Tucked away in a long neglected area of El Paso, Texas, Hacienda Heights Elementary School has for 50 years stood as a beacon of hope for many underprivileged children. Hacienda is the Spanish word for a large fort-like house in which several families live to protect themselves from the dangers of the surrounding wilderness. Hacienda Heights now lives up to its namesake, protecting children from the drugs and violence that pervade the surrounding neighborhood. Its fountains and patios provide an oasis of learning and nurturing for the children. Along with the sound of cascading water, teachers hear the laughter and talk of children who feel safe and valued by the adults at Hacienda.

Hacienda Heights Elementary School (HHES) was not always a haven of hope. The school had myriad problems ranging from abysmal scores on the state mandated accountability tests, unmotivated teachers, a lack of parental involvement, graffiti, and gang influence in the school, to drug stash houses across the street. The results for the school on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills during the previous three years, 1994-1996, demonstrated that only an average 51% of the students passed the tests making Hacienda Heights the second lowest-performing elementary school in the Ysleta School District (Texas Education Agency, 2002).

Reconstitution means the replacement of any or all school staff and is one of the more drastic sanctions or interventions a state or district can take to improve low-performing schools (Spicer, 2002). Reconstitution is now one of the explicit interventions prescribed for low-performing schools under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Under the new version of the law, No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 signed by President Bush on January 8, 2002, school districts must implement corrective actions such as reconstitution if a school fails to make adequate academic progress for four consecutive years (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). After five consecutive years of inadequate progress, a district would be required to set up an alternative governance structure, such as re-opening the school as a magnet or charter school or risk state take over.

To improve dysfunctional schools such as HHES that have large proportions of students scoring significantly below performance standards, some states and districts have adopted the reconstitution process. Currently 15 states have the authority to reconstitute failing schools based on each state’s school accountability system (Spicer, 2002). The rationale is that if failing schools could turn themselves around on their own, they would have done so. Reconstitution recognizes that a culture of failure may be difficult to change from the inside, and failing schools are those least capable of self-initiated change. Reconstitution is the last and most radical step taken to reform a historically low-per-
forming school (Hardy, 1999). This highly controversial strategy is one that has become more frequently implemented as a last resort. One assumption behind reconstitution is that there are fundamental problems with a school’s administration and teachers that are preventing these schools from succeeding. Therefore, administrators and teachers are replaced in an effort to remedy the deficiencies and change the school’s culture and existing relationships with the community and students.

The reconstitution process can be successful despite tremendous obstacles. Hacienda Heights, a kindergarten through sixth elementary school in the urban border barrio of El Paso with a 1996 student population of about 640 was 95.7% Hispanic, 3.2% African-American and 1% White. In a district of 48,000 students and 58 campuses, Hacienda had the highest mobility rate at the time - 27.5%, with almost 87% of the students coded economically disadvantaged and approximately 36% coded Limited English Proficient or LEP (TEA, 2002). In addition, Hacienda serves the students from the El Paso County Shelter for Battered Women, and these children require additional support such as counseling and tutoring.

Hacienda began the 1996-1997 school year with a staff that was almost completely new. The superintendent hired a new principal who was given the opportunity to hire an assistant principal, counselor and librarian and an almost complete staff made up of 40 teachers. In addition, the school was designated a magnet school for dual language. These changes caused major upheaval with the previously apathetic community, because they had not been consulted or been informed that a reconstitution was being considered for the school. As a result, the superintendent called a community meeting to explain the changes but the crowd became so unruly that the police had to be called in to regain order. To assuage the opposition, the superintendent agreed to give the school a $1.2 million dollar renovation, with the understanding that the dual language program would be the focus of the school’s new curriculum. This new staff and focus represented a new beginning for Hacienda Heights and the surrounding community.

The culture of the school was one of the first areas targeted by the new administration. The previous belief system held that the students were unable to reach academic success because they were from poor homes where parents did not speak English, or because their parents didn’t care how well they did in school. The principal referred to this belief as the “pobreito” (poor) syndrome. She came in with no tolerance for low expectations, and the new belief system became a rallying point for all endeavors. The new belief system of “no excuses” and an incredible work ethic from everyone - teachers, custodians, clerks and parents created a powerful philosophical shift, no more “pobreito” syndrome. This shift in philosophy along with a student uniform policy that was instituted at Hacienda facilitated the focus on academic success in a nurturing, positive environment.

Dual Language

The District designated Hacienda Heights as a dual language magnet school. This decision was made due to its dismal Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) test performance and declining enrollment. Parents of students enrolled in the voluntary program elect to participate in this unique opportunity. Dual language students study French or Japanese in addition to the Spanish/English Two-way program. The program combines the best of bilingual education for language minority students and the best of foreign language immersion education for language majority students (Sack, 2000). Instruction is provided to native speakers of two languages using both languages. One of the languages is a second language for each student. The language minority (Spanish-speaking) students receive academic instruction through their first language and English language arts and portions of their academic instruction in English. The language majority (English-speaking) students receive academic instruction through their second language (Spanish), and English language arts and portions of their academic instruction in English. Both groups of students spend the entire day together never separating the language groups (Thomas & Collier, 1998).

At Hacienda Heights the Two-way program has been implemented as follows: Grades K-1: Eighty percent of the instructional day is devoted to content instruction in Spanish and 10 percent for French or Japanese and the other 10 percent for English. Reading instruction begins in Spanish for both groups of students. Grades 2-3-4: Students receive 70-60-50% of the day in Spanish and 20-30-40% in English while maintaining the 10% in French or Japanese language instruction. Students begin formal English reading in the third grade. Grades 5-6: The students’ instructional time is balanced between English and Spanish. Students develop academic language in each of the major curricular areas.

There are four major goals for these students. The first goal is to develop high levels of proficiency in their first language (bilingual/bilingual). The second is for students to achieve high levels of proficiency in their second language. The third goal is for academic performance to be at or above grade level in both languages with oral proficiency in the third language. The final goal is for students to have high levels of self-esteem and positive cross-cultural attitudes.

Leadership and Empowerment

School leadership was a critical component for the successful reconstitution process at Hacienda. The principal and assistant principal were given as their first assignment the reconstitution of a low-performing school. They embarked on a focused and direct path to lead the school toward its vision of college preparation and good citizenship. The principal had a clear vision, focused on intensive professional development, positive encouragement, effective communication, and wise resource allocation, which were essential for attaining the academic goals for students (Owens, 2001).

The leadership at Hacienda is unique in many aspects. The principal empowered and, expected, all teachers to be instructional leaders and role models for fairness, a good work ethic, and positive attitude. The principal interviewed and hired teachers based on their qualifications and alignment with the school vision as well as being innovative, responsive learners. Teachers were given the opportunity to initiate refinements to the instructional strategies and programs (Owens, 2001). Teachers participated in leadership roles, such as grade level chairpersons and mentors for new interns.
Curriculum

The reconstitution process involved an overhaul of the school's curricula and the implementation process in order to transform the low-performing school into a place of successful teaching and learning. Needed interventions were targeted in the annual Integrated Campus Action Plan (ICAP) (Doherty, 2001). The plan ensures that the curricula meet the highest standards, basing modifications on TAAS data and reading assessments. Professional development is examined in the ICAP for its effectiveness based on data such as attendance, grades, running records, Mock TAAS, TAAS, and the Reading Proficiency Tests in English. There were three initiatives targeted for special emphasis: reading, math, and writing, in this order, to achieve the restructuring of the school's lowest areas of performance on TAAS. The staff at Hacienda believes that reading is the foundation for all other learning, and until each child becomes a successful reader, he or she will struggle in other areas (Hudson, 2001). The campus reading programs have been extremely successful, raising both the TAAS passing rate in reading 22 percent and the level of passing approaching the proficiency level of student Texas Learning Index (TLI) averages of 85 or higher in all grades. The improvements are the results of the balanced literacy program, the large amounts of daily reading practice required, and the early reading intervention strategies.

Quantitative skills were targeted for improvement during the reconstitution as 47% of the students were falling on the math portion of the TAAS assessment during 1994 and 1995. Professional development was key to enabling teachers to become proficient in the area of math instruction. Therefore, after careful research, a new constructivist math curriculum for grades two through six, written by math consultant Sharon Wells, trained teachers to take all students from the concrete (using manipulatives) to the semi-concrete (drawing problems out) to the abstract, regardless of math content. This new program requires about 60 to 90 minutes daily for implement.

Parental Involvement

Since the reconstitution, the school has had to work assiduously to develop a trusting relationship with parents and community and refocus the staff's commitment to the unified, shared vision. The massive changes in personnel and the history of anger and distrust shown by the community have made improving the culture of the school a top priority. Several changes were put into place or have evolved in order to improve the learning and teaching environment (Owens, 2001). First, an open door policy for parents was implemented. Prior to the reconstitution, parents and grandparents brought the students to the school doors, but never came in. The message had been "Stay Out." "No parents beyond this point." Benches are strategically located so that parents can come into the school to wait for their children. All communication sent to the homes is in English and Spanish. Families are given immediate access to the administration. Bilingual meetings are held for families in the daytime and in the evenings for different types of parental training. Teachers set aside adequate time for phoning and meeting with parents, thus improving communication between the school and home. A mindset of "service" to parents and children evolved.

In addition, parents are asked for input when new initiatives are being considered and current ones are being reviewed. Parent Academies are held regularly to inform parents on all areas of student performance. The campus has an active Campus Educational Improvement Council (CEIC), consisting of the campus site-based team, parents, community members and the principal. Parents are notified
of each monthly CEIC meeting, and encouraged to attend so that they could share concerns and vote on important school issues such as: campus budget, instructional initiatives and professional development. The CEIC examines all the data from the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills, as well as student attendance, retention and funding. The CEIC is also involved in the review and approval of the ICAP.

Other initiatives which have provided important opportunities for reflection and inquiry at Hacienda include monthly Book-of-the-Month launches, summer workshops for parents, parent math and science nights, parent conferences, TAAS workshops for parents, dual language presentations and discussion groups for parents. Trusting and beneficial relationships were built between the school’s adults and parents to the mutual benefit of children during these meetings and training sessions.

**Conclusion**

Students attending Hacienda Heights face many unique challenges such as limited-English proficiency, low income, and/or single-parent homes. Working collaboratively, the school community tailor the curriculum to address these special needs, thereby increasing the opportunities for students to reach their academic potential. The success in addressing the needs of students after the reconstitution is evidenced in many ways: Hacienda Heights has recorded outstanding scores on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), surpassing Texas averages in both English and Spanish. In the last six years, the school has been Texas Education Agency (TEA) Recognized, the second highest ranking on TAAS, two years and an Exemplary school for four years. The 2002 TAAS scores indicate that in third through sixth grades, 93% of all students passed in reading, 96% passed in math and 97% passed in writing. These scores are significant compared with pre-reconstitution in 1994 and 1995 when they averaged 77% in reading, 63% in math, and 80% in writing in grades three through six (TEA, 2002). The school won the United States Department of Education National Blue Ribbon Award for the 2001-2002 school year as a result of its outstanding achievement in all areas of school performance.

The successful reconstitution of Hacienda is attributed to a research-based curriculum that is standards-driven and is challenging and innovative, with the ultimate goal of providing students with a rigorous preparedness for their continued education. In order to realize this goal, the staff is motivated, knowledgeable and dedicated to making a difference in the lives of students. The school has become a hacienda in which students come to learn and grow so that they may achieve their highest aspirations.

**Implications**

While there is no magic formula for making a reconstituted school a success, there are strategies that were implemented during the reconstitution process at Hacienda Heights that have demonstrated that they are essential factors in a successful school: Strong leadership. The school survived the reconstitution process successfully because of a committed, strong, and motivated leader responsible for its success.

- Empowered teachers as change agents that transformed the status quo.
- Student-focused culture of high academic expectations in a school where failure was once acceptable.
- Used achievement data collected from previous years to bolster accountability efforts and redirect instructional practices and professional development for teachers.
- Brought in a new and qualified staff eager to take on the challenge of working in a chronically unsuccessful school, and provide a fresh start to their students. The school received additional resources and support from the district at each stage of the reconstitution process. They helped while preparing to reconstitute, during the implementation stage, and finally, in the institutionalization stage when the school was no longer under district watch. The new curriculum was based on national and state standards implemented with teaching’s best practices. Finally, parental involvement was a key component to student success and was addressed in comprehensive and innovative ways.

**References**


Ana Maria Soledad is a native El Pasoan who was a member of the administrative team that implemented the reconstitution process at Hacienda Heights Elementary. She is currently employed as the bilingual education and foreign language facilitator for the El Paso Independent School District. She was a Fulbright Exchange Administrator to Argentina. Soledad is currently a doctoral candidate in Educational Administration at the University of Texas at El Paso.