provides social skills training rather than formal therapy, has lunch with Ellie in the cafeteria and helps her initiate play during recess. Those efforts are helping Ellie recognize and return the friendly overtures made by her classmates.

**Not her real name*

IV. Key Components at Johnson Elementary

In addition to the core components of all Achievement Plus schools outlined in Chapter III, collaborators at Johnson Elementary found the following elements crucial to their success:

- Strategic site selection
- Adequate funding
- Property acquisition
- Financial support for displaced residents
- Facility design and reconstruction
- Selection of a school name that resonated with the community
- Development and refinement of the demonstration site concept
- School-level instructional leadership
- Refinement of the Extended Learning and Learning Supports programs
- Cultivation of relationships
- Partnership with the YMCA
- Development of a mission statement and formal expectations
- Link between school reform and community building

Strategic Site Selection

The site for Achievement Plus's third school was not chosen until after Dayton's Bluff and Monroe were part of the initiative and planners had engaged in a long and careful selection process. Initially, SPPS and the Wilder Foundation focused on a different site, where long-range plans by the city's Planning and Economic Development Department called for a new elementary school. But then they paid a courtesy call to State Senator Randy Kelly and the chairman of the Saint Paul City Council who represented the area surrounding the old Johnson High School.

Both were adamant that Achievement Plus should make Johnson the third site. Phalen Village already had momentum carrying it toward revitalization, they argued, but the Payne-Phalen community needed a major project to get things moving. The politicians' support was important to Achievement Plus, which needed public funding, and the initiative's leaders listened.

The problem was that the Johnson site was relatively small. Fifteen feet to the east of the building were houses, followed by a strip mall; to the north, a street flanked by houses; to the south, a sheer bluff that dropped to railroad tracks and industrial flatlands; and to the west, a vacant, gravelly parking lot. If Johnson Elementary was to become a real community school, planners would have to dramatically expand the site.

SPPS School Services Executive Director Patrick Quinn examined the state guidelines for schools. At a minimum, Johnson Elementary would need extra space for a playground and parking. Then Wilder President Tom Kingston brought the Saint Paul YMCA into the planning group. The Y wanted to attach a brand-new facility to the school to serve the entire community, which would require even more land.

By that time, most people agreed that the Johnson site was perfect for Achievement Plus. The community was economically disadvantaged and would benefit greatly from the educational, family support, and recreational services encompassed by the plan. But, clearly, some houses would have to go in order to bring these improvements to the neighborhood—and that would not be an easy idea to sell to people for whom affordable housing was scarce.

Funding

It took many funding sources to create Johnson Elementary and the attached YMCA, including a state grant, a YMCA capital campaign (applied only

to the Y construction), monies from the county, SPPS operating capital, and bond issues.

Because the school district owned some of the land already and was the only partner with the right of eminent domain over the additional properties, SPPS and the YMCA agreed that the school would own the planned Y and then the Y would lease it back in a multiyear, long-term arrangement. The Y would be responsible for its building's capital, operating, and maintenance dollars. As the work progressed, however, costs for the building exceeded the budget. State funding sources were tapped out, and the YMCA was unable to increase its financial commitment. So SPPS raised the remaining money through a federal program that enabled the district to sell bonds without paying interest on them. Brokers who sold the bonds received a tax deduction equivalent to what they would have made in interest, while the school district was allowed to repay the money at zero interest.

There is no doubt that Johnson Elementary was an expensive school to build. But Johnson Elementary's proponents weren't just building a school: they were creating a community icon. Given the option, they chose to search for extra funding rather than cut corners in the design or construction. Four years later, with Johnson Elementary firmly ensconced as a beacon of the East Side, not one of the funders regrets that decision.

Acquiring the Properties: Community Outreach, Negotiation, and Support

The Johnson Elementary renovation project required 31 property owners and 56 tenants to relocate. As the site grew from just over 2 acres to almost 13, it absorbed 61 properties (including four vacant lots). Two of the vacant lots were tax-forfeited properties acquired from the state, but four homes had to be condemned. The rest were purchased by SPPS at market rates.

The property acquisition process had the potential to be very volatile in an economically stressed community like Saint Paul's East Side. But Achievement Plus turned the project into a relatively smooth

*“Without a neighborhood school
you don't have a sense of place;
but that, alone, is not enough.”*

—Tom Kingston
The Amherst H. Wilder Foundation

collaboration between school and community, with both sides focused on the positive outcome at the end. How did they do it?

Planners approached the community early, honestly, and respectfully. When Patrick Quinn began meeting with residents who lived around the old Johnson building, he brought a site plan showing the neighborhood, the school building, and all the houses as they currently stood. He emphasized that SPPS and Achievement Plus wanted to give the neighborhood a wonderful new school that could benefit the entire community, but certain conditions would have to be met. “We had to walk a tightrope of what we were doing *to* the community in order to do something *for* the community,” Quinn recalls. “It was a real balancing act.”

Quinn made sure his listeners understood that SPPS, as a taxing authority, had the power to take the properties through eminent domain. But he also acknowledged that it was “an awesome power” and that it is “a horrifying thing to come home from work at the end of the day and open a certified letter saying that we're taking your house.”

Quinn's first public speech met with a few moments of silence. Then began a seemingly endless series of evening meetings in living rooms and meeting halls to discuss residents' concerns. Some residents had wanted to move for a long time, and the Johnson Elementary project offered them an opportunity to sell. But others had no intention of moving and viewed SPPS as their nemesis. Even those whose properties were unaffected wanted to know what the changes would bring to their community.

An important player in this process was the East Side Neighborhood Development Company. For decades, ESNDNC had worked to restore storefronts, improve housing stock, engage in community organizing, decrease crime, and provide social services on the East Side. ESNDNC's role was to help coordinate and mobilize the neighborhood in support of the project and to give the concept credibility among local activists.

Lynnell Thiel, Director of Student and Family Support for Achievement Plus, became the project's neighborhood liaison. Using the following strategies, she worked to engage community members in the process:

- **Public meetings** allowed residents to voice their concerns and goals for the school. Most of the residents at planning meetings were concerned about how increased traffic would affect the neighborhood and which houses were going to be torn down, as one resident recalls. Some had recently invested large amounts of money in home renovations, only to learn that their houses were marked for demolition.
- Residents had **authentic opportunities to contribute** to school design decisions. Very early in the process, a site team was established to represent community organizations, parents of potential Johnson Elementary students, and other community members. The team met monthly, and over time it evolved into a site-based school council that hired Johnson Elementary's principal, helped to name the new school, publicized the school opening, and registered students.
- **Task forces** were established to generate programming recommendations on mental health, early childhood development, health, extended learning, and family support. These groups had representation from community-based service providers, residents, and Achievement Plus partners. Thiel facilitated the task groups' work, and the school site team considered their recommendations. From those groups grew the partnerships Achievement Plus

has today with service providers at Johnson Elementary.

- A **large advisory group** was established to comment on the site plan. This umbrella group included representatives from SPPS, Achievement Plus, and community partners. It met frequently with Johnson Elementary's architects to make sure decisions were made with all stakeholders' programming preferences in mind.
- **One-on-one outreach** targeted the school's immediate and extended neighbors. A community member was hired to visit non-English-speaking residents at home, describe the school project, and collect feedback. That effort culminated in a neighborhood picnic attended by 230 residents.
- **Information disseminated through grassroots groups** and entities with strong connections in the community helped keep word-of-mouth on message. Staff from the East Side Neighborhood Development Company knocked on doors, distributed flyers, and sponsored events where residents could learn about the project. The District 5 Planning Council held community dinners and sent out flyers asking for resident input.
- **Relocation specialists** hired by the school district helped homeowners and renters understand their rights and benefits, assess their homes' worth, and find alternative housing. This strategy was not as easy as planners had hoped, however. Rental property in the area was at such a premium that applicants had to act within the first two or three hours of a listing to have a shot at the property, and many East Side residents—especially those without telephones or transportation—needed extra assistance to follow through.

Throughout the process, residents held as much authority over decision-making as possible. At one especially contentious facility planning session, when several residents objected to the demolition of an

entire block of housing for parking space, Patrick Quinn asked residents to suggest an alternative. Go west and south of the school, the residents urged. There was less housing there and drivers coming to the YMCA could easily turn in off the side street, thus reducing traffic in the residential area. SPPS agreed to the less-disruptive alternative, which meant closing a street that would have been shortened anyway by the soon-to-be-developed Phalen Corridor. “It was wonderful,” a resident says. “[Quinn] came to our block meeting and listened, and we felt we were heard.”

The amount of top-level, intensive community outreach that SPPS poured into the Johnson

Elementary project represented a major commitment of school district resources—but, says Harvey, it was well worth it: “We were very serious about shared decision-making . . . and people could see that in our actions.”

Financial Support for Displaced Residents

SPPS arranged for displaced residents to receive financial assistance that could be used as a rent subsidy or taken as a lump sum for down payment on a house. The school system also paid displaced residents’ moving costs. The benefit amount was based on average comparisons within a one-mile radius, and moving costs were determined by the

MOVED TO PARTICIPATE: ONE RESIDENT’S STORY OF RELOCATION AND RENEWAL

Fong Lor moved with his wife and five young children from Wisconsin to the East Side of Saint Paul in August 1997. After several months of searching for an affordable home, he purchased one right next to the abandoned John A. Johnson High School. Soon Lor received a flyer indicating that the school would be renovated and reopened, and he was thrilled. Then, just six months after moving to the neighborhood, Lor learned that his home was one of the houses slated for demolition to make way for the new Johnson Elementary parking lot.

Lor began attending meetings on relocation. He was worried about finding another home, wanted a better price for the house he was leaving, and didn’t want his children to have to leave their new school. He did some research on the legal aspects of eminent domain authority, and he talked to colleagues at the city’s Office of Licensing and Inspection, where he works as a health inspector. Lor quickly learned that he didn’t have many options for resisting the move, because building the school was in the public’s interest. But he also grew interested in the renovation plans, and he joined the

Johnson Elementary site team. He was the only Hmong resident on the team, and he reasoned that participation would help him learn about the American schools his children would attend.

Ultimately, Lor found a new home three miles east and out of Johnson Elementary’s attendance area, but by then he had been involved in the school project so intimately and for so long that he decided to send his children to Johnson Elementary anyway. (SPPS does not transport children across attendance areas, so Lor drops off and picks up his children.)

Lor was especially involved in the selection of the principal. SPPS gave the site team guidelines for job candidates’ educational priorities and qualifications but, says Lor, “As parents we were looking for someone who is willing to spend a lot of time in the school building and the area. We talked a lot about after-school programs; we wanted to make sure the principal wasn’t someone who would only care about what happened from 8:00 to 4:00.”

number of rooms in the house. The relocation process wasn't always smooth. It normally takes about 90 days to acquire a house through condemnation, but some cases stretched out more than a year because the absentee owners were hard to locate. Moreover, the rental market had only a 1 to 2 percent vacancy rate; property owners were taking applications and screening tenants, and many of the local residents had troubled rental histories. Sometimes, SPPS had to pay incentives to potential landlords. All of the families eventually found homes, however—many of them nearby—and several of the former renters used relocation benefits to purchase houses. Overall, community members now describe the process as a success.

Building Design and Reconstruction

Everything in the Johnson Elementary building had to be completely restored or rebuilt. Inspectors refused to check the chimney during the first walk-through for fear of falling bricks. The mechanical, plumbing, and heating systems had to be completely replaced and air conditioning added. The walls had no insulation, windows were broken or boarded up, the brick outer walls were crumbling in places, and the entire building needed a new roof. The interior was dark and depressing. Virtually the only useable components were the load-bearing walls and structural frame, brass stair rails, some terra cotta staircases, and the woodwork on exterior doorways.

On the other hand, the extensive reconstruction that Johnson Elementary needed meant Achievement Plus, in collaboration with its many partners, could create a physical environment designed explicitly to support the initiative's goals for academic achievement, Extended Learning, and Learning Supports. Thus the design featured classrooms with breakout areas for reading and tutoring, roomy and inviting spaces that could be used flexibly without disturbing classes, and circular tables in the cafeteria instead of rows of seating.

Johnson's old gymnasium became the new cafeteria; its soaring windows had been filled with bricks but when they were cleared away the sunlight streamed in. A loading dock, added in the 1960s when

Johnson was a warehouse, was torn down and converted into an entry, with an exterior plaza and a glass lobby looking west to the Saint Paul Cathedral and the Capitol Building. An alley next to the school was enclosed to form the main corridor. A large playing field and parking lot were added. The old auditorium became a library and classrooms. The new YMCA provided the school's gymnasium.

The adjoining YMCA, in fact, was a major focus of design and construction. In 1997–98, YMCA President Tom Brinsko had been looking for a way to revitalize the organization's image and reanchor it in the neighborhood. The East Y, located four blocks from the site that would become Achievement Plus' third school, was dilapidated, and its board members wanted to sell the building. The YMCA of Greater Saint Paul had just completed a capital campaign to finance three new, suburban facilities, and potential funders told Brinsko the community viewed his organization as having abandoned the neighborhood. They warned him that any request for assistance would have to include a plan to support the urban environment. Brinsko turned to Wilder's Tom Kingston for help and advice. Kingston, meanwhile, wanted a partner who could significantly augment the school's learning opportunities.

Collaboration between the district, Achievement Plus, and the YMCA on construction of the new building raised a major design issue. YMCAs are by nature very open to the public, while schools must consider security issues. After debating various ways of giving school and community members access to both the school and Y without jeopardizing safety, planners compromised on a second-floor, locked pathway between the two facilities, accessible to staff through key badges.

Today, the 63,000-square-foot, two-storied YMCA is actively used by 3,000 student, family, and community members. It boasts a full-size lap pool, a children's pool and water slide, a gymnasium shared with the school (including an office for Johnson Elementary's physical education instructor), cardio- and strength-training equipment, day care center, aerobics studio, teen center, play area for very young children, licensed preschool, Head Start program,

and a program for preschool literacy development. The Y is open from 5:30 A.M. to 9:00 P.M., Monday through Friday, and for reduced hours on Saturdays and Sundays. A YMCA employee, stationed on the school side, serves as Johnson Elementary’s site-based Extended Learning director.

A second focus of design and construction was the integration of space for services and supports into the school building. The concept of offering Extended Learning and Learning Supports wasn’t hard to sell, but understanding the kind of space it required took some effort. The challenge of creating a school that had medical areas, a family center, and counseling space in addition to classrooms—not to mention areas where large groups of teachers could gather for seminars and other professional development—was a frequent topic at design team meetings. In the end, planners developed a special wing of offices and meeting rooms for the services and placed them in a central, high-traffic area so they are very much part of the school but still removed from classroom areas.

Selection of a School Name

Johnson Elementary was named by the school board after long deliberations involving dozens of residents, community organizations, businesses, and alumni of Johnson High School. During a brainstorming process directed by the school site team (parents, community members, and representatives of local organizations), contributors proposed about 60 names—from “New Hope” and “Community First” to “East Side Pride Elementary.” The strong preference among alumni of the old Johnson High School and some longtime residents, however, was to retain the name “Johnson.” Clearly, the school was a beacon both of the neighborhood’s future and its past.

SPPS’s willingness to give residents a dominant role in the naming of the school, including the process, sent an important message to East Siders that this was their school and they were important partners in its creation. It was a message residents needed to hear, and it helped to ease tensions over the changes they had to absorb.

Development and Refinement of the Demonstration Site Concept

When Patricia A. Harvey arrived in Saint Paul, planning for Johnson Elementary as a community school had already begun. Johnson Elementary’s inclusion in Achievement Plus presented an opportunity to build in the kind of infrastructure needed to support frequent visitors and adult learning. The total reconstruction of the school, along with the new YMCA, would make Johnson Elementary a flagship of the school district—and thus a natural place to demonstrate best practices.

Implementing the demonstration concept became one of Maria J. Lamb’s main tasks. She faced the following challenges:

- **Building cohesiveness among teachers who came from many different schools.** During Johnson Elementary’s first year after reopening, visitors were kept to a minimum so the literacy coaches could become fluent with the curriculum and teachers could establish a sense of cohesiveness—both in their classrooms, which held students drawn from schools with varying levels of proficiency, and across the school, which now contained teachers with many different teaching styles unified under the community school umbrella. From her experience in Fort Worth, Lamb knew it would take three to six years before Johnson Elementary could reach its full potential for staff development and model replication.
- **Getting teachers focused on the core components of Achievement Plus.** During Johnson Elementary’s second and third years, SPPS made the school available for Writing Institutes. The amount of teacher preparation time needed to host major site visits proved so great, however, that visits were scaled back from three to one annually after the second year.
- **Establishing oversight and accountability mechanisms.** In 2003–04, SPPS placed all three Achievement Plus schools under the direction of Area Superintendent Luz Maria Serrano.

Serrano, who worked closely with Lamb on the initiative's curriculum and instructional supports, now spends time in the schools providing support for the principals and leadership teams.

- **Blending community-school values with expectations for a district-wide demonstration facility.** Johnson Elementary's ability to serve as a one-stop shop for education, health and human services, and family support and as a community gathering place serves both the interests of community members and the purposes of a demonstration site. Space is shared throughout the school for demonstration or professional development activities as well as community groups. Because the school uses its cafeteria (the largest meeting space) for student activities during the school year, SPPS also works with the YMCA to use their multi-purpose room for large gatherings as needed.
- **Fostering continuous learning among teachers.** Johnson Elementary's faculty members are teachers not only of children but also of other schools' staff. To fulfill that role, they must be willing and able to keep learning new strategies and acquiring knowledge themselves. One of the biggest challenges is to ensure that most, if not all, of Johnson Elementary's teachers support and participate in their own learning process.
- **Providing infrastructure and supports for teachers.** Most teachers at Johnson Elementary are experienced educators, and job postings are explicit about the degree to which they are expected not only to teach but also to link with the community and families and to open their classrooms to other colleagues. Still, when it comes to the day-to-day reality of teaching in a demonstration school, most teachers need extra support. At Johnson Elementary, the main source of support is the 10 additional days of professional development that teachers receive, half of which occurs as a summer training session devoted to creating environments that support literacy. The school also has two on-site

staff who plan with teachers, visit classrooms to demonstrate lessons, and discuss students' work.

- **Managing the demonstration process to minimize stress on teachers and students.** Working at Johnson Elementary clearly has benefits: classroom libraries, easy access to mental and physical health services, after-school academic support, and proximity to the YMCA. And, because they receive extra professional development, Johnson Elementary teachers are presumably more marketable than some of their peers. But there is intense pressure, too, driven by the district's high expectations for Johnson Elementary and its students.

In particular, some teachers feel pressure to prepare for training days. As many as 15 visitors may come to observe a classroom on a given day. After demonstrating the lesson, teachers meet with the observers for discussion. Moreover, classes must have reached a specific point in the curriculum by the time of the demonstration. Grade-level teachers learn in the fall when they will receive visitors and what lesson they will demonstrate, and they pace the semester or school year to stay on track. These demonstration days happen approximately six days a year at Johnson Elementary.

The pressure ultimately extends to everyone involved with the school. Johnson Elementary's three custodians work hard to keep the building looking pristine; nondemonstrating teachers help the substitutes deal with classroom problems; and Achievement Plus staff help prepare the school site for demonstration visits and summer Writing Institutes.

A core group of teachers left Johnson Elementary, including those who didn't want to adopt the America's Choice framework, those who weren't comfortable opening their classrooms, and those who didn't want to align their work with that of other teachers. Since then, the leadership team has become more strategic about how and when demonstrations occur. Today, when outsiders visit classrooms,

it is for very specific purposes and controlled amounts of time. Classrooms are open on certain professional development days scheduled by the district, but not every day.

School-Level Leadership

As Maria J. Lamb observes, “It requires an instructional leader, not a traditional principal, to lead this work.” Johnson Elementary’s principal, Frank Feinberg, was hired early in the planning process—more than a year before the school opened, and well before Lamb’s arrival. He was the first choice of the school site team because he interacts well with the community and all of the school’s partners, has a genuine affection and concern for students, and is willing to work long and hard hours.

It is difficult to structure leadership in a school that has so many moving parts, including many partners, the YMCA facility, an emphasis on community engagement, the mandate to demonstrate best practices, and the constant scrutiny and involvement of the school district. Feinberg is acutely focused on both the academic and the community aspects of his job, whether that means overseeing the learning process, keeping the building safe for users, encouraging public dialogue about issues, or ensuring that a broad group of decision-makers are involved in choosing solutions.

Refinement of Extended Learning and Learning Supports

When Johnson Elementary opened, the community outreach process revealed parents’ desire for a very comprehensive Extended Learning program. Achievement Plus tried to fulfill parents’ expectations.

Andrew Collins, Director of Extended Learning overseeing all three Achievement Plus schools, focused on designing a program that addressed community priorities, while remaining within realistic financial parameters. He states: “At first, the benchmark was, ‘How many kids can you serve and how many partnerships do you have?’ Now we strive to have the strongest partnerships that benefit our kids, families, and community in a deeper way.”

Today, Johnson Elementary’s Extended Learning partners are:

- Campfire USA
- Century College Service Learning Department
- City of Saint Paul Fire and Safety Services
- Community Design Center
- East Side Arts Council
- East YMCA
- Hmong Minnesota Pacific Association
- Ramsey County Mental Health
- Saint Paul Public Library Bookmobile
- SPPS Area Learning Center
- University of Minnesota Multicultural Center for Academic Programs and Extension Services
- Amherst H. Wilder Foundation

Johnson Elementary’s Learning Support partners are:

- 3M volunteers
- AMAZE: All Families Matter Book Project
- Children’s Dental Services
- East Side Learning Center
- East Side Neighborhood Development Company
- East YMCA
- Eastside Family Center
- Housing Link
- Lutheran Social Services
- Merrick Community Services
- Metropolitan State University Center for Community Based Learning
- William Mitchell College of Law
- Ramsey Family Physicians
- SPPS Nurse Practitioner
- University of Minnesota Department of Epidemiology
- Amherst H. Wilder Foundation (Child Guidance Clinic, Social Adjustment Program for Southeast Asians, and The Roof Project)

One of these partners, the East Side Learning Center, has become an especially important academic resource for Johnson Elementary. It operates in the school before and after classroom hours and during summers, facilitated by the School Sisters of Notre Dame and staffed by 65 volunteer tutors and 11 part-time, paid tutors (mostly elementary school

teachers). The Learning Center provides free one-on-one literacy tutoring for students in kindergarten through fourth grade. Staff members develop individual lessons plans (about 100 per week), communicate with classroom teachers to make sure the after-school sessions reinforce lessons from the school day, and meet with each enrolled student two or three times a week.

Johnson Elementary also has a two-year state Tutorial Assistance Grant (TAG) drawn from federal Reading Excellence funds, which supports after-school reading activities for students in kindergarten through third grade. Initially, TAG and Extended Learning programs competed for the some of the same students within a limited time frame. However, all the services were quickly coordinated, and staff developed a single registration form used for all the after-school programs.

Cultivation of Relationships

Achievement Plus collaborators and partners at Johnson Elementary often say, “Relationships are everything.” Thus, for example, the outreach workers at Eastside Family Center don’t just give parents in crisis a phone number to call and send them on their way—the workers make the call with the parent and then try to help the family avoid future crises. Eastside’s staff also help ensure that families are treated well at service agencies by acting as the professional go-between, and they reach out to parents who are reluctant to discuss family troubles with their children’s teachers.

Eastside Family Center Director Joan Schlecht chairs a quarterly Human Services Networking meeting for every service provider on the East Side, which helps coordinate efforts to serve the same families. She also serves on Johnson Elementary’s Leadership Design Team, School Site Team, Parent-Home-Community Committee, Student Support Team, and Resource Coordinating Team. Those memberships would be unheard of at other schools, but they are central to Achievement Plus’s effectiveness at Johnson Elementary. When a teacher raises concerns about a specific student, for example, Schlecht, the school nurse, the school social worker, and the counselor

provided by the Wilder Foundation can brainstorm together about ways to help the family.

The close relationship between the Family Center

TUTORING PROVIDES LITERACY SAFETY NET

On any given day, the East Side Learning Center hums with the gentle buzz of children’s voices reading aloud. Working in 12 cubicles—and often overflowing to tables in the hallway, a large conference room, and two counseling rooms—the students and their tutors read books, write on white boards, and use magnetic letters and learning games to reinforce skills. The youngest students focus on phonics, while older children work on reading comprehension. They reread texts over and over, and take the books home for more reading.

The Learning Center debuted at Johnson Elementary in February 2001. It works well because of several factors:

- Engaged, appreciated volunteers who share a sense of community
- Ongoing training for tutors
- A well-organized system of lesson plans, reading logs, tutor guides, and student folders so tutors and students know what is expected of them
- Repetitive practice with easy materials that build children’s confidence
- A learning environment that provides privacy with few distractions

Most important is the children’s relationships with tutors, who come from local churches, high schools, colleges, and businesses. “It’s as if they have a cheerleader next to them,” the director of the Center says.

and school means that Johnson Elementary gets access to the community and family perspective and Schlecht keeps the school informed about the family issues that affect academic performance. In exchange, Eastside Family Center gains a steady flow of clients, free rent and utilities, and relationships with school personnel that often continue after the teachers leave Johnson Elementary.

Partnership with the YMCA

The partnership between SPPS, Achievement Plus, and the YMCA was a complicated and delicate matter. Issues included cost overruns during construction; ensuring security in both buildings while still allowing easy access to the Y; developing schedules for the Y that gave Johnson Elementary some dedicated space for student activities every day; and establishing oversight of the Extended Learning director shared by both entities.

The biggest tensions surfaced during construction of the facility. The YMCA, as a corporate entity, was accustomed to selecting architects and contractors independently, while the school district's method gave oversight to SPPS. And when construction costs began to exceed the budget and the YMCA was asked to cover the overrun, the Y held firmly to its original level of contribution. SPPS found other sources of money to complete the facility.

The issue of shared-staff oversight also proved challenging. The site-based Extended Learning director is a YMCA employee who works for an Achievement Plus program at Johnson Elementary. The site-based director also runs the Y's summer camp program and has extensive contact with family and community members.

The potential for confusion and conflict while trying to please multiple supervisors is immense, especially because during the first two years the position was funded half by Achievement Plus and half by the Y. Now the site-based director turns to the Director of Extended Learning for guidance on programming and procedural matters pertinent to Extended Learning, to the principal on school administrative issues, and to the Y for non-Achievement Plus

“Six months from now, something else may come up [to threaten family stability]. Because of the relationship we’ve built, they’re going to come back to us, and we’re going to be able to empower them on that issue, too. The goal is self-sufficiency . . . [so they can] handle the situation on their own.”

—Joan Schlecht
Eastside Family Center

matters. The director of the YMCA, meanwhile, works to connect the entities by talking informally with the principal, providing space for SPPS workshops, and orienting new YMCA staff to the school. Early tensions between the school and YMCA have mostly faded, as all partners work to create relationships that transcend individual leadership.

Development of a Mission Statement and Expectations

Johnson Elementary's principal and faculty developed their first mission statement in 2000–01, the school's first year. By the second year, however, the principal was aware of major philosophical differences among staff. The school staff revisited the mission and began to make it more precise, especially after realizing there would be significant staff turnover between the second and third years. The statement that emerged was, “In partnership with our parents and community, we will commit all of our resources and efforts for all children to reach high academic standards and become contributing members of society.”

In spring 2003, the leadership team went a step further and compiled a list of expectations for all staff, which they circulated broadly for comment. The resulting statement is now given to all prospective new teachers.

The Link between School Reform and Community Building

Johnson Elementary began as a school-reform effort but became much more: a catalyst and vehicle for neighborhood revitalization. This was an extended, resource-intensive, and emotionally volatile progression, however, during which school construction issues had to be balanced with the community's concerns about affordable housing and resident empowerment. Similarly, Achievement Plus had to work to keep community redevelopment issues aligned, rather than in competition, with the process of improving education.

In part, the fact that Johnson Elementary's transformation was so complicated and extensive helped to push the experience closer to community development than to a traditional school renovation. But to some Achievement Plus planners and partners, especially Wilder's Tom Kingston and

ESNDC's Mike Anderson, the concepts of schools as the center of community life and high-quality education as a catalyst for neighborhood revitalization were inseparable.

"Once the project had a strong person [Maria J. Lamb] in charge, I immediately started thinking about how it could become part of a larger solution," says Kingston. "Without a neighborhood school you don't have a sense of place; but that alone is not enough." That shared belief spurred Wilder to develop the Opportunity Housing Investment Fund, which aims to improve the quality, availability, and affordability of housing around the school, and energized ESNDC's continuing efforts to renovate storefronts, start small businesses, and develop the Phalen Corridor.

Those activities fanned the flames of stakeholder engagement, convincing people to invest new resources in the East Side as "social venture" partners. "It brought a lot of pride to some of the economic development efforts. It brought community volunteers to the program. It brought in a lot of cross-pollination among programs," says Kingston.

V. Looking Back: Lessons and Observations

Less than a decade ago, the idea that schools in Saint Paul’s most troubled neighborhoods might boast exemplary Curriculum, Extended Learning, and Learning Supports with rich partnerships—let alone serve as community hubs and catalysts for neighborhood rebirth—seemed like a pipe dream. Today, with the Achievement Plus Community School initiative growing in three schools, it seems like an attainable reality. Johnson Elementary, with its improved test scores, ability to demonstrate best practices, and successful record of community involvement, is the flagship site for the initiative. In that capacity, the Johnson Elementary experience has important lessons to offer about the strategies, opportunities, and resources needed to achieve the goals; the turning points that shape this type of school-community partnership; and the value added by Achievement Plus.

Necessary Strategies, Opportunities, and Resources

What does it take to turn a daring reform initiative into a positive, collaborative effort? What opportunities, resources, attitudes, and partners are essential? Achievement Plus collaborators involved with Johnson Elementary 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. They also ensure consistency across classrooms and grade levels.

The designers of Achievement Plus envisioned student achievement as the primary measure of the initiative’s success. Until Maria J. Lamb arrived, however, they could not focus enough attention on instruction and curriculum to produce positive results. One reason was that the Children’s Aid Society’s community schools

initiative was the template for Achievement Plus and that model was not organized around academic improvement. Johnson Elementary experienced this problem less acutely than other Achievement Plus schools because it opened last (and closer to Lamb’s arrival), and the belief that academic strategies are preeminent had a strong influence on how Johnson Elementary leaders deployed their resources and energies.

- **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 that plan.
- **Capitalize on resources and conditions that exist locally.** Despite the challenges of partnership, everyone agrees that if Johnson Elementary and the YMCA had not formed an alliance, it would have been a failure for the community school concept, a waste of resources, and a lost opportunity to leverage the simultaneous revitalization of two major neighborhood institutions.

... 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 firm on expectations.

... *For Community Involvement*

- **Give parents and community groups input into the planning, development, and leadership process.** A good basic strategy is to keep the district planning councils informed about the project. Such councils are effective conduits of information to residents, and their meetings offer a venue for broad public discussion.
- **If you go to the trouble of requesting community advice, use it.** Johnson Elementary planners presented multiple designs for the school's layout and architecture and selected the one with the strongest neighborhood support.
- **Make sure someone with authority to make decisions attends all neighborhood meetings.** At Johnson Elementary, that person often was Patrick F. Quinn, SPPS's Executive Director of the Office of School Services. Residents say his presence was crucial to their belief that they had an authentic voice in the planning process.
- **Community involvement often begins with home ownership.** Several of Johnson Elementary's most active resident partners say that if they or their family members hadn't owned property in the neighborhood, they would not have cared much about what happened to the block. Johnson Elementary planners recognized that fact, and they also realized that by shifting the focus from home displacement to housing redevelopment they might alleviate dislocated renters' resistance. Thus the district helped some displaced residents use their compensation as down payments on other properties and, in four cases, paid to move houses to new sites.
- **Community involvement can produce new leaders and foster residents' professional growth.** One positive side effect of resident engagement in the Johnson Elementary project was the emergence of new, previously latent community leaders. Residents who discovered new talents now are strong community advocates and role models.

Two strategies helped Achievement Plus connect school improvement to other community revitalization efforts: establishing a school liaison to the community and linking with a credible community organization. Johnson Elementary benefited from being the home base for Achievement Plus's Director of Student and Family Support, who stimulated connections between the school and community by reaching out to both residents and community groups. Johnson Elementary also benefited from an alliance with ESNDC, whose style of community organizing had credibility in a neighborhood distrustful of most formal institutions.

- **Don't make promises you can't keep.** At first, Achievement Plus tried to accommodate the community's desire for a very broad range of services and supports. But that vision was so grand that it was impossible to deliver. Scaling back required careful communication with community members to make sure they didn't feel Achievement Plus was backing out of its commitments.
- **Don't take the attitude that you're "saving" or "helping" the community; make it an equal partnership.** The strategy of beginning public conversations before floor plans had been drafted helped Achievement Plus in that regard. SPPS and its partners could prove they were looking for community input and weren't already committed to preconceived ideas.

... *For Partnership and Ownership*

- **Cultivate the support of "influential elites" and public champions** such as state legislators, the mayor, county manager, district council members, school superintendent, and deputies of public agencies so the initiative becomes (and remains) their priority. Constantly supply them with information and opportunities to get involved.
- **Promote win-win relationships.** The types of assistance that community organizations could bring to the table were obvious. But what could

a partnership with Johnson Elementary give them that would make it worth their effort? Achievement Plus leaders sold the partnership concept by emphasizing three valuable resources: access to students, parents, and the community; rent-free space; and some use of school equipment and utilities.

- **Have each partner play its strongest suit.** When the Johnson Elementary project had to relocate families and acquire land, the school district's involvement was vital because SPPS had the power to condemn and acquire properties. ESNDC and the Wilder Foundation were better suited to developing replacement housing and helping community members buy into an overarching concept of neighborhood revitalization. The YMCA, meanwhile, has little involvement in academic matters but is a magnet for bringing community members into the school and provides a great resource for students.
- **Embed the push for change within the school system.** It often takes a firm nudge from the outside to start the ball rolling, but to keep it rolling the district ultimately must own the initiative—especially when academic improvement is the goal. Maria J. Lamb embedded Achievement Plus in the top levels of SPPS by reporting directly to Patricia A. Harvey, even before Lamb was Chief Education Officer. When Lamb and Tom Kingston also agreed to let the Wilder Foundation drop back from a leadership position to a supporting one, it cleared the way for SPPS to take charge.
- **Develop a mechanism to help outside agencies integrate with the school environment.** Until Johnson Elementary established a Student Support Team, partnering agencies struggled to get teachers to refer students to them. Making presentations at teacher staff meetings didn't do the trick; they needed a forum where service providers and teachers could get to know and trust each other, and the support team provides that format.

Furthermore, partners have to look beyond their own organizational interests to the common goal: fostering children's academic growth. Notes the YMCA's Tom Brinsko, "You can't just wear your organizational hat and expect this to work. You have to think more broadly; you need to make the achievement of kids the primary focus."

... For Professional Development

- **If teachers are to use and demonstrate best practices, they need to build knowledge and skills.** SPPS emphasizes professional development for all teachers, but for Johnson Elementary teachers it is especially important. SPPS reinforced the link between Achievement Plus and professional development by placing both under the supervision of one administrator, Maria J. Lamb. Forging a mission statement and set of expectations, early on, also helped Johnson Elementary promote a culture of continuous learning.
- **Professional development needs to be linked to a strong model for curriculum and instruction.** The model should be nonprescriptive and emphasize peer learning. Teachers should feel that professional development opportunities will help them in their classrooms and also enhance the learning experience for their students.

... For Creating and Maintaining a School as a Demonstration Site

- **In the high-stakes environment of a demonstration school, every bit of teacher support and recognition counts.** Johnson Elementary educators expend a tremendous amount of energy and commitment on teaching. They participate in annual institutes and weekly staff development meetings by subject or grade level, made possible by the 10 extra staff professional development days added to the district contract. "It helps that we have so many resources available," says a sixth-grade teacher.

- **Be clear about what you want to demonstrate and who will demonstrate it.** SPPS administrators decided Johnson Elementary would demonstrate three components—teaching, Extended Learning, and partnerships—and also provide a laboratory where visiting teachers could watch their peers practicing new skills.
- **Give teachers time to build a cohesive team before opening the school to observation.** This is advisable even for a school with very good teachers, especially if they come from different environments and teaching models. After learning this lesson, SPPS moved to exempt first-year Johnson Elementary faculty from classroom observations and reduced the number of large demonstrations given annually.

... *For School “Vision” and Leadership*

- **To keep academic progress front and center, a school like Johnson Elementary needs instructional teacher-leaders or literacy coaches** who are very strong in content and instruction and can deliver their knowledge effectively to other teachers in the school, whether those faculty are new teachers or veterans.
- **Expectations for students should be consistent across the school.** At Johnson Elementary, all teachers use Responsive Classroom management techniques, and all students know the rules of behavior for classrooms and hallways. This fosters a sense that everyone is working together and ensures that basic messages get reinforced at each grade level and by every teacher.
- **Staff need to share a vision for education that reaches beyond the classroom, and they must keep that vision in mind.** It could be easy for a school like Johnson Elementary, with so much going on, to lose focus on why it does what it does. An overarching question asked frequently by and of Achievement Plus collaborators is, “What’s in it for the kids?”

“The lesson we learned is that . . . we have different levels of schools and classrooms. Level I means [teachers are] just getting into the practice. Level II is ready to be a demonstration classroom. Level III, at an individual or school level, means you’re ready to [give] training.”

—Patricia A. Harvey
Saint Paul Public Schools

... *For Sustainability*

- **Limited turnover in key staff positions is crucial.** Johnson Elementary has been able to develop the community school concept and cultivate deep relationships with families because the people who work most closely with community members and who also direct the initiative have been with the project since its inception.

Turning Points

Looking back on the path that Johnson Elementary took to become a model of good teaching, learning, and community partnership, several turning points are apparent.

Obtaining State Funds

At a cost of approximately \$29.5 million, rebuilding John A. Johnson was an expensive proposition. Until the state legislature contributed funds, it was not certain that the project could move forward. After the state’s grant, collaborators say, there was no doubt.

Moving from Planning to Implementation

Long time participants in the Johnson Elementary project say that no one fully understood how hard it would be to open a new school building. For the first part of the first year, the cafeteria wasn't ready, so students ate lunch in the halls; the new YMCA wasn't done, so buses took students six blocks to the old facility. Administrators made do with makeshift offices. Moreover, there were hundreds of children to manage and educate; staff didn't have as much time to reach out to the community as they'd had during planning.

Growth in Teacher Familiarity with the Standards-Based Curriculum

Johnson Elementary educators generally agree that America's Choice School Design was a good approach for the school because it emphasizes professional development and uses a high-quality research base. But the school design introduced many new concepts into the school very quickly, and there wasn't enough time in the day to present everything America's Choice called for. Teachers felt stressed. However, by the third year, teachers had begun to internalize the approach and knew which components took precedence.

Development of a Coordinating Structure for Learning Supports

The turning point for learning supports came when Johnson Elementary established a Resource Coordination Team, which supports and institutionalizes the work of the student and family support staff.

Formation of Real Partnerships between School Staff and Learning Partners

When Johnson Elementary first opened, teachers and service providers had to learn how to work together as a team to benefit students and families. In 2002–03, however, the services were more fully integrated as teachers saw improvements in the students who received support services. For instance, teachers asked the Eastside Family Center for help when students were in danger of leaving Johnson

Elementary because of their family's mobility. Connections between the staffs have come a long way and bode well for the future.

Value Added by Achievement Plus

What accomplishments can be attributed to Achievement Plus at Johnson Elementary?

- **Academic improvement.** In a school where the majority of students qualify for federally subsidized meals and are children of color—two characteristics that often correlate with academic struggle in school—Johnson Elementary has a larger proportion of third-graders reading at or above standard than the district, as measured by the state MCA test, and an average NCE score (55.8) exceeding the national average (50.0), as measured by the SAT10 test. The boost in performance has not yet spread to every academic subject in every grade, but it is a big step in the right direction.
- **Family stability.** At the end of Johnson Elementary's first year, 70 of 207 students who began the school year had moved to another school, and half of those had left town entirely. Stability has improved due to the school's partnership with ESND and a housing consultant, who have helped several families find alternative housing near the school.
- **Neighborhood stability.** Before the renovation of Johnson, the East Side lost a steady stream of houses to vacancy as families moved to better neighborhoods. Various groups had poured money into stopgap solutions but had not been able to stem the tide. In the four years since Johnson Elementary reopened, however, there has not been a newly vacant house in the neighborhood.
- **Child health.** Students have better access to immunizations, screenings, health education, and basic care than in the past.
- **Child mental health.** Many of Johnson Elementary's students live in families that are stressed in many ways. Parents may not have the

time or energy to teach social skills or to intervene when children have emotional problems. The therapists and family outreach workers provided by Achievement Plus's partners offer counseling, role modeling, and medical treatment or referrals that have helped many children focus on learning.

- **Community cohesiveness.** Teachers who came to Johnson Elementary from schools that drew students from multiple neighborhoods see more parents taking an interest in Johnson Elementary and participating in school life.

Family members attend special assemblies that feature their children's literacy activities and volunteer to help with classroom projects.

- **Physical environment.** The sense of pride that East Siders feel for Johnson Elementary is reflected in the area around the school. Continuing neighborhood revitalization is evident, with homes being rehabbed, business being created, and a general feeling of community pride returning to the neighborhood.

VI. Looking Ahead: Challenges and Opportunities

The revitalization of Johnson Elementary laid a strong basis for education reform on the East Side of Saint Paul to become part of larger community-building efforts. Johnson Elementary now is the hub of the community for people who have children at the school or are involved in the family center. Through the housing fund that grew out of the Johnson Elementary project, and through the Phalen Corridor project to build transportation and commercial infrastructure, redevelopment is expanding beyond the school's immediate area.

There are still issues to work out at Johnson Elementary, however. Teachers continue to work through the demands of working in a demonstration school. And as Extended Learning and Learning Supports grow along with the Johnson Elementary community, Achievement Plus will have to continue to revisit what each partnership is doing for the school, the families, and the students. Noted Maria J. Lamb in an Achievement Plus videotape, "Transforming schools and transforming systems require deep change. The challenge is, how do we keep children engaged in schools . . . [and] keep a neighborhood moving together?"

Coordination and communication among Achievement Plus, school, and partner agency staff

are another continuing challenge. The Resource Coordinating Team seems to be helping, but coordination strategies for the school and YMCA are still evolving. There are administrative details to resolve, too. Do the benefits, in terms of academic achievement, family support, and neighborhood stability, warrant that additional cost? Most people who know the school and have seen its effects on individual children and families firsthand believe that they do. But for the public at large, test scores are the indicator of success. At Johnson Elementary, scores are headed in the right direction, as evidenced by the current testing scores.

Johnson Elementary is many things to many people with many different expectations. Still, people agree that a school like Johnson Elementary is a rare and wonderful opportunity to improve long-term outcomes for children and their community. "A neighborhood getting better is a good thing," observes ESND's Mike Anderson. "You have to create opportunities for increasing wealth in the neighborhood. You have to create opportunities for families, through good schools and housing. As a school, you have to create opportunities for kids by making them competent. The bottom line is, you need competent kids and competent families to create competent neighborhoods."

"The primary factor that convinced me to make my professional move to Saint Paul was the incredible potential of John A. Johnson Achievement Plus Elementary School. I have not been disappointed."

—Maria J. Lamb
Saint Paul Public Schools

ACHIEVEMENT PLUS

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