Des Moines Public School District: The Downtown School

More information is available at:

Table 5-2. Core ideas in the Des Moines Public School District: The Downtown School  
(http://old.dmps.k12.ia.us/schools/1Downtown/)

This is a checklist to describe the major features of each school. Check the box if the item is an important element of the school philosophy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attainment-based student progress</th>
<th>X</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Customized learning</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Project space and instructional space</td>
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<td>Criterion-referenced assessment</td>
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<td>Criterion-referenced student records</td>
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<td>New roles for teachers</td>
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<td>New roles for technology</td>
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<td>New roles for parents</td>
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<td>Multi-age grouping &amp; multi-year mentoring</td>
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<tr>
<td>Enjoyable learning</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Skills for self-directed learning</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collaborative learning</td>
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<td>Learning by teaching</td>
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<td>Well-rounded development</td>
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<td>Small learning communities</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>Choice for students, parents, and teachers</td>
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<td>Family services</td>
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<td>A learning cooperative</td>
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History of the school:

The Downtown School is the result of a cooperative effort with individuals in the school system and business leaders in the Des Moines, Iowa, area. School officials and business leaders got together to discuss ideal school settings in the late 1980’s. The main question considered was how can we make this particular school a role model for other schools? Business leaders raised money, but the school district took it over. Financial pieces now rest with the school. This is the last year for the Downtown School at the current location, and next year they will move into district buildings to solve the problem of increasing lease costs. The school will still be in the downtown area on the western fringe of the business district next year on a new campus. Demolition and construction on the new site will begin by December, 2010.
The most impressive thing about the school is that the teachers and parents are not afraid of challenges and something new. When they heard that the funding for the school was drying up it could have been a major obstacle. Instead of frustration, teachers and staff looked at it as an opportunity to have a permanent home.

The Downtown School has very high parent involvement, which is probably the main component that we have making the school successful. School of choice parents have made a conscious decision for their child to attend. The attendance is for the entire school area. Outside communities can send their students to the school so the school does not require students’ families to live in the Des Moines public school area. It is not a “high rent” application process.

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1. Learning experiences. (Project based)

Project based learning has such a wide variety of approaches. How they are able to share that with parents depends on age and ability. The school utilizes a multi-age structure. The manner in which knowledge is shared varies widely in the way it is displayed to their parents/audience. Students often share that information in presentations.

2. Teacher’s role

There is a teacher of record for each child, but each classroom is multi-age classrooms with about half of the students being a younger age and half being older. During reading or math they might exchange with partner teachers. At each level there are children moving from one class to another, or from table to table. No desks are used for students who use table and community grouping. Teachers don’t have desks, but a computer station and a table where they can sit down with the students. When children need something in another area they move to that area.

3. Schools as professional clusters.
4. Choice, incentive, and decision-making systems.
5. Clusters as learning organizations

The Downtown school used individualized learning in everything we do. Smaller class size makes the school work. There is a one-on-one focus on every child. Class size ranges from 16-21, and the school goal is to have class sizes no larger than 18. Budget issues have made class size begin to increase.

7. Learning contracts.

Learning contracts are a part of every student’s program. They are a part of the student-led conference and the Learning Portfolio.

8. Developmental levels.
If child is learning at fifth or sixth grade level in third grade, they are reading at the higher level. If they need the curriculum, they receive it but still move forward.

9. Children with special needs.

The Downtown school has one special education teacher who covers students in both the main building plus a secondary site. As is true throughout the district they write IEPs with parents. IEPs and Learning goals are very similar. The IEP is more of a legal document with specifics we have to follow. It specifies that the teacher may work with the student directly for a period of time. The goals that are written on the portfolios are more general and indicate what level they are trying to reach.

Different intervention groups work with students who need extra work. Intervention groups may consist of any professionals who are involved with students, whether from the home classroom or another classroom.

10. Curriculum

Curriculum is decided district-wide, but is readily modified for student needs. Standard texts are available to students. Art, Physical Education, and Music are handled by the classroom teacher and not by specialists.

11. Assessment

Portfolios are the means of collecting information that are most often used. Twice a year, the school uses student-led 3-way conferences with parent(s), the teacher, and the student. A main goal of the conference is to share the student portfolio. All parties must sign the portfolio, which includes learning goals set out for the upcoming semester.

The portfolio includes an educational portfolio that was designed by a committee of teachers over the summer of 2010. It is being used for the first time in the 2010-2011 school year. It includes social development, life skills, ability to solve increasingly complex tasks. The portfolio includes a narrative by the teacher about what the student’s accomplishments included on a monthly basis. Also reported are personal development, records accomplishments, academic and personal student goals, and writing samples. Students participate directly in the goal-setting process.

When the Downtown School shares student progress, it is measured with the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS). Students score in the mid 70’s, closer to 80’s in reading and math. The school doesn’t put a lot of effort into ITBS. There are some things that students haven’t been exposed to but we ask teachers to follow district curriculum and not be worried about the standardized testing. We are not overly concerned and they hope that they don’t need to get that way.

12. Technology

Technology was described by the principal of the Downtown School as “not much”. There is a classroom workstation in every class. In last two years there has been an Infocus and an Elmo in every lower level classroom. Each teacher has a document projector. Classrooms tend to use a lot of manipulatives in the instruction. One of the ways that the Infocuses are used is that teachers give
students a problem and there are 8 children in the group, with different number choices and a student will work with the various choices. Children demonstrate their learning with the classmates and share the strategy that they used.

There are plans to purchase IPads for each student, but those plans are still being made.

13. Administration.


Starting out, the school was looked at with a lot of anticipation, and people thought it was a very temporary concept. Business leaders, teachers, and administrators spent one year researching best practices. Commitments from the district that the school would be allowed to follow a different pattern made it possible to pursue different goals. Items addressed in the planning included Association acceptance of unique hiring practices and changes in calendar involving extra days being added to the calendar.

The Downtown school has quite a bit of autonomy from the beginnings of the school. They are confident in the ability to do something different if we have research to back it up. When the district was using another math program, the Downtown School was able to use the CGI program. There were many interested, and CGI ties in closely with the Turk math program. Turk has now combined with Pierson’s Investigations, so last year when the new math adoption was chosen, every school had a choice of Everyday Math or Investigations. Most of the schools involved with CGI chose Investigations. The programs are used as more of a resource than a strict program.

The PTA often supports unique programs financially if district financing is not readily available.

The Downtown School is set up like most schools. School governance consists of a principal and a dean of students. The principal’s job is to do performance reviews, but the principal is aware of the need to be physically present in the classrooms every day, not necessarily for a performance review.

Teachers are involved in hiring decisions along with partner teachers and the dean of students. An agreement with the professional Association provides the opportunity to see teachers teach before Human Resources will assign them to the Downtown School. Teachers need to know the expectations before they are hired. Teachers wouldn’t want our dress code, for example, they wouldn’t want the extra effort. There are no specialists who often provide planning time for teachers. All teachers must make that kind of commitment. Teachers are interviewed and the new potential partner is a part of that process.

15. Other human service systems.

Parents are responsible for all student transportation. There is presently an onsite child care facility that is active before and after school.


17. Evidence of effectiveness.

The Downtown School is now considered a model for best practices, with numerous teachers from both in-district and outside of the district making observations and taking pieces of the curriculum to
their home schools. Other schools, like the Walnut School (another elementary school in the district) are using a lot of good techniques. We have International Baccalaureate schools curriculum active in our school, and Walnut Elementary School has done that as well. We emphasize experiential based education which is basically our project based education

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