

# The Abell Report

*What we think about, and what we'd like you to think about*

Published as a community service by The Abell Foundation

## The Abell Report Volume 1, Number 1

### To Community Leaders:

The traditional role of a charitable foundation is to make gifts of money to improve the quality of life. We see the role of The Abell Foundation as somewhat broader.

We take it as a part of our responsibility to try and involve the community in deciding its priorities.

That is why we are publishing The Abell Report.

With it, on a bi-monthly basis, we plan to share with you ideas about community issues which we believe warrant our interest — and yours; and in so doing, heighten awareness of these issues and stimulate debate about them.

We look forward, in the months and years ahead, to sharing information with you on important issues facing our community.

The Abell Foundation

## Experiment at Walbrook Senior High: Is It A Part of 'The Answer' For Baltimore?

It is unusual for Governor Schaefer, all 47 state senators and 141 state delegates, Mayor Schmoke, all 19 members of the Baltimore City Council, all 1,021 members of the Greater Baltimore Committee, State Superintendent of Schools Hornbeck, Superintendent of the Baltimore City Schools Pinderhughes, President of the City School Board Hollis, all nine members of the City School Board, and (it is safe to say), every one of the 220,000 property taxpayers of Baltimore City—it is unusual for all of them to come to agreement on any one issue, but they have on this one: the need to improve the quality of public education in Baltimore City.

What is not clear are the specific actions needed to effect that improvement. And, because of limited resources, there is a consensus that the actions taken be well thought-out and thoroughly evaluated, and that new approaches be disseminated widely in the community before being adopted system-wide so that all interested parties are given the opportunity to comment.

The comprehensive high schools are a major challenge to any urban school system. These schools educate the students who are left in an area of the city after many of the higher achieving children have left it for city-wide schools—City, Poly, Western, School for the Arts, Dunbar—and the vocationally oriented have gone to vocational schools. Of all the high schools, the lowest attendance, worst scores and the highest dropout rates are found in the comprehensive schools. Most of the problems experienced by these children are caused by factors that impacted upon them long before they arrived at the high school. Those factors need to be dealt with as they bear on younger children, but

whatever is done for them before they arrive at high school, the comprehensive high schools must be operated as effectively as possible in order to maximize the benefits for the children who are there.

In order to test a different model for operating these schools, to the end of developing a more effective comprehensive high school, the Baltimore system joined the Coalition of Essential Schools, choosing Walbrook Senior High for the experiment. The almost all-black, West Baltimore school began the new program in September, 1986, with one quarter of the entering freshman class. The Abell Foundation feels the program is a promising one, and that the more people who are aware of it, the more people there will be to make informed judgements about its merit.

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feels the program is  
a promising one"*

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The Coalition of Essential Schools is the brainchild of Theodore R.Sizer, the respected chairman of the education department at Brown University. As a member of the Coalition, Walbrook is one of 52 high schools around the country working separately and together to put Sizer's theories on how to improve the quality of secondary education into practice.

Walbrook intends to make the program standard curriculum for its ninth and tenth grades; and eventually, for its eleventh and twelfth (vocational education students excepted). Hope does not stop there; the city entertains the possibility of replicating the program, if it works at Walbrook, in each of its comprehensive high schools.

## Some Recent Grants By The Abell Foundation

The William M. Smith, Jr. Cultural Center/  
Bethel A.M.E. Church  
to acquisition and renovation costs of a larger  
facility to enable the expansion of community  
outreach services to meet the needs of low-  
income residents of Baltimore. \$180,000

Maryland Writing Project.  
Towson State University \$100,000  
toward first-year funding of a comprehensive  
training program to teach effective writing in  
selected Baltimore City Public Schools.

Touchstones Project/  
St. Johns University \$25,000  
to underwrite the cost of teacher training  
workshops and materials for a reading and  
discussion program based on elements of the  
Great Books curriculum to encourage the  
development of critical thinking and dialogue  
skills at Fallstaff Middle School.

Baltimore Medical System, Inc. \$195,335  
to fund in part three years of operating costs  
of a school-based health clinic and health  
education resource center at Herring Run  
Middle School.

Higher Education Needs Study/  
Greater Baltimore Committee \$125,000  
toward study of Baltimore region's present  
higher educational system as it relates to  
identifying needs of the business community  
and its impact on future economic growth.

Elementary School Program For Research  
On Elementary Middle Schools/  
The Johns Hopkins University  
A three-year grant to establish an evaluation  
center to assess existing instructional pro-  
grams in the public school system to identify  
effective programs across the nation; and to  
introduce new programs into practice in an  
effort to make a marked improvement in  
academic achievement among Baltimore City  
elementary school children. \$900,000

The Learning Bank/  
Communities Organized to  
Improve Life (COIL) \$100,000  
toward endowment of a drop-in adult literacy  
center in Southwest Baltimore.

Maryland State Arts Council \$50,000  
to help fund a four-year program providing  
technical assistance in management develop-  
ment of small to mid-size Maryland arts  
organizations.

Child Care Foundation \$4,000  
toward costs of a conference in critical issues  
in development of child care services in  
Maryland.

Sizer's theories are contained in  
his book, "Horace's Compromise:  
The Dilemma of the American High  
School," (1984) which he wrote  
after visiting and studying some 100  
high schools around the country.  
His theories include: "less is more,"  
that students will actually learn  
more if they are taught less but more  
selective (*essential*) material; per-  
sonalization, that teachers must be  
responsible for no more than 80  
students, and therefore be able to  
coach rather than lecture; that pro-  
motion level-to-level (there are no  
"grades") should come when the  
student is ready for it and not when  
the school calendar calls for it; and  
that such promotion, even gradua-  
tion, should not be based on tradi-  
tional written tests, but on "demon-  
strations"—showing mastery of the  
material in many possible forms  
(orally, a laboratory experiment, an  
essay).

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*"The techniques of  
teaching and testing  
are at the heart of  
the program."*

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Though Walbrook's model is  
made up of Sizer's collected  
theories, the degree to which a  
school is able, or willing, to imple-  
ment any one of them varies. That is  
why each school in the Coalition na-  
tionwide has developed its own ver-  
sion of the program.

Walbrook's looks like this.

One hundred and fifty students—  
90 in "Level IV" (9th grade) and 60  
in "Level III" (10th grade)—attend  
a "school within a school." This  
select student body functions apart  
from the main student body and  
faculty; it has its own teachers  
teaching to the Coalition's own doc-  
trine of instruction, its own cur-  
ricula, school day, and schedule of  
classes for that day. The students in  
the Coalition must supplement  
traditional written tests with  
demonstrations that are intended to  
exhibit mastery of work studied,  
and, based on a combination of  
pencil-and-paper tests and their ex-  
hibitions, advance level-to-level.

Classes average about 22  
students, and for these students the  
school day begins at 8:00 a.m. and  
ends at 4:30 p.m.—a half hour

earlier and an hour and a half later  
than it does for the rest of the stu-  
dent body. From 8:00 a.m. to 10:30  
a.m. and from 2:00 p.m. to 4:30  
p.m. the students function within  
the Coalition program; mid-day, in  
the time between, they become part  
of the rest of the school, joining  
fellow students in coursework and  
campus life.

The curriculum is heavily college  
prep: at Level IV it includes English,  
algebra, biology, American govern-  
ment, and Latin; at Level III,  
English, geometry, chemistry, U.S.  
history, French. Coursework is  
enriched with field trips; recent ones  
included the Library of Congress,  
Walter Reed Medical Center, and  
the French Embassy.

The techniques of *teaching* and  
*testing* are at the heart of the Coali-  
tion of Essential Schools program as  
it functions at Walbrook. And it is  
the degree of success or failure of  
these techniques that in the end will  
determine the program's viability  
and its future at the school, and as a  
consequence, perhaps, its future  
within the entire Baltimore City  
School System.

*"The governing practical meta-  
phor of the school should be  
student-as-worker, rather than the  
more familiar metaphor of teacher-  
as-deliverer-of-instructional ser-  
vices. Accordingly, a prominent  
pedagogy will be coaching, to pro-  
voke students to learn how to learn  
and thus to teach themselves."*

*"Coalition of Essential Schools"  
Education Department,  
Brown University*

In the classrooms at Walbrook  
that doctrine ("a prominent  
pedagogy will be coaching") is the  
operating technique, shifting more  
responsibility for teaching from the  
teacher to the student. Bessina  
Williams teaches biology to a Level  
IV class. In teaching a test for car-  
bohydrates in foods, she says, "Or-  
dinarily, in traditional teaching of  
this experiment, the teacher *does*,  
the student *observes*. In Coalition  
teaching, the *student* does, and the  
*teacher* observes. Here, I tell them

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Baltimore School System generally—even when one takes into account, from an evaluation of the program by the Johns Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools—that Coalition students enjoy the starting-out advantage of an 8th grade history of better-than-average attendance. In short, their attendance record was good *before* they entered the program; it gets *better* when they're in it.

In its evaluation, the Hopkins Center concludes that "good evidence has been found of positive effects on students of participation in the program," and that the program "actually gives a significant boost to student academic achievement." But the study does suggest some inconsistencies—and reasons for caution in any overall evaluation process.

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*“. . . inconsistencies, and reasons for caution . . . in evaluation”*

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First, according to the author of the study, Dr. James McPartland, Co-Director of the Johns Hopkins Education Research Center, "The evidence shows that *going in* the students begin with sizable advantages over other Walbrook students; they are younger, thus more likely to have been promoted on time at each earlier grade in their respective histories; and second, the students turn out to have had much better attendance rates historically than their non-Coalition counterparts at Walbrook have had. An objective observer might argue then that the Coalition students are in fact the most likely students to succeed *anyway*—in whatever enrichment environment they are in or not in.

"There is still a third caution. Notwithstanding the generally better attendance record of the Coalition students, poor attendance rates persist within the program, as they do, similarly, throughout the rest of the school. Although participation in the Coalition does have a significantly positive effect on student attendance rates, absenteeism remains a problem for the program".

But, controlling for the differences in student characteristics,

that is, taking the performance of those children who are statistically the same as the average student in zoned high schools, the Hopkins evaluation concludes that "the thrust of the evidence is that participation during 1986 and 1987 in the Essential Schools Program at Walbrook increases a student's school attendance and promotion rates, which are important behaviors linked to school academic achievement and graduation."

But neither the Hopkins study, nor any other study, makes clear how much of the improvement (in any area measured) is due to smaller classes and how much to the teaching techniques. The question about class size raises an important point: to reduce all high school class sizes to 20 would be prohibitively expensive within existing resources. Program advocates have contended that flexible use of the staff presently assigned to the school would permit classes of 20 school-wide with only minimal additional costs. That contention needs to be documented.

The potential for the success of the program can also be judged by less tangible criteria. For example, it is clear that if student interest in, and enthusiasm for, the program is proof of how well the program works, it appears to work well. The drop-out rate is zero. The whereabouts of all students who have left the program is known; they are in other school districts. Observers talking to the students, in small groups and one-on-one, find they have a special sense of enthusiasm about the program, and about their place within it. They appear to be not only more interested in the schoolwork they are currently doing, but in going to school in general. Their aspirations in life are high. Of seven Coalition students asked to indicate what they would do on graduation, all seven say they intend to go on to college. Among the colleges selected: Naval Academy, Rutgers, Brown.

The program addresses several additional problems. It is a generally accepted premise that one of the reasons children leave school is that they find it boring. In theory, schools are intended to educate individual students—promoting a love of learning and independent thinking. But it is also a generally accepted premise that many schools are run like "factories"; that the

emphasis is on efficiency, control and the mass production of young adults with diplomas; that teachers are rarely consulted on the structure of programs; that their expertise is not valued; that decisions are made for them by others not in a classroom.

Linda M. McNeil, head of the Department of Education at Rice, points out that such shortcomings in the system result in fragmentation of knowledge (bits of information to be memorized); mystification (no time for asking the question "why?"); and omission (material has to be glossed over to avoid the delay caused by discussion). The traditional system often kills the enthusiasm of the teacher and the child. But the Walbrook model, by involving the teachers in the planning of the curriculum and the children in the learning process, harnesses rather than suppresses this energy.

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*but "good evidence has been found of positive effects"*

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Conversations with teachers and students indicate a level of morale rare in public education.

But some critics are distressed that, in light of the promise of the effort, no evaluation process was put in place at the start-up. While they applaud the school system for trying a new approach, and for testing it before implementing it system-wide, they suggest that the absence of a more sophisticated, hard-data evaluation process is a problem that should not only be remedied here but throughout the system, so that decisions can be made on a factual rather than anecdotal basis.

It is true that the community leadership and the citizenry agree, generally, on the need to improve public education in Baltimore City, and that they have not come to an agreement on how to manage the effort. Fortunately, it is also true that for that effort there is no lack of promising "how-to" ideas.

One of them, functioning at Walbrook Senior High and making a thought-provoking case for approval, acceptance and replication, is the Coalition of Essential High Schools.

what we are looking to find out, and then we find out *together*. I do some gentle probing, which leads the student to develop the concept a little faster, and with a little more certainty." As the student goes to work on the assignment, Ms. Williams stays with him, or her, provoking discussions.

Lisa Bladen Pollack teaches English and Urban Growth. She says, "This is the way the program is supposed to work. The teacher is really the coach, helping guide students rather than standing up there and saying, 'This is the constitution, these are the parts.' We'll be doing a lot more things with that. We'll say, 'This is the constitution. Why don't YOU read it, and these are various judicial situations that have come up in connection with the constitution. What would you do if you were the judge?'"

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*"such a demonstration is effective proof that the program works"*

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Another English teacher, Florence Davis, has assigned the story, "A Man Without A Country." "I am not going to read that story to them. They are going to research the times about which it was written. Then, in groups, the students will present the story—reading it, setting it in context. The student, in each case, becomes his own teacher. That is *coaching*, and that is what we are working towards all the time here."

John Brown teaches all levels of mathematics. "What I try to do is lead a student through the process and then let the student come up with the answer. I try to make the students an integral part of the lesson. In a traditional classroom when a student gives an answer the teacher says, 'That's right,' or 'That's wrong.' But I just let the students give us various answers and then I ask them to justify their answers in each case, and to tell me why, in each case, he or she thinks the answer is correct. The program is student-owned, and because the students own the program, they are more receptive to it, and they learn more."

*"The program proceeds with no strict grading and with no system of 'credits earned' by 'time spent' in class. The emphasis is on the students' demonstration that they can do important things."*

*"Coalition of Essential Schools"*  
Education Department,  
Brown University

Whether a Coalition student can, indeed, do "important things" is a judgement that his or her peers, teachers, and other members of the school administration must make after viewing the student's demonstration—a presentation made in front of the class that demonstrates his or her mastery of subject matter. Currently, Coalition students are taking pen-and-paper examinations and will continue to even as the program matures, because, as Ms. Davis puts it, "In the real world of college entrance and job applications, students must graduate with the ability to excel in written examinations." But it is one of the goals of the Coalition program to have its students be judged by an added criterion: their ability to synthesize, to bring together skills from diverse disciplines—English, history, math, science, and, perhaps, what might be called "public speaking"—in a way that allows them to communicate ideas more clearly, and with more force and conviction. When the program is working right, the demonstration is the showcase for it.

It was the showcase, for example, for Walbrook Level IV student Derrick Rowe.

On a morning in January, Derrick stands at a lab table in front of about 15 students and four members of the Coalition faculty. In front of him on the table is a small pan; on the wall to his left are two 24-inch square charts. Though momentarily embarrassed, he gains confidence quickly, and introduces both himself and his demonstration. "I'm Derrick Rowe, and I am going to demonstrate how to dissect an organism."

He proceeds, without faltering and without referring to notes, to introduce and to explain the purpose of each of the instruments and the objects with which he will be working. As he does, he holds each one of them up for the audience.

He gains poise as he moves along. Using a paper model of a frog, and pinning it in place in his "operating" pan, he proceeds to dissect, taking care to put his skittish teenage viewers at ease: "I am using a paper model, so of course there is no pain."

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*"absenteeism remains a problem"*

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After completing his dissection, he goes over to one of the charts and, with a pointer, points to the lexicon of words he has used, so that the students not only get to see the vocabulary of the demonstration, but to hear it as well. He then goes to the other chart; it is a paper model of a frog, greatly enlarged, and with layers of papers representing layers of tissue. He says, "I will now perform the dissection on this larger, paper model, so that you will be able to see, incision by incision, exactly what I am doing." He moves through the exercise in full control of his material, and of himself. He concludes on the same note of confidence: "I have just demonstrated the proper steps in dissecting a frog." His teacher-judges agree that indeed he has made good on his promise, and they would go a step further; he has not only demonstrated how to dissect a frog, but, too, that such a demonstration is effective proof that the Coalition program works.

Does it work? Do Walbrook's students learn more from the Coalition's techniques of coaching and presenting? There is some hard data. The performance rate for students in the Coalition program exceeds the rate for students in the regular Walbrook program and those of the students in the Baltimore School System generally. Walbrook has tracked and compared scores of the Maryland Functional Tests for its 1986-'87 Level IV (9th grade).

(% pass-fail)	Coalition	Schoolwide	Systemwide
Reading	100%	93%	94%
Writing	26%	19%	26%
Mathematics	82%	57%	44%
Citizenship	61%	33%	56%

The attendance rate for the Coalition students shows a similar overall superior performance over that of the regular students, and of the