

## SCHOOL PROFILE

**Walker International Middle School**  
1712 S. 32<sup>nd</sup> St.  
Milwaukee, WI 53215



- Type of School:** \*Middle School (grades 6-8)
- Location:** \*Central Milwaukee: Layton Boulevard West Neighborhood; located approximately 3 miles southwest of downtown Milwaukee  
\*Urban: All students in Milwaukee have access to Walker through a school choice selection process
- Size:** \*Approximately 747 students  
\* One of 25 middle schools in the Milwaukee Public School system
- Student Population:** \*Most racially balanced school in Milwaukee – 32% African-American, 22% Caucasian, 36% Hispanic, 6% Asian, 3.5% American Indian, .5% other.  
\*All students are included in a team-taught heterogeneous University structure (i.e., similar to a house or family structure) with the exception of several students having severe disabilities who are mainstreamed for part of their day.
- Principal:** \*Susan Apps – Respected by the teachers, parents, community member, and MPS administrators.  
\*Ms. Apps has lived her entire life in the neighborhood.  
\*Strong connections with neighborhood and city groups.
- Teachers:** \*Team-teach in a University (i.e., family or house) structure with one special educator assigned to support each University.  
\*Teachers in each University loop through all three grades with the students by teaching the 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade curriculum.

**Summary of Classrooms, Teachers, and Students Involved in the Research Study  
Walker International Middle – Milwaukee, WI  
1998-2001**

**Spring Semester, 1999:**

**Class:** 7<sup>th</sup> & 8<sup>th</sup> Grade Reading Resource  
**Hour:** 12:30-2:30  
**Teacher:** Sandy Ruesink – Reading Teacher  
**Target Students:** Devon; Patrick; William; Caleb; 50% of the class has special needs  
**Class Make-up:** 24 students total: 10 boys; 14 girls; 4 Causasian; 1 Asian; 19 Black or Latino

**Class:** 6<sup>th</sup> Grade Social Studies  
**Hour:** 9:30-10:20  
**Teacher:** Mr. Murray  
**Target Students:** Whole class observation; Dion; Anthony  
**Class Make-up:** 18 students total: 11 boys; 7 girls

**Class:** 7<sup>th</sup> Grade Reading  
**Hour:** 10:20-11:30  
**Teacher:** Sandy Ruesink – Reading Teacher  
**Target students:** Whole class observation

**1999-2000 Academic Year:**

**Class:** 8<sup>th</sup> Grade Reading (Scholastic At-Risk Class)  
**Hour:** 9:15-10:30  
**Teacher:** Sandy Ruesink – Reading Teacher  
**Target students:** Whole class observation; All non-EEN students reading at a 4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> grade level; Gary is the only student with disabilities in the class; Jeremiah  
**Class Make-up:** 13 students total: 7 boys; 6 girls; Mixed races

**Class:** Computer Lab Class  
**Hour:** 10:30-12:00  
**Teacher:** Mrs. Klingsporn  
**Target students:** Whole class observation; Students with Emotional Disturbance and Learning Disabilities are fully integrated in this class; Students with Cognitive Disabilities are as integrated as possible  
**Class Make-up:** 13 students total: 7 boys; 6 girls; Mixed races

**Class:** 7<sup>th</sup> Grade Special Education Resource (University of Barcelona)  
**Hour:** 12:05-12:35  
**Teacher:** Stephanie Pups – Special Education Teacher; 1 paraprofessional  
**Target students:** Whole class observation;  
**Class Make-up:** 17 students total: 12 boys; 5 girls; Mixed races

**Class:** 7<sup>th</sup> Reading (University of Barcelona)  
**Hour:** 9:30-10:20  
**Teacher:** Stephanie Pups – Special Education Teacher;  
**Target students:** Whole class observation; Mary; James; Sam; Caleb; Kyle; Ontario  
**Class Make-up:** 20 students total: 11 boys; 9 girls; 5 Caucasian; 15 Black or Hispanic

**Class:** 7<sup>th</sup> Grade Reading – Homeroom (University of Barcelona)  
**Hour:** 10:20- 11:30  
**Teacher:** Stephanie Pups – Special Education Teacher  
**Target students:** Whole class observation; Jose; Patricia; Cruise; Jason;  
**Class Make-up:** 18 students total: 9 boys; 9 girls; Mixed races

**Class:** 7<sup>th</sup> Grade Science (University of Barcelona)  
**Hour:** 12:30-1:20  
**Teacher:** Mrs. Porter – Science Teacher  
**Target students:** Whole class observation  
**Class Make-up:** 18 students total: 11 boys; 7 girls; 2 Caucasian; 16 Black, Hispanic or Asian

**Class:** 7<sup>th</sup> Grade Science (University of Barcelona)  
**Hour:** 9:15-10:20  
**Teacher:** Mrs. Porter – Science Teacher  
**Target students:** Whole class observation; James; Kyle; Sam; Mary  
**Class Make-up:** 20 students total: Mixed races

**Class:** 7<sup>th</sup> Grade Science (University of Barcelona)  
**Hour:** 10:20-11:30  
**Teacher:** Mrs. Porter – Science Teacher  
**Target students:** Whole class observation; Aaron; Jamie; Patricia; Cruise;  
**Class Make-up:** 17 students total: 8 boys; 9 girls; Mixed races

**Class:** 7<sup>th</sup> Grade English (University of Barcelona)  
**Hour:** 10:30-11:30  
**Teacher:** Mr. Kotnick – English Teacher  
**Target students:** Whole class observation; James; Jose; Mary; Caleb; Ontario; Mike  
**Class Make-up:** 18 students total: 9 boys; 9 girls; 3 Caucasian; 15 Black, Hispanic or Asian

**Class:** 7<sup>th</sup> Grade English (University of Barcelona)  
**Hour:** 12:30-1:40  
**Teacher:** Mr. Kotnick – English Teacher  
**Target students:** Whole class observation; Cruise; Jose; Robert; Jason; Denise; Patricia; Mike; Jamie  
**Class Make-up:** 20 students total: 9 boys; 14 girls; Mixed races

**Class:** Social Studies (University of Barcelona)  
**Hour:** 9:15-10:20  
**Teacher:** Mr. Bare – Social Studies Teacher  
**Target students:** Whole class observation; Aaron; Josario; Danny; Greg  
**Class Make-up:** 17 students total: 8 boys; 9 girls; Mixed races

**Class:** Social Studies (University of Barcelona)  
**Hour:** 10:20-11:30  
**Teacher:** Mr. Bare – Social Studies Teacher  
**Target students:** Whole class observation; Rudy; Cory; Raisa;  
**Class Make-up:** 19 students total: 12 boys; 7 girls; Mixed races

**Researchers who observed, interviewed, and recorded data**

Kim Beloin                      Spring 1999 – Fall 2000  
 Paula DeHart                    Spring 1999, Spring 2000  
 Michele Zeigler                Spring 1999  
 Nancy Proctor                  Fall 1999-Fall, 2000

**People Formally Interviewed**

6-2-00	Susan Apps	Principal	Interview by: Proctor
3-15-00	Stephanie Pups	Special Educator	Interview by: DeHart
1-21-00	Stephanie Pups	Special Educator	Interview by: Beloin

Ongoing informal interviews were conducted with those teachers who were observed throughout the school year.

**Curriculum:**

Read 180 Program  
 Scholastic Reading Program

### **EMPOWER CITIZENS IN A DEMOCRACY:**

- Walker has a shared Decision-making Council in which staff are included on all decisions.
- Middle school students work with elementary students in 2 neighborhood elementary schools as academic tutors and on neighborhood projects.
- Students and staff develop and implement many cultural programs due to the multiculturalism present within the school and neighborhood.

### **INCLUDE ALL:**

- The majority of students with academic, behavioral, and physical disabilities are included in heterogeneously grouped Universities. Some students with severe challenges are mainstreamed into general education courses and receive special services in a school-based program.
- Title I services are provided within the general education classroom. Students are not labeled or pulled-out for services.
- “Teachers and students know that special education is a service and not a place.”

### **TEACH & ADAPT FOR DIVERSITY:**

- Students are involved in many different authentic learning opportunities, including the electronic intergenerational book club and the archeological dig.
- Math and science classes demand project-based learning and cooperative learning.
- Teachers make appropriate accommodations for testing in order to include students with IEP’s in district and state-wide assessments and proficiency projects.

### **BUILD COMMUNITY & SUPPORT LEARNING:**

- One special education teacher is assigned to each University to support all students with disabilities in that university.
- Daily team meeting time is used to plan and decide on necessary supports for students.
- Teachers provide consistent support to students by looping through all three grades with the students in their University.

### **PARTNERING:**

- A full-time parent coordinator is employed by the school to serve as a coordinator and liaison between the school, family and neighborhood.
- Walker has a formal partnership with Layton Blvd. Neighbors West.
- Walker International Middle School opens the school facility to the neighborhood citizens through the nightly programs such as: open gymnasium, community learning center, and school-community health care center.
- Maximus provides adult computer classes in the evenings.
- Journey House provides cultural classes in the school.
- 4-5 parent volunteers in the school every day.

- Walker International Middle School has formal partnerships with:
  - The Boys and Girls Club – provides evening and Saturday activities in the school building.
  - Aurora Health Care and City Health Services – staffing for a health clinic within the school for students and community members.
  - Layton Boulevard West Neighborhood Group – Hand delivers school newsletters to neighborhood residents each month.

## **Introduction**

Walker International Middle School is an urban school serving a diverse and international population of students with and without disabilities. Walker International was chosen as a research site because the school community exemplifies the five principles of Whole Schooling in its own unique, yet effective way. This school profile will provide specific examples illustrating how the Whole Schooling Principles are implemented across age, grade and ability levels.

## **Principle 1: Empower Citizens in a Democracy**

The first principle of Whole Schooling is to help students learn to function as effective citizens in a democracy. This principle is the core goal of our public education system and is exemplified in a number of different ways. The examples below are taken mainly from interviews and observations over a two-year period of time. When looking at the many examples, several main themes or findings emerged.

### **Finding 1: Committed respected school leaders support the school community in democratic decision-making.**

Ms. Susan Apps is the principal at Walker International Middle School. Ms. Apps has lived in the Walker neighborhood her entire life and is very supportive of and committed to the school and neighborhood. Ms. Apps is not only highly respected by the school community, but also by the neighborhood and the community at-large.

When it comes to decision-making, one teacher stated, “We have committees for everything. This is good but sometimes it takes a long time to decide things. Building committee talks about any important issues going on in the school, like running in the hall or referrals that aren’t being followed up on. We have a Sunshine committee, a charter school committee, and many others.” When asked more specifically if all decisions were made by committees, “No. There are some administrative decisions, but then our principal might do an opinion poll to find out what we think. We might have three or four options and then vote for one. We used this procedure for deciding on when to have parent teacher conferences. We had four choices and we picked one of the four.”

Walker International is one out of three schools in the Whole Schooling Research Project that had becoming or was in the process of becoming a Charter School. Walker International, like other schools that seek charter school status wanted to have more autonomy and decision-making power. One staff member shared, “We have a charter school committee because we have become a charter school. We call ourselves a charter school because we have filled out all of the paperwork, and we are almost there. We have to decide how much we want to go by the guidelines of the Milwaukee Public Schools. We can't opt out of having students pass the proficiencies, that it is mandated.

We are almost like a private public school. We can make some of our budget decisions and enrollment decisions.”

Given charter status, Walker International has the autonomy to make more decisions on a school-level. Given interview data, the staff had indicated that they feel most decisions are made in a democratic manner. The only comment made in opposition to this finding was, “Our principal needs to have a little more backbone as far as making decisions.” Overall, there was substantial evidence to show that the majority, if not all, decisions are made with input from school-based stakeholders.

### **Finding 2: Students are involved in leadership roles and decision-making.**

Although finding 2 emerged out of the data from all eight research schools, observation and interview data did not provide evidence that finding 2 was present at Walker International Middle School. However, it should be noted that this doesn’t mean there are no opportunities for students to be involved in leadership roles and decision-making opportunities. It simply indicates that the researchers did not see or hear about such opportunities when conducting observational visits and interviews. This would also be an excellent area for the Walker International School Community to be mindful of and to explore further.

### **Finding 3: Schools grow and change quickly, but schools reform slowly.**

This finding also emerged out of the data from all of the research sites combined. This finding did not emerge from the interview and observational data collected at Walker International Middle School. The staff and leaders at Walker International appear to be made in thoughtful and democratic ways. Some schools engage in quick changes when the staff is looking for long-term reform. At Walker, decisions regarding charter school status, partnerships with other groups, etc. appear to be made after thoughtful investigation. These decisions are made with input from stakeholders and are not looked at as quick fixes, but as long-term positive reform.

### **Finding 4: School leaders promote and believe that continual staff development, research, and collaboration improves the quality of education for all.**

Walker International Middle School has many collaborative partnerships. Due to the health care needs of the students, the leadership and staff at Walker sought a relationship with Aurora Health Care clinic. As a result of these efforts, Aurora Health Care provides health care services within the school building to the students and to the neighborhood as well. Walker International Middle School also has a collaborative partnership with the Boy’s and Girl’s Club. These collaborative partnerships and others will be described in greater detail later in this document.



Another example to support this finding is the school's interest in pursuing charter school status and the school staff's interest in being involved in the Whole Schooling Research project as a tool for further information and improvement within the school. Ms. Apps and others at Walker work hard to promote the positive practices at Walker. They are excited about all of the partnerships they have developed and maintained and they speak with enthusiasm about the many improvement initiative and projects that have been undertaken at the school over the last five years. Continual improvement appears to be a mission in action at Walker. The staff has accomplished much and continues to discuss ways to make further improvements and maintain the positive collaborative partnerships that have been working so well.

**Finding 5: Diversity across ethnicity, SES, culture, ability, etc. is accepted and valued.**

Diversity is in great abundance at Walker International Middle School. Walker is the most racially balanced school in Milwaukee with 32% of the students being African-American, 22% Caucasian, 36% Hispanic, 6% Asian, 3.5% American Indian, and .5% other. This racial balance is a real plus for the student body. Students are learning side-by-side with classmates who come from different backgrounds, races, and have different abilities.

All of the classes were quite diverse. In one of the reading/language arts classes that was regularly observed, there were 24 seventh and eighth-graders. It was a diverse class with four Caucasian girls, one Asian-American female, 9 additional girls who were either Latino or African-American and 10 boys who were Latino or African-American. The reading skills in the class varied widely from students who were at grade level to students who struggled to read anything. Ms. K's classroom had a female student who recently came to Walker and only speaks Arabic. She has an aunt and uncle that translate for her at home when she is working on homework assignments. Ms. K said that she had made great progress since coming to Walker. It was interesting to watch two students in particular in Ms. P's classroom. Freddie was a tall, African-American American students while his friend Adam was a white, redheaded boy. Watching these two boys work together was a positive reminder of just how diverse Walker students are and how little that seemed to matter to the student body. Students of all races, abilities, and ages sat among each other in the lunch room to eat and worked with each other in the classroom. It is a picture that illustrates the melting pot of Milwaukee.

**Finding 6: Students, Teachers, and parents are encouraged and empowered to develop their true selves.**

In democratic schools, all people are encouraged and empowered to develop their individuality. There were few observed examples of this finding at Walker. Again, it is with caution that this statement is made. There may be examples to illustrate this finding that should be included here, however, those examples were not prevalent during the observations and interviews conducted over the year and a half of school visits for this

research. One example that does stick out occurred in Mr. M's class. The students were all working on their assignment when Mr. M approached one student who was just sitting at his desk. They had a quiet conversation between the two of them when Mr. M said, "You have to think about what you want to do in the future. Right now your job is school." Mr. M. was encouraging this student to see the value in how his education could be a link to what he might want to become in a few short years.

On the counter side of this finding, there were some examples illustrating the use of the demerit system for students. The use of the demerit system as observed on various occasions seemed to be in conflict with this finding. Students may have been encouraged to see the link between what they were learning and what they would one day want to become, but the demerit system seemed to undermine that encouragement with a reactive consequence that focused on following school procedures and not on learning for meaning, value and purpose. This is a real challenge. Many of these students are disenfranchised from public education by the time they reach middle school. Many don't even show up for school anymore one they reach middle and high school. It is a complex issue that that staff struggles with on a daily basis.

## **Principle 2: Include All**

The second principle of Whole Schooling supports instructional practices where All children learn together across culture, ethnicity, language, ability, gender, and age. This principle is exemplified through different examples at Walker International Middle School. It is important to know that the school is structured in a house or family model, however, each house is called a "university." Some universities appear to provide more access to the general education curriculum than others. This research project focused on teachers and students in two – three of the universities for a more in-depth look. The following findings and corresponding examples will demonstrate this.

### **Finding 1: Students with disabilities have access to the general education curriculum.**

When observing in classroom, it is difficult to tell who has a disability and who does not. This is both the good news and the bad news. The good new is that students with disabilities are included and have full access to the general education curriculum being taught. The bad news is that so many urban students have academic delays and special needs and may not have been referred for special education or may not quite qualify for special education. Therefore, the classrooms in this large urban school have many students with academic needs who are learning together.

Students with emotional and learning disabilities were fully integrated into the majority of classrooms in the universities that were observed. Students with learning disabilities are fully integrated as well. Those students identified with cognitive disabilities (i.e., mental retardation) were integrated as much as possible, with accommodations being made to assignments, etc. Even with accommodations, students with disabilities were expected to complete assignments in the general education curriculum. Students with

disabilities also had access to technology to assist them in completing assignments. During one observation, Ms. R was helping Greg on the computer. He apparently forgot to save his work on a disk and had lost his previous work. He had to start the Inspiration project all over, but Ms. R was providing support for him.

During other observations, Roger, a student with a learning disability was always working very diligently in his classes. Ms. P said that he regularly comes to homework club after school to get extra support and assistance. English is not Roger's first language, which makes language even more difficult for Roger to learn and use. Based on multiple observations and interviews over a year and a half, the majority of students with disabilities do have access to the general education curriculum. They are included in general education classes within their university. Accommodations and supports are provided to them in order to have a reasonable chance to achieve success in their classes. Students appear to take advantage of teacher assistance in the classroom and after school through the homework club in order to progress in the general education curriculum.

### **Finding 2: Inclusion is valuable for kids with disabilities.**

Specific examples to illustrate this finding did not emerge from the data on Walker International Middle School. This finding is the result of the many examples that emerged from the data across all eight of the schools. The first finding provides some examples to illustrate that students with disabilities were included in the general education curriculum and in general education classrooms. This appears to have been a positive and valuable educational experience for the students, however, specific examples demonstrating that inclusion was valuable did not surface.

One informal interview comment that was made does raise a question regarding this finding at Walker. One teacher said, "We do have inclusion in this school, so we don't do pullout. Sometimes this doesn't work well because the general education teachers are not trained in special education and don't know how to accommodate. Then the special education teacher has two jobs. She has to teach classes like the other general education teachers and make all of the modifications for the students in the university. Then, sometimes accommodating isn't sufficient because the students are so far behind that they don't get anything out of the regular curriculum." This comment raises some important issues to monitor closely. If this is a pervasive issue across universities at Walker, a discussion and plan of action for making adjustments and changes will be needed in the future.

### **Finding 3: Inclusion improves the educational experience for all kids.**

Including the students with disabilities in general education classes within all of the universities has provided the different universities with a special education teacher. The special educators are used in different ways across each university. In the universities that were observed most closely, the special educator served as another classroom teacher by teaching reading and language arts content. During an interview, one special educator

stated, “I like to get to know all of the kids and be a resource person to them. I get to know so many of the kids, not just students with disabilities. Some of the kids maybe have never been referred but they are experiencing problems and need the special help.” This is one way in which inclusion has improved the educational experience for all of the students. Ms. P is available as a resource and support to any students who needs special assistance.

Smaller class sizes have been another way in which students all of the students benefit from inclusion. One of the science teachers specifically mentioned that she feels the entire group needs special help at different times. “The total inclusion allowed the classes to be significantly smaller and helped give all the kids greater attention.” All of the students benefit from lower pupil-teacher ratios. Given that this is a middle school, there is even a larger gap in the academic performance of the students as a group. Some students are academically at a high school level, others are on grade level, and yet others are reading at a 1.7 grade equivalency. The gap is also wide due to some of the urban issues that face the students, the neighborhood and the school. There is greater transiency in poor urban areas, which results in students moving from school to school quite often and students missing a lot school. Transiency also affects the special education referral process. Students may be referred for an evaluation and during the process move to another school or district. It takes time for the records to follow the student, which further delays the student’s ability to get the special help that is needed. There were also several new students each marking period that came from various other schools where they may have been expelled or were re-entering from alternative schools. These factors and others also widen the academic gap. Consequently, the reduction in pupil-teacher ratios and the ability to provide special assistance when needed and without going through the entire referral process has been helpful for all of the students.

#### **Finding 4: Inclusion provides positive, proactive supports for students.**

As already discussed in the previous finding, the smaller student-teacher ratios and the special assistance that is readily available from the special educator in each university are both positive and proactive supports for the students. In addition to these, the students with disabilities also have the opportunity to draw upon the expertise and support form all of the content area teachers in their university. They learn science, math, and social studies from expert teachers who have thoroughly studied and are committed to their academic discipline. This is much different from the old practices of special educators teaching all of the academic subjects to their group of students with disabilities. Ms. P. stated, “The kids with disabilities rotate through all the teachers just as their classmates do. I tell them if they need help with something they should ask the teacher in that classroom. They have a hard time with this they are not very good self advocates, but they are improving over time.” Ms. P also brings up the benefits of teaching students with disabilities how to advocate for themselves. By having a team of teachers they learn from, these students have daily opportunities to work on self-advocacy and communication skills with different adults.

In addition, teachers also see that students with disabilities are just like their non-disabled students in so many ways. One teacher said, “Some of the kids with disabilities have behavior problems, but then again half of the kids without disabilities also have behavior problems.” General educators begin to feel like they do know how to provide supports for students with disabilities because they have been dealing with the same or similar needs from their nondisabled students for many years.

Finally, there was one comment that counters this finding that is important to mention. One of the teachers expressed this concern. “I think there are many good things about inclusion, but for the reading, writing and arithmetic, if they don't have their skills down they should be pulled out to work on those so they don't feel alienated in the regular classroom.” This is the challenge and it is not unique to Walker. The challenge is to design a structure where students academic, social, and behavioral needs can be furthered in an inclusive environment. The first thought is to pull students out of the inclusive environment to accomplish this. Rather than look to pull-out services as the only answer, the staff is encouraged to be creative and think about other ways in which students could master their basic academic skills while being included with their peers. Based on observations of the different teaming configurations, teaching teams have been trying to structure short blocks of time within the day to address the individual concerns of students with significant academic delays. The special educator works with the students with special needs for 30 minutes per day after lunch to focus on any additional specialized help they may need in any of their subjects. The special educator believes it is her responsibility to know what types of things are being taught in the other teachers’ classrooms in order to effectively assist those students. There is also a 30-minute block to time in the morning for the special educator to assist any student in organizational skills and general assignments. However, the special educators believe more time is needed to be able to observe in the other classrooms and to gather content information.

### **Finding 5: Inclusion promotes the natural distribution of students.**

There were mixed examples of this finding at Walker International Middle School. Some of the universities did demonstrate the natural distribution of students while in others, students were grouped. For example, in one of the universities that was observed more intensely, the researchers were not able to identify who the students with special needs were. The teachers in that team said that they had rearranged the schedules to avoid having all of the students with disabilities in any one class at the same time. Given the current schedule, there were four to five students with disabilities in each of the five classes within that university. Ms. P said, “On our team there are 27 out of 134 kids who have been identified with a disability.” This translates into approximately 20% of the students having an identified disability. That percentage is high, yet it is not unusual in a large urban district.

In another university, Ms. R. said that half of her class had a learning disability. Although the percentage of students identified as having a disability are high overall both in the school and in the district, 50% does not represent a natural distribution. Yet, there seem to be occasions when grouping students for specific purposes for a small part of the

day have been beneficial for academic skill development. The staff should be cautious of overusing this practice as other effective inclusive practices will be negatively affected if such grouping practices are over used.

### **Principle 3: Teach and Adapt for Diversity**

The third principle of Whole Schooling promotes the philosophy and practice of designing instruction for diverse learners that engage them in active learning in meaningful, real-world activities. One method for supporting this principle is by developing accommodations and adaptations for learners with diverse needs, interests, and abilities. The following findings and examples illustrate how Walker International Middle School implements this principle.

#### **Finding 1: Instructional practices are responsive to learner's needs, interests and abilities.**

There were many opportunities to observe instructional practices that were responsive to learner's needs, interests, and abilities. During one observation, the art teacher and reading teacher co-taught a unit in which students wrote a book and illustrated it. There were certainly accommodations made for students. For example, one student had a one-page storybook that was beautifully illustrated. The students gathered together in the library to have an author's party. They each shared their books and then took time to celebrate their hard work with refreshments and conversation. The illustrations in the books were outstanding. The writing varied quite a bit due to each student's writing level. The students were all very proud of their work.

Ms. R explained one of the reading programs that she uses. Some of the students are in a special reading advancement program that was sponsored with a grant from Scholastic. The lowest readers in each grade level were identified from all homerooms and assigned to a 90-minute reading class. None of these students qualified for special education services. Most of the students were at a fourth-fifth grade reading level. The program is divided into twenty-minute sections. The first is a lesson introduction, and then the children break into three groups, with 20 minutes at computers, 20 minutes in a small work group with the teacher, and 20 minutes for free reading. Scholastic provided all programming for the computerized portion and all reading materials. The free reading books are also audiobooks. Each student has a set of earphones to use with the computers and the tape recorders. Students also read into the computers via microphones, and the computers customize the vocabularies and questions to the appropriate reading level. The class is divided into thirds and split between working at the desks, the computers, and free reading area. During one observation, the students were writing poems and stories and then doing free reading. This was a motivating class that was very responsive to the individualized needs of students who experienced reading delays and did not qualify for special education services.

Students with disabilities are included in general education classes with special education support. Given this structure, Ms. P, the special educator in one of the universities serves as the reading teacher. Ms. P stated, “In my room, I do a lot of whole group instruction. When we read something together, they feel more comfortable approaching me and asking questions. When we do it together, they gain have a basic level of knowledge. I read some of the chapters to the class because there are times when the class needs more help with deeper level thinking activities. They can understand the material very well, if they don’t have to focus so much energy on reading it independently.” Ms. P also teaches the students reading strategies that good readers use. They use the scan and skim strategy for some of the expository reading. They used a strategy called 15 squares to record important information on narrative text. They used the prediction strategy and a whip around strategy to share what they know as they are reading each selection. Sometimes, the class listens to a story on tape and uses the KWL strategy to record what they know, what they have learned and what they want to learn more about. They also have silent reading time when they have some selections that they each must read and other selections from which they can choose.

On an individual level, modifications were made for students when needed. For example, In English class, Roger was able to select fewer words from the vocabulary list and verbally define or describe the words, rather than writing them all out. The teacher arranges the unit work to be done largely in class, with vocabulary and some extra credit as homework. She marks the papers with point scores so the students can be aware of how many points they have lost, and can arrange to make up the points through extra credit activities. These are largely exercises to increase vocabulary, word searches, crosswords, and other pages from a 4<sup>th</sup> grade level book. There were over 900 points available in the units this grading period. However, she does adjust the number of points required for some of the students with disabilities and accommodates those with writing issues by listening to their answers.

Modifications in students’ schedules are also needed at times. Ms. P reviewed the IEP’s for how much and what kind of help each student needed. She then identified additional resources by having another special education teacher provide support to them during English and math. She used her resource time to go into the science and social studies classes to provide help as needed. The purpose of the scheduling adjustment was to be sure the students with the greatest needs were being served as their IEP’s require and as they need it. This was another example of how instructional practices were responsive to the needs of individual students.

## **Finding 2: Motivating instruction reduces the need for individual accommodations.**

Based on classroom observations, there were examples of motivating instructional lessons that the students were engaged in. In Mr. M’s social studies class, the students were instructed to create a post card for a place they would want to visit. In order to create the post card, the students had to research and read about the facts that would entice a visitor. Students chose different places to visit, including China, Africa, and

India. In another integrated science and social studies class, the teacher had the students get into dig groups for the archeological dig project. The students were working on uncovering artifacts in their dig boxes, listing the artifacts on their graphs, removing the sand into the grocery bags, and putting the artifacts into plastic baggies. The tools they were using were spoons, sand screens, brushes, dental tools, tags for each artifact and a mapping chart for location. The various groups worked well together, dividing up the work of digging, labeling and recording. The students were very motivated to do the dig and there were few modifications that needed to be made so that all of the students could meaningfully participate.

In one of the English classes, the teacher instructed the class to complete three assignments. The first assignment was to create a lunch menu based on the information they read in a story. The second was to write a descriptive piece on the characteristics of the perfect father. The third assignment was to write a persuasive paragraph on something that each individual felt passionate about. In another class, students were reviewing the elements of a good news story and analyzing how a good newspaper story is introduced. These writing assignments were not only motivating, but also meaningful and applicable to the students.

There were a couple of counter examples to this finding. The majority of times when students were off task and uninterested were when they had worksheets to complete or a list of written questions to respond to in writing. These assignments were given out in Reading, Science, Social Studies and English at various times. When assignments such as this were given, more individualized modifications were needed in order for students with special needs to participate.

### **Finding 3: “Authentic” curriculum and instructional practices are implemented (Authentic: Involving the construction of knowledge; disciplined inquiry; value beyond school).**

Generally, that curricula which students find to be motivating is also useful and authentic in some form. Consequently many of the examples above also fit under finding three. There were additional examples that will be shared here.

One of the reading classes was working on sending electronic greeting cards to a friend or family member. When they completed this, they e-mailed their intergenerational book buddy. Each student was paired with a senior citizen, neighborhood resident or College student. The partners would read the same book and then have regular discussions about the book by using e-mail. This was like having a book club, but rather than discuss the book in person, it was discussed electronically.

As mentioned in a previous finding, students also illustrated and wrote their own books. This was a very authentic assignment. The 20 students and their reading and art teacher gathered in the library for an author’s party one afternoon. A volunteer from the neighborhood also came to the party. All twenty students were released from their classes during one period to participate in the Author’s party.



In science, students were learning and applying scientific principles. Ms. P addressed the students, “I want you to use the scientific principles to try to explain why it is cooler near Lake Michigan in the summer and warmer in the winter.” This was also a very authentic and meaningful assignment that the students could readily apply to their daily lives.

There were also examples of curriculum and instructional practices that were not authentic. For example, on several occasions, the class was instructed on the Roman numeral system and given a worksheet to complete. Although this may appear to be an important topic, it doesn't fit the definition of authentic in that it does not involve the construction of knowledge, disciplined inquiry and may be minimally used beyond school. Other examples included the completion of worksheets on synonyms and antonyms. Again, these skills may appear to be important from a teacher's perspective, however, it is likely that these students will not complete synonym and antonym worksheets when they are finished with their formal education. These same skills were applied in a more authentic way through the development of the storybooks that were presented at the author's party. It is an ongoing challenge to teach meaningful and authentic content in useful ways. These examples and counter examples are illustrated in order to be continually mindful of the different ways in which instruction can be meaningful or lack meaning for students.

#### **Finding 4: Instructional practices integrate curriculum.**

In addition to the examples already mentioned, there are a few additional examples that illustrate this finding. During an observation in science class, the students were engaged in an integrated project that involved both science and English. The integrated project was to develop a PowerPoint presentation of a biome. This was a research project in which the students had to conduct research on the Internet, take notes, compile the important information into a slide show and complete a bibliography. During another observation, the students were writing an imaginative paper to fulfill the English proficiency requirement. The science and English teachers were working together to have the students write their papers in connection with the science unit on plants.

Finally, as discussed briefly in a previous finding, the 7<sup>th</sup> grade students were all involved in an archeological dig project that involved the integration of science, social studies and Spanish. The general assignment was to do a research project from beginning to end, with each archeological dig box representing a different location around the world. The artifacts buried in the boxes were clues to the location. The students needed to eventually write a report about their location, and do a persuasive speech about how their artifacts supported their conclusion. One group's box was for Egypt. They found a mummy, and a pyramid, along with Egyptian hieroglyphics buried in the sand.

These examples, in addition to others that had already been described all illustrated how teachers would co-teach and work together to integrate curriculum and instructional practices. This added meaning to the student's work and also added support with the two teachers available to help all of the students.

**Finding 5: School staff implement a number of major determiners of learning, including: small class size, high expectations, time on task, accountability, effective management strategies, predictability, structure and routine, high attendance and participation rates, and relevant curriculum.**

Many of these major determiners of learning were visible in the classrooms at Walker International Middle School. First, smaller class sizes were realized through the realignment of special education teachers. When special educators taught a content area class, the group sizes for all of the other sections were reduced. One teacher said, “By each of us taking a class, we have a class size of about 23 if everyone showed up, but we usually have an attendance of 18 due to all of the absences.”

Secondly, teacher held high expectations for their students and wanted the students to work hard and plan ahead. One teacher was conversing with two students at the author party when she said, “I want you to go to a competitive high school like Rufus King or Riverside University High School because they have high standards and you are capable of achieving them.”

Time on task was also emphasized. For example, Mr. M used good proximity control and also used all class time very effectively and efficiently. He circulated among the students, encouraging them to work together, stay on task and support each other. Mr. M really appeared to enjoy the students and the content he teaches. He clearly wanted the students to love the content too.

Ms. P. was also very good at holding students accountable for learning and completing their work. She held students accountable by calling on students who didn’t have their hands raised as well as those that did. She reviewed missing homework with them and encouraged them to turn it in even if it was already late. One day, one student brought in enough homework to bring his grade up from a U to an A-.

Mr. M’s class was a good example of students working well due to structure and routines. Mr. M was always calm and profession which seemed to set the tone for his classes. Mr. M. had structure and rules in the classroom. Students knew they needed to raise their hands to get help, or get out of their seat. There was some quiet talking among the students as they worked, but the majority of students were always seated and working during independent work times.

One of the counter examples to this finding was the low attendance rate. The absences for the students seemed to be quite high at times, especially in the spring. Some of the teachers discussed the impact poor attendance was having on certain students. One student has been coming perhaps once a month, and recently got suspended because he came and was wandering around in the halls. He didn’t know where to go, no one recognized him, and he became disruptive. The teachers reported that the school has about an 80% attendance rate on a daily basis. In December, some of the teachers

reported that their classes drop to about 70%. This means that classes with an enrollment of 25 typically have 15-18 students in them on any given week. Teachers do their best to discuss the importance of attending class with their students. On many occasions, teachers addressed students with comments such as, “You are absent too much and it is affecting your learning and your grade!” Ms. P talked about her concern regarding the absenteeism in the group as well as the low level of actually doing their homework. “There are 7 U’s in this group in the first grading period. Some of the students with modified grading procedures only had to achieve 70% of the total points to get a Pass, and they were still unwilling or unable to get that much work turned in.” Ms. P explained that for the last grading period, thirty students earned U’s, among the 150 students in this University. Ms. P said that the ones who turn in work tend to get A’s or B’s, but most of the rest just don’t bother to turn in work, even when they have finished some of it. This is one reason she is now helping students to monitor their missing homework.

Absenteeism is a common urban issue and one that is also a real challenge at Walker. Another issue that seemed to interrupt instruction on a frequent basis was the telephone ringing or people knocking on the classroom door for vision screening, announcement, fire drills, sending students on errands, stink bombs, etc. Every time there is an outside interruption that the teacher needs to handle, the students get off task and start to talk among themselves. This would be an excellent area to discuss and look closely at as a school team. The less outside interruptions, the more time on task for student learning.

This finding illustrated mixed results. There were examples of different teachers using different strategies and structures to facilitate learning. In addition, there were outside influences such as attendance and outside interruptions that had a great impact on the learning environment and the students. The challenge here is to think of ways to minimize the negative influences while maintaining or maximizing the positive ones.

#### **Principle 4: Build Community & Support Learning**

Principle four focuses on the school’s practices for building an effective and supportive learning community. This often requires the use of specialized school and community resources (e.g., special education, Title 1, gifted education) to build support for students, parents, and teachers. This principle also focuses on building community and mutual support within the classroom. Finally, providing proactive supports for students with behavioral challenges is a necessary ingredient. The following findings and examples illustrate Walker International Middle School’s strong commitment to principle four.

#### **Finding 1: The creative use of available time, staff, parents, and peers benefits and supports ALL students.**

There are several additional examples from Walker International Middle School that speak to this finding. Some of the universities decided to use a 70-minute block schedule as a way to create team planning time each day and to integrate instruction and offer it in larger chunks of times for the students to absorb. The block schedule leaves each teacher

in the university (i.e., house or family) with at least one planning period everyday in addition to the team-planning period at the end of each day. Ms. P said, “We do block scheduling. We are one of two teams that do block scheduling. It works well for the majority of the students, but we just had one student who didn't like the block scheduling and so he went to another University team where they don't use block scheduling.” Although the creative use of time through the block scheduling structure meets the needs of most students in this university, students ultimately do have a choice regarding where they think they will learn best.

Staff are also aligned and used in creative ways. As mentioned earlier, the staffing structure differs from one university to the next because each team has the autonomy to decide how to best use their resources. Ms. P said, “My team wanted to work it out so that we had six classroom teachers instead of five classroom teachers and a special educator. They wanted me to be a classroom teacher so that we had smaller class sizes and they wanted me to teach the reading classes. So if the kids needed accommodations in other subject areas then those teachers have to make the accommodations. I am not able to make all of the accommodations across subject levels and teach reading. We meet every day during 8th hour so there is ample time to collaborate and make adjustments as needed.”

The middle school also employs the looping system as a way to stay connected to the students throughout their middle school experience. One teacher said, “I am assigned to a 7th grade level team. We are on a looping system. I'll follow the kids to 8th grade and then I'll go back to 6th grade and start with a new group. This works very well because it takes a while to get to know the kids. This works especially well for students with special needs. We get to know the students and their parents very well.” Looping appears to be an effective structural strategy for keeping students connected to each other and their teachers throughout their middle school years. This helps each university and the school as a whole to build community within and to support the individual learning of each student.

## **Finding 2: Peers serve as natural supports for their classmates.**

There were a few mixed examples to illustrate how peers serve as natural supports for each other at times and how peers struggle to do this at other times. During observations, certain teachers often used peer partners as a strategy to have student support each other. Typically, peers chose their partner rather than having the teacher pair students up. Teachers often gave some reminders as to how students should work together to be productive and get their projects completed. Most of the student partners would work well together and share strategies and information. Mr. M would encourage students to think out loud as a way for the partners to learn thinking strategies from each other. Students often had to share instructional materials as well which required some pairing or small group work.

Students also had difficulties working together and supporting each other. During one observation, Denise was working with Roger. Roger had a learning disability. Denise

would become physical with Roger by putting her hand on his neck to move him along. Roger didn't react at all to this. In another group, one of the girls was flirting with the boy next to her, with who she had been talking all period. Within minutes her flirting elevated to subtle punches and poking him in the arm. Students at the middle school age had a difficult time working with the opposite sex without becoming flirtatious or physical. This can and did get in the way of having a productive partnership in order to complete a project or assignment. In addition, there were also gang affiliations that the teachers and students had to deal with. One day, Mr. M asked a student to pull up one strap of his bib overalls and hook it in place. When a left or right strap is down and unfastened, it can be a sign of a gang affiliation.

Therefore, although peers supports were encouraged in productive ways, given the age of the students and the urban influences they are faced with, these peer supports can quickly deteriorate into gang issues or opportunities for flirtation. These outcomes are important to be mindful of at the middle and secondary levels especially.

### **Finding 3: Whole Schools provide positive, proactive supports to manage behaviors.**

There were also mixed results for this finding. There were examples to illustrate that positive and proactive behavioral supports were in place on some occasions and at other times, student behaviors were handled in reactive and negative ways. Here are some positive examples. During one observation, Mr. M. was circulating around the room while the students began working. Mr. M gave positive reinforcement and shared strategies for developing good study habits and organizational tips.

During another observation, Ms. P was reviewing missing assignments with each student. Out of the 21 students, most of them were missing between two and five assignments. Unfortunately missing homework is quite common. Ms. P reviews missing assignments with the students while they still have an opportunity to complete it and earn credit for it. Otherwise, their quarter and semester grades would be severely impacted by all of the missing work. Ms. P told the students, "I'm here on Tuesdays and Thursdays for homework club. I had two kids who came today and met one of their proficiencies for the 8<sup>th</sup> grade." Ms. P also started giving out tickets for turning in homework. The students can collect tickets and then turn them in for various rewards they chose. Ms. P shared, "The homework initiative is something we have been doing for all of our kids especially some of the kids with special needs. When students hand in a homework assignment, they receive a ticket. After the eight-day rotation, we collect the tickets and if they have done 80% of their homework, they get to do something special and they also get to choose one homework assignment to skip."

Many of the teachers are highly skilled in teaching their content. Managing behaviors while trying to teach is a real challenge. Ms. O is on her toes at all times and continually manages the students' off-task behaviors, helps individual students, and keeps the lesson moving forward. Ms. O must be exhausted at the end of each day. She works very hard to be proactive and positive while teaching the content.

As mentioned, there were also counter examples to this finding. During one observation, the classroom teacher was teaching 24 students. She began the lesson, “What we are going to be doing today . . . David, go sit in a different seat. You are working on something I did not give you permission to do.” David mumbled, “Bullshit. It ain’t my problem.” The teacher continued teaching the class, but became increasingly frustrated by the escalating noise level of students talking. Students continued chatting with their peers next to them. The teacher’s voice got louder and louder and was interspersed with “sh” about 3-4 times every minute. Perhaps she continued talking above the students because they are never totally quiet. Nevertheless, it didn’t seem to help quiet the class or move instruction along. Perhaps a different seating arrangement, a co-teaching arrangement, or developing a type of positive behavior support plan for the entire class would help as a proactive strategy for this group.

In another class, the teacher was circulating around the class when she asked Jim to read a loud. He argued, “It’s stupid.” The teacher responded “If you are not proud of your reading, maybe you need to work on it.” The teacher called Adam aside. He had gum and no assignment book. She confronted him and he spit out the gum. “Theresa, you can go sit in the hall. Is it possible to be more rude?” Other students are chatting with each other throughout all of this. The teacher wrote out two demerits for two students and posted them on the front board. Then Juan caught a wadded paper ball from Alan and got caught by the teacher. She confiscated the paper, and sent Alan to the office. Before sending him to the office, she had to write out an incident report, in duplicate, and send one copy with him to the office. Needless to say, the teacher didn’t get much content covered and the students got very little instructional time due to all of the student behaviors that were handled. These middle schoolers are difficult to manage, however, the teachers may want to consider trying some different positive and proactive strategies for reducing the behaviors that are interfering with so much instructional time. There is no simple solution to such a complex issue, but the more proactive and positive a teacher can be, the less reactive and punitive s/he needs to be. The main purpose is to preserve as much instructional time as possible. When having to react to so many behaviors, there is little time left for academic instruction and learning to take place.

This is one area that is a great challenge, but also a very important challenge to take on. Teachers’ frustration rises and when frustration escalates, negative reactions tend to follow. Some of the teachers appear to have more success in positively and proactively managing student behaviors. This would be an important area for staff to discuss and share ideas with each other on a regular basis. It would also be helpful for the teachers to observe each other teaching and offer support, suggestions, and positive reinforcement for the management techniques that are working well. This would be an excellent way for the teachers to build community among the staff and to support both teacher and student learning at the same time.

## **Principle 5: Partnering**

The last principle of Whole Schooling is Partnering. This principle requires that school build genuine collaborative relationships within the school and with families and the community. It further promotes that schools take an active role in strengthening the community as well as providing guidance to engage students, parents, teachers and others in decision-making and the direction of learning and school activities. Walker International Middle School exemplifies this principle in concrete ways that will be described below.

### **Finding 1: Joining together with families, community members and university faculty mutually benefits all.**

There were many examples of mutually beneficial partnerships between Walker International Middle School and the community. Walker has a formal partnership with the Layton Blvd. West Neighborhood Association. The school is open to the neighborhood citizens through nightly programs such as the open gym, the community learning center, and the school-community health care center. Aurora Health Care and City Health Services staff the health clinic within the school for both students and community members. Community members from the neighborhood volunteer their time to supervise the open gym and to hand deliver the school newsletter to every house in the neighborhood each month.

In addition, Maximus provides adult computer classes at the school to neighborhood residents in the evenings. Journey House provides cultural classes in the school as well. The Boys and Girls Club also provides evening and Saturday activities in the school building. Walker International Middle School is not just a school, but also a community center that is open to and shared by the neighborhood citizens.

Finally, a full-time parent coordinator is employed by the school to serve as a coordinator and liaison between the school, families and neighborhood. The parent coordinator works with 4-5 different parent volunteers each day. She also planned parent outings where parents could get to know each other on a social level.

There are many wonderful partnerships that have been developed by the Walker administration, staff, and parents that are very beneficial to the students, their families, and the neighborhood at large. This is one area in which Walker outshines so many schools and can teach all of us about the need to develop and maintain mutually beneficial partnerships.

### **Finding 2: Collaboration and Co-Teaching strengthen the overall school community and learning experiences.**

Collaboration and Co-teaching are structured differently from one university to another at Walker. In one of the universities that was observed regularly, the team of teachers was

piloting an experimental program in which the special educator on the team was teaching a content area class to all of the students in the university (i.e., house or family). The other teachers on the team were then responsible for making all of the needed accommodations for the students with special needs in each of their classrooms. The teachers did confer with the special educator on a daily basis regarding needed accommodations and supports for the students. This co-teaching structured appeared to work well for both the staff and students in this university. Other universities had slight variations on this same co-teaching model. The students liked this collaborative structure because it gave them all more teacher contact time due to smaller student-teacher ratios. It also gave students access to teachers with different areas of interest and expertise.

### **Finding 3: Parents and students feel supported by school staff.**

Although finding 3 emerged out of the data from all eight research schools, observation and interview data were not available to provide evidence of finding 3 at Walker International Middle School. However, it should be noted that this doesn't mean there are no parents or students who feel supported by the school staff. It simply indicates that the researchers did not have an opportunity to interview parents and individual students about their feelings regarding support. This would also be a valuable area to pursue and explore further in future research gathering efforts at Walker International Middle School.

### **Conclusions**

It has been a great privilege and pleasure to have Walker International Middle School as a research site in this project. So many schools will learn about the successes and challenges of teaching and learning in an urban middle school due to the school's willingness to open their classroom doors to outside observers. Without Walker stepping up to the plate, this research project would be void of an urban middle school experience to share with others. We realize the commitment and effort that the staff must put forth everyday in order to teach our urban youth. Thank you for your patience and cooperation in this project so that others can benefit from your good work.