

## Chapter 4

## FINDINGS

What we really need is to take the school reform movement back to the beginning, to the first years of formal learning, to the elementary school, which is by any measure transcendentally the most important. We need to go into every classroom, where teachers meet with students, because that's where excellence in education begins and ends. Above all, it's time to stop looking for quick fixes and promising panaceas and begin to put into place the tried-and-true practices that really work. (Boyer, Address, 1995, p.1)

In the personal reflections section of Chapter 1, I described how the staff at Kipps Elementary School became interested in the Basic School concept and explained our involvement up to the point of our retreat in June, 1997. This retreat was a major event in our involvement with the Basic School philosophy.

The students' last day of school was June 11, 1997, and teachers were assigned to work two days beyond the students' last day. Several weeks before, the staff development committee had met and decided to use one of these days as a planning retreat so that we would leave the school for the summer with some ideas of what our involvement with Basic School would be the following year.

The members of the Staff Development Committee and I had developed an agenda for this meeting which we felt would meet the interests of the faculty. We began by reshowing the Basic School video as a way of reviewing Boyer's beliefs and to place the major ideas of Basic School in the teachers' minds as they began to think about the following year. We also presented the results of a staff survey we had done about the direction our school should take in its involvement

with Basic School.

At the meeting, I presented a graphic organizer of what I perceived to be the benefits of implementing the Basic School philosophy. The first part of this graphic was a picture of a person being rained on with drops representing some of the many different activities our school was facing such as staff development, new state standards, and biennial school plans. (At the time, our school was also to be involved in the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools [SACS] school renewal process, so this was a major task that would demand a lot of our time. Since that time, our school division has chosen not to affiliate with SACS.) The next part of the graphic was the same person standing under the Basic School umbrella which caught the raindrops (activities) and organized them into a practical, meaningful format. Thus, teachers could see that the focus of Basic School was not on doing something different, but on using it as a framework for what we were already doing.

The last and major part of the retreat was spent discussing the kinds of activities in which we would be involved during the next year. The main focus was on experimenting with another way to structure our school to enhance student learning and teacher professional growth. Teachers had suggested in the survey that they would be interested in working in a group that had members from other grade levels and subject areas throughout the school. They also had interest in attempting to organize the extra responsibilities (committees, duties, etc.) of the school into a better system. Thus, I presented them with a suggested list of “families” that would include a teacher from each grade level and specialty areas. The teachers then moved into these families and began planning activities they might be involved in for the next year.

The remainder of this chapter will be a presentation of the findings of our experience with

Boyer's research as we went about experimenting with a different pattern or structure to address our needs. The report is divided into six sections, each representing an aspect of the Basic School with which we were involved. I have chosen to present the findings in this way for several reasons. First, the most significant change in our school as we went about exploring the Basic School framework was the development of the family structure. That structure had a major impact on all of the decisions we made about how we would address the Basic School philosophy. Thus, the first section of this chapter will discuss Patterns to Fit Purpose: The Family Structure. Secondly, because Boyer emphasizes the need for schools to focus on the four priorities and because we chose to do so, they become the structure for the remainder of this chapter, with sections addressing School as Community, A Curriculum with Coherence, A Climate for Learning, and A Commitment to Character. In each of these sections, I will present Boyer's beliefs, the Kipps experience, and what we learned from our experience.

#### Teachers as Team Members: Family Structure

Once empowered, teachers in the Basic School work together as team members. They view the *whole* school, not just their own classroom, as the place for learning. Research reveals that the most successful learning does, in fact, occur in schools where teachers not only teach skillfully in separate classrooms, but also find solutions *together*. (Boyer, 1995, p. 35)

#### Boyer's Beliefs

Under the priority of School and Community, Boyer reveals his beliefs about teachers as leaders and as team members in the school. He emphasizes the importance of providing time for teachers and principals to work together and says this time should be scheduled "...not just

horizontally, but *vertically* as well” (Boyer, 1995, p. 39). He was dismayed to find that in most schools, teacher planning occurs only among teachers on a grade level which “...leads to a disturbing discontinuity in learning” (Boyer, 1995, p.39). What he proposes, instead, is that teachers should be meeting together and working with teachers from other grade levels and other disciplines, sharing and collaborating to provide more connections for students. They should be about “... pursuing common goals and creating a sequential course of study that spirals upward, resulting in a seamless web of learning (Boyer, 1995, p. 39).

### The Kipps Experience with Family Structure

Organizing into families of teachers from across the grade levels became our primary focus for the school year. After we had divided our staff into four families, we decided to give some focus to each family by assigning one of Boyer’s priorities to each. A suggestion was also made to give the families color names so that their focus would be seen more generally, rather than solely on the priority. Thus, our staff members became part of the School and Community or Red Family, the Character or Green Family, the Climate or Yellow Family, and the Curriculum or Blue Family.

Our plans for the year included each family meeting at least once a month to plan activities, deal with issues, and carry on with any other business that came before the family. They would choose a representative for each family who would then meet with the principal and the three other family representatives once a month to discuss the activities of their families. In addition, each family would choose a facilitator to conduct each meeting and a recorder to keep track of the meetings and activities of the family. A form was developed to document the minutes

of family meetings so that there would be consistency in communicating information to all staff members (Appendix D). The recorder would also be responsible for maintaining the archives of the family, a collection of all the documentation the family produced. These archives would include minutes of meetings, flyers, announcements, and any other document related to the family.

To prevent our involvement in families from becoming too overwhelming, we decided that the goal for each family would be to plan one school-wide event and one family-wide event for the year. The school-wide events are described later in the section of this chapter discussing each family.

The family-wide activity ended up being somewhat of a school-wide event. Because of difficulties that would arise with schedules and other school routines, our staff decided to have one day designated as Family Celebration Day. On this day, each family provided activities that involved all the students in the school in a multi-grade format that had students interacting with other students from all six grade levels. Activities included doing a group art project, exploring in our school's outdoor classroom, physical fitness activities, writing a book together, as well as a plethora of other ideas.

Another task given to families was the assignment of extra responsibilities at the school. This list of tasks is made up of the many extra assignments teachers in schools usually take on such as committee assignments, club sponsors, and other designated "extra" tasks. In the past, a list of these assignments had been presented to teachers, and they chose the assignments with which they would be interested in working. However, as we began looking at the focus of the families, we realized that many of these extra responsibilities fit in very naturally with certain families (Appendix E). As an example, the School Safety Committee seemed to fit very well with

the Climate Family. Rather than having a separate committee meeting at another time, members of this family could become the School Safety Committee. Though later we discovered drawbacks to this process, at the time, it seemed an effective way to accomplish these tasks.

Thus, our school staff began working together in “vertical teams” for the first time. As the year went on, we realized the need to place not just teachers, but every staff member in the school on a family. Thus, we added our instructional assistants, cafeteria staff, custodial staff, and administrative assistant to teams. We then realized that many of these people had difficulty meeting with their families because of the times those meetings were scheduled. Issues such as this one forced us to focus continually on how to make this family experience a positive, effective way to think differently about our school’s teaming patterns.

#### Learning from Our Experience <sup>1</sup>

“I think being in a family group generated more ideas than if we were grouped in grade-level groups. It was a great experience getting to know colleagues in a different way.” (Marilyn Kline, 60-62)

“I can now walk down to the primary hall and I have things to talk to those teachers about.” (Abby Franklin, 18-19 )

“I really made some good friends in my family...Two of those people are moving away at the end of the year, and I have to say it’s a little bit crushing to see them go. Without the family tie we had, I wouldn’t have realized what wonderful teachers we are losing.” (Tom Roberts, 23-27)

“It’s the first time in my career that on a regular basis I have sat down with teachers from across the grade levels and had meaningful conversations.” (Meredith Walters, 39-40)

Issues dealing with our school’s implementation of the family structure became a major

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<sup>1</sup>All teachers referred to in this study have been given pseudonyms. The line numbers from the transcripts of the recorded interviews are also included. Appendix F gives the dates and times the interviews occurred.

point of discussion during the school year. Though mostly positive, there were several aspects of the family organization that were difficult for some staff members to accept. An informal survey at the end of the year showed that staff members were generally very pleased in the way the family structure had gone. Overwhelmingly, they wanted to continue with families in some format for the next school year; however, certain issues surfaced which we needed to reconsider.

Interviews with teachers near the end of the school year revealed many positive experiences. In addition to the quotations above, their comments included many positive affirmations about the families. "I think everything we've done in families has been very meaningful," (87) Kathy Wilson said. Marilyn Kline commented that being a member of a family "...generated more ideas than if we were grouped in grade level groups because specialty teachers can not always be a part of those discussions" (58-59). One of the major points in favor of the family groups was the feeling that the family meetings gave more people more opportunities to express their opinions since faculty meetings had so many people in attendance, a great deal of material to cover, and limited time.

However, the teachers also pointed out several concerns they felt about the organization of families. The inclusion of the extra responsibilities in the family structure was one aspect of our Basic School involvement that brought mixed reactions. Lisa Goodwin found these extra responsibilities the least effective part of our involvement (23). Similarly, Kathy Wilson felt these responsibilities "took away from what we could have been doing" (60) with students. On the other hand, Marilyn Kline said having the responsibilities tied to the family "made duties easier because you were working with the same people in one meeting" (40) rather than having multiple meetings. Similarly, Bonnie Stewart commented that the family provided "a built in team where

we had already established give and take, so you didn't have to start all over with a whole new team" (45-46).

Another concern that became evident was a feeling that teachers need to be given more choice in their involvement with families. This concern was two-fold. First, teachers sensed that they were not given choice in which family they would become involved. Though a suggested list of possible family members was given to teachers and they were told to respond if they had concerns with the families to which they were assigned, teachers still felt they wanted to explore a different way to make these assignments. Also, in the matter of choice, some teachers disliked having the extra responsibilities assigned to the families because it sometimes forced them to take on responsibilities they did not want or prevented them from having assignments they wanted.

On the other hand, perhaps one of the most positive family experiences was the Family Celebration Day. Almost unanimously, teachers expressed a desire to continue with this activity and expanding it to include more opportunities to meet in the across-grade level experiences.

Entries in my field journal<sup>2</sup> throughout the year also revealed the positive and negative reactions from teachers regarding the family structure. An entry on June 19 expressed my excitement at the enthusiasm showed during the retreat as teachers planned family activities for the next year. A few days later I wrote about two teachers coming to me with concerns about the families. The first was a teacher who felt overwhelmed with our plans for families added to our regular routine. The other concern was about the family planning times taking away from team planning times.

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<sup>2</sup>When needed, field journal entries are designated as FJ. The month and date for each field journal entry is also provided. All journal entries, unless otherwise noted, occurred from June, 1997-May, 1998.

Various entries in the field journal showed the positive and negative reactions to the family structure. Mostly, I recorded information about conversations I had with teachers about some activity in which they had taken part. Some sample entries include: “A teacher told me today how much she was enjoying getting to know other teachers on other grade levels” (10/7) and “I attended a meeting of the Community Family and I was so pleased to see the enthusiasm this group has for planning activities to reach out into our broader school community” (10/20).

An entry in my field journal on November 5 revealed my concern that some people were having problems with the family structure. A discussion had taken place in faculty meeting about finding more time for family planning. Some people felt more time was needed, and others felt they could not give more time. My frustration is obvious in my journal entry:

I am very frustrated and actually quite angry that people are seeming to not be willing to open up and talk with others on other grade levels. I want to sit down and figure what the next step should be. Should I meet with the entire faculty and just open up and talk bluntly about concerns? Would that be throwing things out of proportion? Is this a problem with a few or with many? Why do some members of our faculty seem to be going away from collaboration instead of moving toward it? (FJ, 11/5)

Though this frustration was very real, it was short-lived. Entries in the field journal during the second semester were generally very positive and revealed the enthusiasm the teachers were feeling about their involvement in activities across grade levels (3/2, 4/13, 5/1). A number of entries were written after I attended a family planning time and saw the many positive influences of teachers meeting with teachers from other grade levels (1/15, 4/13).

An examination of the archives each family kept will be presented in the next four sections as I describe the activities of the families. Likewise, field notes that were collected are a part of those sections.

### School as Community Priority

We say in the new Carnegie report that building a true community of learning is the first and most essential ingredient of an effective school. We found, in our study, that it is simply impossible to achieve educational excellence at a school where purposes are blurred, where teachers and students fail to communicate thoughtfully with each other, and where parents are uninvolved in the education of their children. Community is, without question, the glue that holds an effective school together... (Boyer, Address, 1995, pp.1-2)

#### Boyer's Beliefs

Boyer reveals many tenets of school as community in his research report. To have an effective school community, one must experience a shared vision among the stakeholders in the community, teachers must be treated as leaders, and parents should feel that they are genuine partners in the education of their children.

According to the Basic School research, the shared vision of a school must exhibit six essential qualities: a purposeful place with a clear mission; a communicative place where people really listen to one another; a just place where all community members feel they are treated fairly; a disciplined place where expectations of conduct are clear; a caring place where people are genuinely concerned about each other; and a celebrative place where people revel in the excitement of learning (1995).

Boyer goes on to talk about the role of teachers in establishing an effective school-community relationship in a school. First, he says that teachers should be given the time to work together as teams, with their focus on the entire school and not just their individual classrooms. Time must be given for planning together so that professional development can occur continuously as teachers learn from each other. Secondly, Boyer emphasizes that effective teachers have several characteristics: they are well informed; they know children; they empower students; and they are open, authentic human beings. And, he goes on to say that teachers should be scholars, "...staying well informed and remaining professionally renewed" (Boyer, 1995, p. 44).

His final major proposal for an effective school-community relationship in the involvement of parents. Boyer suggests that the relationship between school and home must begin even before the students come to school. Then, after they begin it is important from their very first day that parents feel they have an active role in their children's education. Efforts must be made to involve uninvolved parents, those who are not comfortable and indeed are sometimes afraid to come to school because of their own bad experiences. Boyer offers the idea that parents should have a place in the school they can come and feel comfortable as they meet with other parents, wait for meetings, or volunteer (1995).

"Simply put," Boyer says, "in the Basic School building community is the first and most essential goal, with teachers and the principal and parents engaged in common cause on behalf of children" (Boyer Address, 1995, p. 3).

As stated in Chapter 1, Kipps Elementary began with many beliefs similar to those Boyer presents in his Basic School report. A number of activities and events relating to community were already in place at the school before the staff began studying and implementing the Basic School philosophy. The school had already developed partnerships with three local agencies including a bank, an engineering firm, and the local recreation department. These partnerships were in the beginning stages and maturing more each year. The partnership with the recreation department was particularly meaningful to the school. As the school was being planned, town officials and school officials developed a plan for cooperatively using the school facility for recreational activities after regular school hours. Thus, the gym, some classrooms, and the grounds of the school were used by the recreation department on a daily basis.

With these activities already in place, the School as Community priority was seen as an opportunity to expand upon our existing involvement. This particular family became a major change agent at the school. They were involved in many different activities and were constantly planning new ideas to involve the community in the school. Two major projects came into existence under the direction of this family: the First Day Celebration and the Parents as Partners Project.

### First Day Celebration

The School as Community Family plunged into their planning and quickly decided that their major school-wide activity would be a First Day Celebration in which we would encourage parents to come with their children to school and join us in a celebration. Just as Boyer noted as he talked about typical school-home relationships, the staff at Kipps had long held the belief that

parents should be discouraged from coming to school on the first day. Many times as principal, I have stood before the parents at their orientation meeting before school begins and told them to put their children on the bus and let them come alone on the first day. If parents were to bring their children to school, I encouraged them to bring them to the front door and then be on their way. Thus, the idea of encouraging parents to come to school with their students on the first day was to be quite a change in philosophy for our school. Yet, we knew that if we were to be a truly celebrative place (Boyer, 1995), we should start our year with such an atmosphere.

The First Day Celebration was divided into three parts (Appendix G). First, parents were invited to accompany their children to school, stop by and visit with the classroom teacher, and then to stay for a reception in the school courtyard. School staff members had volunteered to provide food for this reception. Approximately 75 parents attended the reception and spent approximately one hour visiting with other parents and miscellaneous staff members. Parents were very complimentary of this activity.

The second part of this celebration was an afternoon activity in which parents were invited back to join their children in their classrooms for the Balloon Project. During this time, parents (or volunteers if parents were not available) worked with their children to help them to set some goals for the school year. The students then wrote those goals on paper hot air balloons. These balloons were then taken to the lobby of the school where they were displayed. One issue we dealt with for this activity was those students whose parent could not be present. The members of the family decided to ask our business partners and other volunteers to come and help students who did not have a parent present.

Finally, to end the day, all the students in the school (including the kindergartners!)

gathered in the front of the school around the flagpole for a brief celebration activity. Students sang the school song and cheered for the new school year.

### Parents as Partners

The members of the School as Community Family were very interested in thinking more about the Parents as Partners section of Boyer's research. What began as a discussion of ways to involve the uninvolved parents of our school led to this group's leadership in our school applying for a grant to create more opportunities for such involvement. A note in their archives was sent as a reminder of an activity that was to take place in a lower socio-economic neighborhood (ARCH, 7-30-97).<sup>3</sup> This activity involved teachers going to the neighborhood one day during the summer to share some reading and other activities. Thinking such as this led the group to assume the leadership and determination to apply for monies the local school division had set aside for dealing with at-risk students (Appendix H). The Parents as Partners project (name comes directly from Boyer's report) was designed to deal with three components of the school's population: 1) involving all parents in their children's education, 2) an emphasis on priority neighborhoods that are largely made up of uninvolved parents, and 3) a need to look at some priority students whose needs demand early and individual intervention.

The Parents as Partners project became a major thrust for our school's implementing Boyer's research findings. As a result of this grant, the school became involved in a number of activities which are highlighted in Table 4.1.

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<sup>3</sup>Artifacts from archives are identified as ARCH. The date each artifact was placed in the archives is provided when available.

Table 4.1 – Activities Related to Parents as Partners Grant

<p>As a result of the Parents as Partners Grant, the school became involved in the following activities:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Acquiring a Home-School Coordinator, a part-time position, to promote our efforts to improve our relationship with our school community;</li><li>2. Providing bus transportation for PTA functions and other evening or after-school activities;</li><li>3. Taking staff members on “Magic School Bus” visits to neighborhoods targeted as at-risk where staff members shared books, provided refreshments, and spent time talking with parents in an out-of-school setting;</li><li>4. Creating a Parent Place, a room in the school where parents could meet together, wait for a conference appointment, enjoy coffee, read a brochure, or do other activities;</li><li>5. Becoming a SHARE site, a cooperative food program that promotes involvement in community and civic stewardship;</li><li>6. Visiting other schools, especially Basic Schools, to observe other programs that involve community in the school setting;</li><li>7. Emphasizing regular attendance to school through efforts to stay in close contact with parents of students who are not attending school regularly;</li><li>8. And, involving social service agencies, local university staff members, and other community agencies in our school.</li></ol>
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All in all, the School as Community family was the most active during the school year.

More activities were planned and coordinated by this family than any other. Thus, our experience with School as Community gave us many opportunities to learn.

### Learning from Our Experience

“Beginning the year with a very welcoming invitation to parents was certainly a highlight of the year.” (Meredith Walters, 76-78)  
“The things we did on our First Day Celebration were simple things, but they set aside the first day of school as being something very special.” (Marilyn Kline, 110-112)  
“Taking the buses into the at-risk neighborhoods was something we definitely would not have done had we not been involved in the Basic School. We would not have targeted our at-risk students as needing more help. I think that definitely came from the Community Family.” (Bonnie Stewart, 75-80)

Feedback for the First Day Celebration was overall very positive. We asked the teachers to give us an approximate number of parents/volunteers who came to their rooms for the celebration. When totaled, about 125 people participated with us. Teachers were also asked to comment about how they felt things went for that activity. Their responses were overall favorable, with some suggestions to improve the event in the future. See Table 4.2.

Table 4.2 – Teachers’ Responses to First Day Celebration

<p>Examples of teachers’ responses to First Day Celebration included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parents seemed very pleased! It really helped when we were loading kids on buses!</li> <li>• It was a great way to begin the school year, but a little overwhelming for kindergartners!</li> <li>• Morning activity was great for parents! Afternoon was OK – maybe better on first week Friday afternoon? Needed to be long especially outside.</li> <li>• I think everything went great although I was a little nervous about having parents in my room on the first day.</li> <li>• I thought it was very positive. We need to celebrate our learning and the people we work with.</li> <li>• A couple of my parents were frustrated because they also needed to go to another child’s classroom.</li> <li>• I was very pleased with the first day. It was the right amount of time and effort for the faculty. It went smoothly. I like the fact that parents were involved with children. The day went off very positively. (ARCH, No Date)</li> </ul>
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Another way that the success of this day was measured came in analyzing comments teachers made during their interviews. All of the eight teachers interviewed said they felt the First Day Celebration was successful. “Our First Day Celebration was the highlight of our family’s activities,” (42) Kathy Wilson said, and went on to say it was particularly scary for the kindergarten teachers to be doing things so differently on the first day of school. Many of the teachers would like to see the activities expanded in the future and a definite need was to inform parents sooner so that they could arrange being away from their work sites.

Many of the teachers who were interviewed also had very positive comments about the Parents as Partners Program. Betsy Martin said, “In general, the Parent Place and the whole

Parents as Partners Program was a big success in the way it got parents who are borderline into the school more” (52-54). But she goes on to say, “We need to continue to find ways to get parents involved. As far as the Basic School philosophy goes, we need to get some parents on the train with us because I think we left some at the station” (55-58).

In the interview, Kathy Wilson also commented that, as a school, we need to continue to improve our involvement with parents. “I think it will take a while to change everybody’s feelings about parents,” she said. “We have some teachers who don’t want parent involvement in their classrooms. It takes a while to change that over. It takes a while to buy into it” (70-74). Bonnie Stewart had similar feelings as she commented that we needed to enlarge the participation of the faculty in the Magic School Bus activities (67).

Similarly, my comments in my field journal represented the general sense of success with the activities associated with the School as Community Family, mixed with some feelings of needing to do more. My first journal entry related specifically to this family was on August 28 when I recorded my sense of satisfaction with our First Day Celebration. I wrote: “I feel better than I have in my eleven years as a principal about our opening day. Parents were overwhelmingly positive about our invitation for them to come in and celebrate with us.” I went on to think through the aspects of the day that went well and listed some ideas that would make the next year’s opening even more inviting and meaningful.

A journal entry on October 7 revealed my enthusiasm after attending a Community Family planning meeting. “I was amazed at the excitement this group of teachers had for wanting to get parents more involved in our school,” I wrote. “Their discussion ran from idea to idea as they brainstormed some ways to find resources, financial as well as personnel, to put some of their

ideas into action. From this discussion came the idea of applying for a grant to increase our involvement with the students in poorer neighborhoods.” A later entry (November 1) described the excitement the family members had when they found out the grant had been funded.

An examination of the archives kept by the School as Community Family revealed a wide range of artifacts. First, the minutes of each of the family’s planning meetings showed discussion taking place concerning the set-up of the Parent Place room (9/17), plans for the spring family-wide activity (12/8), the decision to become involved in a community project such as adopting our school grounds to keep tidy (2/11), and talking about the visits some family members took to other schools (5/13). A particularly interesting discussion took place at the January 14 planning meeting about the family’s role in maintaining the Parent Place once the grant money was spent. The family members had great concern that they plan ahead so they could be insured that this important outreach to parents would continue. Most impressive were the minutes from the meeting on August 12, when members of this family came together during the summer to plan for the First Day Celebration.

Other artifacts included copies of numerous flyers, including those about the Magic School Bus visits to targeted neighborhoods. A newspaper clipping (8/19) announcing the First Day Celebration was included, along with many flyers reminding members of meetings or other upcoming events. An extensive list of ideas the family had brainstormed in June at the retreat had been marked on in a variety of ways as the family had obviously discussed them. Finally, several notes were included that had been written to the representative for this family from family members (no dates). Those notes included comments about the various activities in which they had participated, always positive, supportive comments about the work they had done.

### A Curriculum with Coherence Priority

We propose, then, in the Basic School, a new curriculum, one that is coherent. Specifically, we suggest that all of the traditional academic subjects from science, to history, to civics, to literature might all be fitted within eight integrative themes that we believe cover the territory of knowledge, but provide integration, too. And these eight integrative themes are based on the universal human experiences we all share. It is possible that all people have eight common experiences? While we recognize human diversity, I think we must urgently start teaching students about human community as well. (Boyer, Address, 1995, p.5)

#### Boyer's Beliefs

Boyer's first emphasis in the Basic School's curriculum is on language. Literacy should be "the first and most essential goal" (Boyer, Intro., p.6) for the elementary school. He goes on to state that language should be defined more broadly than it is in most schools and should include not just words, but mathematics and the arts. Boyer sees connections among these symbol systems so that "Through words, students explore mathematical concepts. Through mathematics, they discover the arts. Through the arts, they also become verbally and mathematically expressive" (Boyer, 1995, p. 67).

Next, Boyer presents his belief that students should be given the opportunities to make connections across the different academic subjects. He believes that students should make these connections, as well as discovering ways to integrate these subjects and ultimately to relate their learning to life. Perhaps Boyer's greatest contribution in the area of curriculum is his listing of eight core commonalities or themes, within which, he believes, all traditional subjects or disciplines can be placed. Table 4.3 presents these commonalities and the goals of each.

Table 4.3: The Core Commonalities of the Basic School Curriculum

### The Basic School Core Commonalities and the Goals of Each

The Life Cycle: All Basic School students understand that human life has a beginning, a time of growth, and an ending. They acquire a basic knowledge of the body's needs and its functions, and adopt personal habits that promote wellness. They develop an appreciation for the sacredness of life, and understand how life experiences differ from one culture to another (p.86).

The Use of Symbols: All Basic School students understand that people communicate with each other through symbol systems. They explore the history of language, consider the purposes of communication, learn about new technology, and discover how mass communication can enhance or diminish human understanding. And they discover that integrity is the key to authentic human interaction (p. 88).

Membership in Groups: All Basic School students understand that everyone holds membership in a variety of group, beginning with the family. They consider how organizations shape our lives, how we, in turn, can shape institutions, and they develop, in the end, a sense of civic and social responsibility (p. 90).

A Sense of Time and Space: All Basic School students learn that people everywhere have the miraculous capacity to place themselves in time and space. Students explore our shared sense of time through history and through intergenerational connections. They learn about our nation's history and study the traditions of other cultures. And they gain perspective, as well, about where they are located, spatially, on the planet and in the universe.

Response to the Aesthetic: All Basic School students understand that people respond to beauty and can be expressive in the arts. They explore the rich variety of artistic expression, learning about the various works of art, recognizing the benefits of making art, and knowing some of the ways in which visual and performing arts have evolved indifferent cultures (p. 94).

Connections to Nature: All Basic School students recognize that everyone is connected to the natural world. They learn about the scientific method and, in the process, increase their understanding of the world around them. Above all, students discover the beauty and wonder of nature and develop a profound respect for it (p. 96).

Producing and Consuming: All students learn that people, as a part of being human, engage in making and using things. They recognize the value and dignity of work, distinguish wants from needs, and understand the importance of becoming creative producers, and responsible conservers (p. 98).

Living with Purpose: All Basic School students learn that all people seek meaning and purpose for their lives. They understand the importance of values and ethics, learn how religious experience has consequentially shaped the human experience, and begin to see the significance of service (pp. 99-100).

Boyer, 1995

Finally, in the area of curriculum, Boyer believes the Basic School is accountable to its parents, students, and the community it serves. Standards or goals are established in the school, and benchmarks are determined to monitor student achievement of these goals. Boyer suggests five goals to provide the framework for assessment including measuring literacy, core knowledge, motivation, sense of well-being, and responsible living. Unique to the Basic School, these goals include both the mastery of academic content as well as the development of good character, both of which are ultimate purposes of the Basic School (1995). The data which are collected to measure these goals should include written responses, teacher observation, student products and performance, and parent and student information.

#### The Kipps Experience with Curriculum with Coherence

The major project undertaken in this priority was our school's Academic Fair (Appendix I). The Curriculum Family suggested that our school go about the traditional Open House evening in a different way. In the past, we had invited parents in for an evening meeting to go to their children's individual classrooms where their work would be on display. Thus, parents saw only the results of one classroom teacher's curriculum and had no opportunity to see other grade levels' work. Since Boyer suggested that we should be merging curriculum over the grades and teachers should be communicating over the grades, the Curriculum Family proposed that redesign this evening to be a time when each family would display work representing all grade levels and the arts. Thus, a parent could then see the connections (or lack thereof) between grade levels.

On the night of the Academic Fair, each family had been given an area of the school (cafeteria, library, gym, etc.) to present "a celebration of our students' academic achievement," as

the flyer announcing the fair stated. Each of these sites had a myriad of student work displayed in many different ways. Some families chose themes to merge the students' work from grade level to grade level. Parents were given a map of each area and could visit not only their child's family's displays, but others as well. Many parents visited all four areas and were very complimentary on the approach we took.

Arriving at the final plans for the Academic Fair took much discussion, including some controversy. Even the title of the event became a point of contention when the Curriculum Family began by calling it a Basic School Fair. Some people felt that this name was giving the impression to parents that we were more involved in our work with Basic School than we really were at the time. Thus, the group agreed to change the name first to the School Fair and then, more specifically, to the Academic Fair. A similar discussion revolved around whether the teachers would use Boyer's core commonalities as themes for their displays. Again, some felt this approach would be very helpful while others felt we would be giving parents the message that we had used these commonalities overtly when we were teaching, a practice we had not yet begun. Discussions regarding the Academic Fair also brought us into some discussion about whether families could make binding decisions or if all decisions had to be brought back to the faculty for more discussion before final decisions were made.

### Learning from Our Experience

“I think being involved in the Basic School made me think about what I teach, why I teach it, and how I should teach it. It made me think about how can I fit all that I teach into a meaningful pattern, in a really organized way that makes sense for the students throughout the year.”

(Abby Franklin, 48-53)

“Academic Fair was great. We had so much fun getting that stuff together. It took a lot of time, but I really enjoyed being with the other teachers setting up as much as the actual night.” (Kathy Wilson, 25-28)

“I see the curriculum as being a real slow process. At the end of the year, we share and do it better the next year. Looking at units through the lenses of the commonalities is what we need to do next year. And somewhere down the road, we might have people visiting our Basic School.” (Tom Roberts, 76-81)

“The Basic School gives us the perfect opportunity to look at our curriculum in a nonthreatening way to see where there are gaps and where there are overlaps. It’s a way that everyone can feel good about the process if we go from the angle of Basic School.” (Betsy Martin, 72-77)

All in all, our school’s first experience with delving into Boyer’s beliefs on curriculum was positive, particularly our work with the Academic Fair. Though we worked through some controversy in planning this evening, the teachers who were interviewed overwhelmingly made positive comments about the evening. Kathy Wilson said she felt the Academic Fair was “the most communication between grade levels about academics that we had ever done” and continued that she appreciated seeing “the growth the kids had made from year to year” (102-104). Marilyn Kline said that seeing the students’ work in the family setting was much more meaningful (25-26). Abby Franklin was emphatic when she said, “I don’t ever want to go back to having Academic Fair in my room. Parents would then only see their kid’s work; they don’t see how we come together” (82-84). Meredith Walters said that she felt some people saw the original idea of Basic School Fair as “false pretense of what we had done this year,” (46) but she felt that the final event

was not a concern for those people. Tom Roberts also commented that the most negative point about the Academic Fair was “the noise level in the gym, but we can easily fix that...” (102-103) by arranging the displays in a more effective way.

Other than the Academic Fair, teachers made other comments about our discussions about curriculum this year in faculty meetings and in family meetings, along with a presentation by a consultant at the end of the year about the Basic School curriculum. The comments in the box above show the interest teachers had in making the connections Boyer describes in his report. There was a general feeling that our school needed to spend more time looking at curriculum on the grade level and then across other grade levels. Abby Franklin said, “I’ve put more time into the units I’m teaching this year and how they fit together and if they don’t how can I make them. I’ve really seen how things should come together rather than just teaching a unit and putting it away” (107-110). She goes on to say that she really liked the idea of key questions that she observed a teacher using when she went on a visit to a Basic School. Tom Roberts said, “I think that looking at things through the lenses will help me a lot. I think that will get me out of the habit of teaching certain units a certain way just because I’ve always done it that way” (50-53).

Entries in my field journal supported the general positive feedback about our work with the Basic School curriculum component. An entry on September 20 addressed a meeting of the Curriculum Family I had attended in which the members of the group had talked about various topics they would like to pursue this year including the Academic Fair, developing a portfolio assessment procedure for students, and beginning to work with the core commonalities. I noted my concern that “this family could easily take on more than they can handle this year.” I also commented on my pleasure at having “such wonderfully dedicated and talented teachers on our

staff.”

Entries over the next few months expressed my approval with the fervor with which this group went about planning the Academic Fair, but also revealed my concern that many of the ideas of this family were being questioned by others. On October 20, I wrote that I was very pleased to see the ideas that “ the Academic Fair will be presented around themes, perhaps the Core Commonalities.” Later, on December 2, I wrote, “I am so pleased to see that the Curriculum Family continues to alter their plans as they talk with other staff members. After some teachers expressed concern about ‘requirements’ for the event, the Curriculum Family decided to let each family make the decision about how they wish to structure their display.” Other entries gave similar accounts of how this family took feedback from the total faculty, discussed it, and came up with options that were acceptable to the majority of staff members (1/15, 3/12).

The archival data of this family was quite extensive. All the minutes of their planning meetings were included. These minutes showed how much time was spent discussing the preparation for the Academic Fair, as well as the many times they addressed the concerns of other teachers regarding their ideas. Other items in the archives related to Academic Fair included pictures of parents visiting during the evening, a detailed list of tasks to be done and who was responsible for each, maps of the school, invitations sent home to parents, flyers given to teachers regarding the various aspects of planning for the night, and a “guest book” in which parents recorded their visit to Academic Fair.

Perhaps the most important thing we learned from our experience with the Basic School curriculum ideas was that we wanted to do more. Many of the teachers had become very

intrigued with ideas they had seen as they had visited other Basic Schools. These experiences led to a very clear consensus as we discussed our plans at the end of the year that our primary focus for next school year should be on curriculum. When we heard that a Basic School Institute focusing on curriculum was to be held in the summer, four teachers volunteered to attend and report back the information they might learn about implementing the Basic School curriculum.

### A Climate for Learning Priority

Beyond building community, and beyond offering a curriculum with coherence, an effective school provides a climate for learning that is both active and creative, not passive and restrictive...The simple truth is that excellence in education is that magic moment between curious students and an inspired teacher (Boyer, Address, 1995, p.6).

#### Boyer's Beliefs

The third priority Boyer presents is the idea of a Climate for Learning. Bringing together the community and the curriculum, he believes, must be a climate that promotes effective learning. The first point he emphasizes is having patterns in the school that fit the purpose of the learning. His first emphasis here is on class size. "A reasonable class size is, without question, key to excellence in the early grades" (Boyer, 1995, p. 123), he maintains. He also suggests that grouping of students in schools should be flexible. Stating that students must be grouped to fit the purpose of their learning, Boyer suggests a variety of ways to place students in learning groups including homeroom grouping, mixed-age grouping, focused grouping, individual grouping, and all-school grouping (Boyer, 1995).

The next topic Boyer discusses in the climate priority is the need for appropriate resources to enrich student learning. Emphasizing a basic, fundamental need, he says each classroom should have a treasury of books so that "a deep respect for the printed page" (Boyer, 1995, p. 142) is implanted in students. In addition, students should be provided with technological resources that enable them to discover the world from their classroom. Yet, students should move from that

classroom and school regularly to take part in the many resources the neighborhood has to offer.

Finally, Boyer speaks of the many services that should be available to children in schools. Though many schools are offering some of these services, the Basic School should constantly be evaluating and expanding the services it offers. With an emphasis on educating the whole child, an effective school acknowledges the student's physical, emotional, and social needs. "Beyond a solid academic program," Boyer says, "the school provides basic health and counseling services for students, referrals for families, and a new calendar and clock, with after-school and summer enrichment programs for learning and creative play" (Boyer, 1995, p. 153).

#### The Kipps Experience with Climate for Learning

The Climate Family spent most of its time planning activities for History Month in February (Appendix J). The focus for this activity was historical figures, with special emphasis placed on the study of minorities, women, people with disabilities, and children. They stressed that many of the activities planned for the month should be tied with the state's Standards of Learning as much as possible. Different parts of the building were designated to highlight specific groups. For example, the lobby of the school was used to highlight African American history. A showcase displayed books written by African Americans. Posters and student art work modeling famous African American painters were displayed on the walls. Throughout the building, teachers displayed their students' work highlighting historical figures they had studied throughout the year. The goal for the Climate Family was to develop an environment that recognized historical figures other than traditional ones most history books presented. In doing this, students and parents could see that we valued the diversity of our community and celebrated the contributions of these

historical figures.

Though the activities related to History Month was our major focus on climate, this family also supported our school site-based team as it explored the possibility of providing child care before and after school, as well as in the summer. A team of four parents visited schools with such a program and brought information back to the school. After a visit to our school from a director of such a program, the school endorsed providing the use of the building for day-care services during these times. Families were surveyed, informational meetings were held, and plans became a reality as parents began enrolling their students into the program called Adventure Club.

#### Learning from Our Experience

“We spent time at one of our meetings talking about how the curriculum related to activities such as Black History Month which we were planning as part of our school climate activities. It was great that we made that connection.” (Meredith Walters, 122-126)

“It was interesting to hear the many different opinions as we planned our History Month Celebration. I didn’t realize we had so much diversity.” (Betsy Martin, 94-96)

“I didn’t understand a lot of the History Month. That just went by me. I expected more, but maybe I just missed what was there.” (Marilyn Kline, 138-140)

Though the Climate Family spent a great deal of time planning their school-wide activity and discussing other issues, their work did not seem as highly visible in the school as some of the other families. One reason for this was a discussion that History Month was coming at a very hectic time in the year. Standardized testing was scheduled, the PTA had a number of activities going on, several members of the family were ill, and inclement weather caused a number of days of school closings. For these reasons, the Climate Family decided to minimize the efforts needed

to make their project a success.

Thus, the teacher interviews did not provide a great deal of feedback about our involvement with the climate priority. Marilyn Kline felt that there was a misunderstanding about what activities should have been taking place during this time. “Several teachers asked me what kind of projects I would be doing, and I had to tell them I wasn’t sure,” (142-144) she said. Meredith Walters said she felt the Climate Family was “slightly dysfunctional” (90) at the time they needed to be working on the History Month and that prevented it from being a more extensive activity. She went on to explain that this dysfunction resulted from health and attendance issues of some family members. However, Bonnie Stewart thought the displays throughout the school “certainly caught the eye of students, teachers, and visitors in the school and gave them a different perspective on history” (121-122). Two teachers interviewed also made positive comments on the possibility of the Adventure Club beginning next year.

Similarly, I had very few journal entries related to the Climate Family. I attended one of their planning meetings on September 17 and wrote in my journal on that day that I was “impressed with the structure this family has given itself.” An agenda had been developed that allowed the family to move efficiently and effectively through the meeting. On January 22, I commented in my journal that the Climate Family seemed to be progressing well in their plans for History Month. As I look back now, I realize that there was some dysfunction occurring of which I was unaware. I also made an entry on March 23 stating that I had suddenly realized that the History Month activities had come and gone without a lot of attention. I wrote, “This became evident to me when someone asked me what the school-wide activities were for each family, and I could not think of what activity the Climate Family had done.”

The archives for this family included minutes from each of their meetings. These minutes show that time was spent at each meeting talking about the extra responsibilities the family had, plans for History Month, issues brought up at the Family Representatives' meetings, and other pertinent topics that had been suggested by members of the family. Two of those topics related specifically to climate concerns that members of the family had observed and wanted to share with others so that they could come up with some possible solutions. First, there was a concern that the after-school program provided by the town's Recreation Department did not provide appropriate supervision. The other was a concern that sometimes visitors to our school did not have identification that they had checked in at the office. Both of these issues were later presented at a faculty meeting, and plans were made to deal with them.

### A Commitment to Character Priority

There was a time when the focus of public education was on the whole child: body, mind, and spirit. Values taught at home were reinforced at school. In 1837, Horace Mann, the father of the common school, insisted that public schools should help students develop reason and conscience. And the highest and noblest goal of education, Mann said, pertains to our moral character. Schools, he said, should teach virtue before knowledge (Boyer, Address, 1995, p.8).

#### Boyer's Beliefs

The fourth priority Boyer proposes the Basic School should address is a commitment to character. “Will what students learn touch their deeper selves and help them not only become knowledgeable, but socially and ethically responsible as well?”(p. 173) Boyer asks. He then discusses the places where character is taught, such as in the family and in places of worship, but also emphasizes that public schools must also assume a role in character building. In going about deciding which character traits to teach, he suggests that school communities come to consensus on the virtues which they can support. As a starting point, Boyer offers seven core virtues for the Basic School (See Table 4.4).

Table 4.4 – The Seven Virtues for the Basic School

<p>The seven virtues for the Basic School include:</p> <p><b><u>Honesty</u></b> – Each person carries out his or her responsibilities carefully and with integrity, never claiming credit for someone else’s work and being willing to acknowledge wrongdoing.</p> <p><b><u>Respect</u></b> – Each person responds sensitively to the ideas and needs of others without dismissing or degrading them. Differences among people are celebrated, and all members of the community are able to accept both praise and constructive suggestions from others.</p> <p><b><u>Responsibility</u></b> – Each person has a sense of duty to fulfill willingly the tasks he or she has accepted or has been assigned. All work is conscientiously performed.</p> <p><b><u>Compassion</u></b> – Each person is considerate and caring. There is a recognition that everyone, from time to time, feels hurt, confused, angry, or sad. Instead of ignoring such conditions, people reach out to one another.</p> <p><b><u>Self-discipline</u></b> – Each person agrees to live within limits, not only the ones mutually agreed upon, but, above all, those established personally...At the simplest level, self-control reflects habits of good living.</p> <p><b><u>Perseverance</u></b> – Each person is diligent, with the inner strength and determination to pursue well-defined goals...Each person pushes hard to complete assignments, and all members of the community willingly support others in their work.</p> <p><b><u>Giving</u></b> – Each person discovers that one of life’s greatest satisfactions comes from giving to others, and recognizes that talents should be shared, through service. Rather than waiting to be asked, members of the community look for opportunities to respond positively to the needs of others, without expectation of reward.</p> <p>Boyer, 1995, pp. 183-185</p>
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After coming to consensus on which virtues a school should support, Boyer says the next decision is how to go about presenting lessons on these virtues. First, he suggests, character can be taught through the core commonalities of the Basic School curriculum. “In the Life Cycle, for example,” Boyer states, “children study health, physical education, and how the body functions. But the deeper lesson is that life is sacred, that we all must be respectful of one another” (Boyer, 1995, p. 188-189). Next, character can be taught through the climate of the school in that the

virtues are modeled by staff members so that students learn them by example. And, students in the Basic School are given opportunities to put character education into action through service projects within the school and in the community.

### The Kipps Experience with Commitment to Character

The Commitment to Character Family addressed a number of topics related to the character priority. One of these was the development of a school pledge. One of the teachers on this family had read about and visited a school that began each day with the students reciting a pledge. Based on the core virtues, the students were reminded each day of their responsibilities for character development. The Character Family began to work with students in their classes, with all six grade levels represented, to come up with some ideas of what the pledge should say. By the end of the year, a draft of a Kipps School Pledge was completed and planned to be presented to the faculty at the beginning of the next school year (Appendix K).

The Character Family also became involved in a local project called the Christmas Store. Carried out with donations only, this program was a way for families from lower socio-economic settings to obtain gifts to share with their families at Christmas. Our school's involvement included a drive to encourage students and staff to bring in items for the store, as well as a number of our staff members volunteering their time to work at the store.

The major activity for the Character Family was the planning of Earth Day for our school (Appendix L). Emphasizing the stewardship we must provide for the earth, a number of activities were planned which involved students' applying the core virtues in creating projects and discussing the care of our planet. Two of these projects included a classroom door decorating

contest using only recycled products and a Recycle City in the lobby of the school which included buildings, cars, trains, and other items found in a city made only from recycled products. Of course, students were actively involved in designing and constructing these projects.

Another activity sponsored by this family was a Character Challenge, carried out in conjunction with a local university's athletic department (Appendix M).. Teachers gave students tickets for such things as completing work, cooperating, showing good work habits, being courteous to others, and exhibiting other good character traits. Students would then put their names on the tickets and place them in a box. In December, two tickets were pulled from the box and those two students were given the opportunity to attend a party at a local game place where football players from the university interacted with them.

Finally, the Character Family chose to make this priority the theme for their Family Celebration Day and, thus, had all the activities related to character. The students were divided into groups which included students from each grade level. They cooperatively worked together on projects such as writing on a large sheet of paper posted on the wall what the virtues meant to them and creating a big book called That's What Friends Are For in which they worked in multi-age groups to write and illustrate pages in the book.

### Learning from Our Experience

“I think we should use those virtues in developing a behavior plan so that we are constantly reminding students of them.” (Tom Roberts, 90-92)

“I think something powerful that’s just beginning is the focus on virtues and commitment to character which has always been a big thing with me. I know other teachers do it, but now everybody will be on the same page and using the same language.” (Bonnie Stewart, 101-104)

“Another thing is the staff modeling the virtues. I think there are times that we are not as compassionate and respectful of each other as we should be...I think we forget sometimes how children tune in and notice things that we don’t think they notice.” (Betsy Martin, 121-125)

“I think we really ought to address the virtues. That’s something that’s been on my mind and every night I’ve been reading about one of the virtues and making a list in my journal about how I can teach it.” (Abby Franklin, 125-128)

Interviews with teachers about our work with the character priority revealed more about activities in which we want to get more involved in the future and less on the activities we did. Specifically, the teachers made it very clear they felt our school needed to address the core virtues. “I would really like to see us hit those virtues,” (120) Marilyn Kline said; “I think the virtues should be the big goal for next year,” (95) Tom Roberts said; and “I think what I talked about the virtues is a place I’d like to see us go,” (100) Betsy Martin said. Other comments on the virtues included specific suggestions on how to arrive at consensus on which virtues we should teach and how we should go about presenting the virtues to the students. Bonnie Stewart suggested doing school-wide assemblies and inviting our partners in the business community to “pitch in with some kind of award such as a luncheon with table cloths for students who consistently show strong character traits” (116-117).

Several of the teachers commented on the different programs the Character Family coordinated. Bonnie Stewart said she particularly felt the Character Challenge was effective in “the way it brought our broader school community together in addressing the issue of character” (121-122). Other teachers likewise felt the activity was very successful. Meredith Walters was pleased that this family had started working on the school pledge, but was excited to get a final product completed (117).

Two teachers commented on a reading group (not associated with this family) that had read a book on teaching tolerance and shared ideas among themselves. Marilyn Kline said that being a part of that group made her even more determined that our school needed to look at the Basic School virtues (30-32).. Betsy Martin said, “When I started reading that book, I was ready to go for it because I have seen students in my class, as young as they are, starting to isolate some of the kids. It reminded me that it’s o.k. to teach about compassion” (24-26).

Entries in my field journal included comments on several of the Character Family’s projects. “I have had so many students tell me about going to the Character Challenge party today,” I wrote on December 11. “They were so excited about playing with the football players. I reminded each of them that that opportunity came about because of their commitment to character.” On May 1, I commented on how great the Recycle City project looked in our lobby. I also made comments on the “wonderful activities the Character Family had taking place on Family Celebration Day. I was especially impressed with the big book writing by collaborative groups of students” (5/12).

A couple of journal entries on June 16 and then again on June 19 revealed my concern that one of the members of this family had some concerns about being involved in this family because

of the priority being difficult to integrate in our school. After talking more with her, we both realized that her concern was the family planning taking away time needed to meet with her team partner and other grade level teachers. Since she had always been a very strong member of our faculty, I felt a need to analyze her concern more. Out of frustration, I wrote: "I have come to the conclusion that we have several areas that I need to be aware of, (1) that some teachers are finding it difficult to break away from the old paradigm of teaming and (2) that some teachers cannot easily see beyond their classroom or team to what's best for the entire school." After talking more with this teacher over the next few weeks, I wrote in October, that the teacher "shared with me today that she is feeling much better about where we're going with Basic School and with the families. She also said that she felt that she had needed to go back and reread parts of the book and that helped her to focus more specifically on what we were doing."

The archives collected by the Character Family included detailed minutes of each of their planning meetings. The minutes from their September 17 meeting showed their concerns with pulling their family together and focusing more on what activities they would plan. A definite structure for their meetings seemed to evolve over time as they would spend time at each meeting talking about each of their planned activities. Also included in the archives were numerous flyers and memos they had exchanged, given to faculty members, or sent home with students.

The big book (That's What Friends Are For) that was written on the Family Celebration Day was also included in the archives. And, near the end was a letter from the local university director of athletics thanking this family for including their student athletes in a program that stressed a commitment to character.

### Personal Reflections

The overall experience of Kipps Elementary School with the Basic School framework was an intensive, meaningful undertaking. The year ended with the staff having mixed feelings on the effectiveness of our involvement with Boyer's research findings. They saw many benefits, but also realized there was much more work to be done in some areas. These findings will be interpreted in Chapter 5, along with recommendations made for future study.