

## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

In the end, the Basic School is committed to building lives as if they were works of art. And this is accomplished as the Basic School becomes a community with a clear and vital mission; as it has a curriculum with coherence; as it has a climate for creative learning; as it makes a commitment, ultimately, to build character, not just within children, but within the community as well. (Boyer, Address, 1995, p.11)

At Kipps Elementary School, we believe that learning is a life-long, collaborative process. We are dedicated to meeting the challenge of providing support, cooperation, and inspiration to all members of our school community. Our child-centered approach encourages each student to understand and enjoy the learning process in a secure environment. (Kipps Elementary School Student and Parent Handbook, 1994, p. 4)

#### Reflections on Kipps Elementary School and the Basic School

Kipps Elementary School officially began when the Montgomery County School Board voted in 1992 to build a new school in the Blacksburg, Virginia, area to relieve overcrowding conditions in the existing four schools. During the next months, a committee of teachers, parents, and administrators met to begin preliminary discussions of how the physical structure of the school might look. The basic structure of the school and its mission began in these discussions. Though these parents, teachers, and administrators began making decisions which would later impact the relationships of students and teachers, the instructional program of the school, and the involvement of parents in the school, many of their decisions centered around the physical structure of the school.

Since many of these decisions were more about buildings and grounds and physical

structures, the real essence of the school as a community of learning began to evolve when the faculty first came together and began talking about their beliefs and priorities as educators and community members. Some common beliefs began to emerge almost immediately -- caring and cooperative climate which centered around the students, involvement of parents and community, curriculum that spanned across traditional boundaries, and the celebration of diversity and commonalities. Though these teachers came from four different schools in the area, they quickly became bonded by a shared philosophy of education.

At about the same time Kipps was being designed and constructed, a group of researchers was looking at elementary schools across the country and, in the process, they were observing, surveying, and interviewing thousands of people. Under the direction of Ernest L. Boyer, these researchers gathered and analyzed their data and presented it as a report entitled The Basic School: A Community of Learning in 1995. Boyer and his team of researchers found that they could define their findings in the format of four basic priorities that are evident in an effective elementary school. These priorities, as highlighted in a brochure published by the Carnegie Foundation, include "...The School as Community, A Curriculum with Coherence, A Climate for Learning, and A Commitment to Character" (Highlights, p. 1).

Though these two groups were working in different places and the scope of their work was quite different, their goals were very similar. The discussions that were taking place as the staff at the new Kipps Elementary went about creating their school were based on many of the same priorities the researchers were discovering in effective elementary schools. The results of the staff's discussion, in the form of a school philosophy and mission statements, would eventually

state their beliefs in providing "a supportive, nurturing, and welcoming environment," "partnerships between families, school personnel, and other community members," "developmentally appropriate learning experiences" along with the "skills necessary for successful problem-solving and decision-making," and the promotion of "good citizenship" and the desire to "respect diversity, recognize commonalities, and celebrate unity" (Kipps Student and Parent Handbook, p. 4). Indeed, the work of the two groups was very similar, as summarized in the next section and highlighted in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1 -- Comparison of Basic School and Kipps Elementary

	Basic School	Kipps Elementary
School as Community	Shared vision Empowered teachers Principal as lead teacher Teachers as leaders Parents as partners Parent resource room	Learning community Shared decision-making Empowered teachers Parents as partners Parent volunteers PTA School-business partnerships
Curriculum for Coherence	Core commonalities Connectedness to curriculum	Beyond traditional Connections from grade to grade Inter-relatedness of curriculum Concept-based curriculum
Climate for Learning	Flexible grouping Celebration of reading Computer technology Human services provided on site Before and after school care	Supportive, nurturing, welcoming Creative Structured, disciplined as needed Global learning Collaborative teaching and learning
Commitment to Character	Place to build character Consensus on basic virtues	Promote good citizenship Respect diversity Recognize commonalities Celebrate unity Kind kids awards Behavior management plan

Thus begins the background and context of the connections between Kipps Elementary School and the Basic School research. As the team of Kipps teachers first assembled and began talking, a community of learners quickly developed. Almost immediately, the nature of the discussions revealed a sense of priorities among the staff. As the team of faculty members began working to develop statements of philosophy and mission, they created ideas that could later be seen to be directly related to the four priorities of the Basic School research.

### School as Community

First, the Kipps staff wanted to develop a learning community at Kipps – a community in which teachers, staff, parents, students, and community members came together to make decisions and work together to educate the students. At the school level, the principal and teachers began a relationship in which the teachers were empowered to make decisions about their classrooms and the school. For example, the Staff Development Committee surveyed teachers to find their needs for in-service activities and made the arrangements for such activities. In many areas such as purchasing instructional supplies, developing the master schedule, and placement of students in classrooms, teachers assumed major roles.

Similarly, the staff had a vision that parents should be partners in their children's education and should be substantively involved and visible in the school. The staff felt that a site-based decision-making team should be developed with members representing all categories of the school staff, the parents, and the community at large. This committee should be given the opportunity and encouraged to be involved in meaningful, substantive decisions about the school. Parent volunteers should be used abundantly throughout the school. The staff proposed a parent

resource room which would be available as a meeting/waiting area for parents when they visited the school. And, of course, an active PTA should be established promptly. Also, the staff felt that school partnerships should be developed with local businesses and industries to collaborate on the task of educating our students.

Many of the beliefs and activities related to school community that the Kipps staff developed are embodied in the Basic School research on school as community and are highlighted by Boyer as examples of how the school should be seen as a community which includes entities outside the building itself. Boyer says, "In the Basic School, community begins with a shared vision. Teachers are empowered and the principal is a lead teacher. The circle of community extends outward to embrace parents..." (Highlights, p. 4). This shared vision, Boyer goes on to say, means that individual classrooms "...are connected by a sense of purpose, in a climate that is communicative, just, disciplined, and caring, with occasions for celebrating" (Boyer, 1995, p. 15). Also central to this idea of community is the notion that teachers are leaders. These teachers are empowered to make vital decisions and often work in teams. They serve as mentors to their colleagues and they are scholars, "...staying well informed and remaining professionally renewed" (Boyer, 1995, p. 44). The third area of community Boyer presents is the belief that parents are partners. This partnership is created during preschool years and is nurtured throughout the student's stay in the school. Boyer goes on to encourage schools to provide parents a place in the school where they can meet and mingle as they come in and out of the school.

Though many of the ideas about school as community that the Basic School research proposes have been put into practice at Kipps Elementary and have become a part of the routine,

some have not thrived as well as the staff had hoped. Those ideas, along with the many other practices Basic Schools are implementing daily, could be the focus for further research in this area that would provide a stronger sense of community at Kipps.

### Curriculum with Coherence

As the staff at Kipps began talking about the instructional program, a desire was quickly evident of moving away from traditional boundaries which limited teaching and learning to subject areas and time constraints. Perhaps, the staff thought, a curriculum could be developed which would provide connections for students from one grade level to another. As the staff began to focus on the inter-relatedness of the curriculum, they developed six concepts that could be seen as ways to connect individual pieces of the curriculum. These concepts included relationships, communication, exploration/discovery, changes, diversity, and unity (Kipps Staff Handbook, 1994, p. 17).

Meanwhile, Boyer and his researchers were finding that such an inter-related curriculum was a major component of the curriculum priority. The "core commonalities" of the Basic School research include: The Life Cycle, The Use of Symbols, Membership in Groups, A Sense of Time and Space, Response to the Aesthetic, Connections to Nature, Producing and Consuming, and Living with Purpose (Boyer, 1995, p. 85). Boyer believes that all curriculum areas currently being taught in elementary schools can be included in these broad commonalities. He goes on to describe each one, giving specific examples of how these broad concepts could bring connectedness to elementary school curriculum.

Similar to the Kipps staff's interest in community involvement early on, the staff was also

excited about their curriculum based on the six broad concepts. However, the business of opening a new school and its many distractions led them away from implementing these concepts as they would have liked. They also had concerns that the concepts may have been too narrow to embrace the entire curriculum they were to teach. So, again, the Basic School research can provide the staff with a method of revisiting their concept of curriculum.

### Climate for Learning

The climate that the Kipps staff envisioned for their school was one that would be a "...supportive, nurturing, and welcoming environment" (Kipps Student and Parent Handbook, p. 4). The staff wanted the school to have a creative, risk-free atmosphere, yet one that was structured and disciplined as needed to assure student learning. The technology program of the school should create a sense of global awareness which would be heightened by the students from other countries who would attend school there. Similarly, this awareness of the world around them should be enhanced with extensive classroom libraries to supplement the learning media center. Cooperative learning and teaching would create a collaborative atmosphere where students would sense the synergy created when people work together. Students should be involved in activities across grade levels, such as fifth graders being buddies to kindergartners.

Boyer's research found that effective schools had some of these same qualities when researchers examined their climates. First, he found that the way students are grouped in the school should be very flexible with opportunities for students to be with others of similar and dissimilar interests and ages. Another finding was that in a basic school, "...books are everywhere. Reading is celebrated in every classroom" (Boyer, 1995, p. 140). Boyer says this

celebration of reading is also enhanced by students being given opportunities to extend their learning through computer technology. The Basic School should also take the responsibility for providing certain services to children, including health and counseling services being provided at school. The research goes on to indicate the need for before- and after-school care being provided at the school site.

Once again, similarities are evident between the Basic School research and the development of Kipps Elementary. Though the school provides after-school programs through its partnership with the town recreation department, parents have recently been requesting that the school consider providing more enrichment activities after school. Teachers have also indicated an interest in looping, a term used to describe the procedure of a teacher moving to the next grade level with a particular class. With these thoughts in mind, the Kipps staff could certainly continue to study and extend their work in this area of climate.

#### Commitment to Character

This priority area is one which the Kipps staff has not spent a sizable amount of time developing. We did emphasize in our school mission that we would "promote good citizenship" and encourage the students to "respect diversity, recognize commonalities, and celebrate unity" (Kipps Student and Parent Handbook, p. 4). Our guidance counselor led us in developing a program in which we weekly recognize students for showing kindness to others. Our staff has also worked to develop a behavior management program that encourages students to respect themselves and others.

Boyer in his research does not spend as much time discussing this priority as the others.



He addresses schools as one of several places where students have the opportunity to build character, with other places including the family and places of worship. He spends time discussing how a school community can come to consensus on some basic virtues that everyone can accept as important. He then goes on to suggest seven basic virtues including honesty, respect, responsibility, compassion, self-discipline, perseverance, and giving (Boyer, 1995, pp. 183-184).

The priority of commitment to character is certainly evident in general ways at Kipps Elementary. However, the Basic School research offers further suggestions that specifically will provide students opportunities to develop certain basic virtues. One possible way the school might be interested in extending this priority is to develop ways for students to be involved in service projects which would tie the commitment of character to the greater community. Other ideas are sure to be discussed.

In summary, though the beliefs of the staff members at Kipps Elementary School are closely aligned already with the findings of the Basic School research, the two still have a number of differences. Many of the tenets of the Basic School research are in place at Kipps; yet, the research goes further to suggest other ways the school can continue to develop into what Boyer and his team of researchers might term a true Basic School. Recent interest in Boyer's work by the school staff indicates a desire to study further and implement more fully the findings of the Basic School research.

### Personal Reflections

In the spring of 1997, Kipps Elementary School had been operating for two and one-half

years with the similarities between the school's philosophy and the Basic School research not having been realized. At this time, I was enrolled in a school leadership program at Virginia Tech and was a member of a reading group made up of other graduate students. The members of the group were given the option to choose which book we would read and discuss. Several other students in our class had read Basic Schools and recommended it to us; thus, our group chose to read and discuss Boyer's book.

As I began reading the book, I was immediately enthralled with the common sense approach Boyer took in developing a framework for elementary schools to design and implement effective programs. Though many of the ideas and strategies he suggested were already a part of our school, he offered ways to organize and extend a school program to another level of excellence. A teacher in our building was also in the reading group, and as the two of us began discussing the profound simplicity of the book, other teachers in our school became interested. This teacher suggested that the Staff Development Committee at our school show a videotape about Basic Schools to our faculty.

We did show the videotape, and the reaction was immediate and exciting. Teachers became very interested in many of Boyer's ideas about changing our way of thinking about the school framework. They were particularly interested in the notion of looping, a term for the practice of teachers moving with their students from one grade level to another. They also liked the idea of a "family" structure in the school in which teachers and students across grade levels would work cooperatively together. Teachers stayed after the meeting to talk about the possibilities that might take place if we wanted to follow Boyer's lead.

The next step was the suggestion that a reading group of teachers be formed to read and discuss the book. When I surveyed to find how many would be interested in taking part in a reading group, we had so many teachers that we had to break them into two groups of about ten teachers each. Within days, I could hear the buzz around school of rethinking and redesigning our school to meet the needs of students more effectively. One teacher went so far as to take a map of the school and rearrange teachers into K-5 teams. Another teacher came to me and said she definitely wanted to move to the next grade level with her class next year. This was a particularly poignant decision because of several students in her classroom who would definitely benefit from avoiding the disruptive transition that occurs at the beginning of each school year with a different teacher and class members.

At about this same time, I attended the annual convention of the National Association of Elementary School Principals in San Antonio, Texas. One session being offered was a panel discussion of the Basic School. Members of the panel were principals of the schools which made up the original Basic School network. As each principal spoke about her or his school and the impact the Basic School research had on it, I knew this was a direction in which I wanted to lead our school. I also found out more about the conception of the Basic School network and Boyer's work underlying the philosophy. I was very pleased to find out that the network is now based at James Madison University, only two hours from our school.

The assistant superintendent for instruction of our school division attended the conference with me and could sense my excitement about this research. I knew that our school was headed in this direction already. We then began talking about how a study of implementing the Basic

School framework would be an ideal topic for my dissertation, blending very naturally educational theory and practice. I madly wrote our ideas as we brainstormed and was very excited to get home and share my ideas with my advisor. When I talked with him, he, too, became excited about the possibilities of such a study.

In the meantime, our school staff development committee had begun planning for an end-of-the-year retreat in which our school would spend an entire day talking about the Basic School framework and how we could use it to organize our school in a more effective way to address the four priorities of Boyer. That retreat was the last work day for teachers, and I was amazed at the excitement and energy that was evident as we divided ourselves into four families and began addressing how we could go about becoming a Basic School. The synergy of those groups and the plans that were made ended our year in a very positive way, with teachers already looking forward to our plans for the next school year (Appendix A).

These reflections on the development of Kipps Elementary and the introduction of the Basic School research to the faculty lead me to look in a more global way at the impact of this research on other schools. We are like many other schools in that we see the need to renew and revitalize, but it is difficult to know where to begin and how to proceed. By following through with this study, I hope to share our experiences in a way that will help other schools become excited about change and renewal.

### Statement of the Problem

Schools often understand the need for change, but they need a unifying theme and body of knowledge to direct that change so that it is not done piecemeal. The Basic School research

offers a potential solution for that problem by presenting a theoretical framework for school renewal and change.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of one elementary school in implementing the framework identified by Ernest Boyer in his Basic School research.

### Research Questions

The following questions were considered in this inquiry:

1. How does an elementary school implement the Basic School's organizational framework into its existing program?
2. How does an elementary school begin to assess itself against a Basic School model to determine where additional attention would need to be paid?
3. What trends might emerge from this implementation which would provide information other schools could use as they implement the Basic School framework?

### Significance of the Study

This study will provide details of how one school applied the Basic School framework including the problems and successes encountered. Thus, after reading this study, other schools could more effectively design the implementation process for their settings. The experiences of this school could lead to the development of a model generalizable to other schools who are implementing the research.