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Spring 2005

Erikson Today





Improving schools

On the cover: Building on the success of the work Professor Patty Horsch (on cover, rear left) has done at Williams School, Erikson is expanding its efforts to improve Chicago schools. Photos by Kathy Richland.

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Erikson is a growing force in school

WITH SCHOOL REFORM ON THE FRONT BURNER in Chicago, expertise—particularly in the critical early grades—is at a premium. Erikson has answered the call with three major new initiatives to improve schools: consulting on a charter school start-up, deepening the skills of a new cohort of experienced teachers, and creating an organizational structure that can help replicate successful school transformation in the future. These three projects are already making a difference, and they will have an impact on children and families for years to come.

Starting out right—shaping foundations of a charter school

Erikson's first major school reform project of the decade—the successful reopening of Williams School in 2003—has led directly to a second: an opportunity to help develop a charter school in collaboration with a major Chicago law firm.

Sonnenschein, Nath & Rosenthal LLP wanted to mark its centennial by giving back to the community. Ambitiously, the firm decided to launch a charter school and began looking for expert advice last year.

Project leaders from Sonnenschein visited Williams School, where Erikson's partnership with the Chicago Public Schools is transform-

ing a failing school into a singular success. At Williams, Erikson faculty, led by clinical assistant professor Patty Horsch, consulted on every facet of structure and operations, from helping hire a principal to selecting and training teachers and redesigning the curriculum.

"We were enormously impressed by the program at Williams and by Patty, so we asked her to get involved," says Errol Stone, who heads the school project at Sonnenschein. Horsch served on the advisory committee and made curriculum recommendations. Then the firm developed a consulting arrangement with Erikson to guide the launch of the school. "We knew of Erikson's premier reputation in early childhood,"

Stone says. "Our first choice for who we wanted to work with was Erikson."

Sonnenschein's resulting school proposal was one of eighteen to win approval in January as part of Renaissance 2010, Mayor Richard Daley's plan to create 100 new schools over the next six years. The firm will launch Legacy Charter School in the North Lawndale neighborhood in August, initially offering pre-K through second grade and adding a grade each year.

Horsch and a colleague, Tammy Steele, advised the firm's planning group on curricular matters. "We helped them set a framework and outline some basic principles to guide their early childhood and primary educational plan, and made recommendations on which materials to use," Horsch says. "My advice was not to lock the curriculum down, because developing curriculum is really something you want your teachers to do."

Erikson will assign an adviser to help hire and train teachers this spring and to consult on professional development and mentoring after the school opens. After the first year, Legacy will become an internship site for Erikson students.

Starting a school from scratch is an extremely complex process, Stone says. "We're essentially starting up

reform

a business—a complicated, highly-regulated one with an enormous amount of expertise required.” The law firm supplies a range of administrative services such as accounting, human resources, and information technology that are daunting for educators to assemble. In return, Erikson consultants have given the lawyers a crash course in early education best practices. “The process has been very challenging, very educational, and very exciting,” Stone says.

Horsch notes, “It’s interesting to explain the rationale for what we’re proposing to very smart people who don’t have a background in early education but clearly have a tradition of excellence and want to do the best for the community.”

Horsch adds, “It’s been an opportunity to revisit some of the ideas we had in the formation of the Williams School project and approach them in new ways.”

Looking forward to fall, Stone says, “We anxiously anticipate seeing the first children walk in the door. Even more, we anticipate seeing them graduate, although that is still some years off.”

The Boeing Cohort—recruiting the best and making them better

In an effort supported by the Boeing Company, Erikson and the Chicago Public Schools recruited a cohort of promising certified teachers to pursue a master’s degree in child development. The aim is to improve the quality of teaching for Chicago’s youngest students.

After just one semester, the CPS teachers in the Boeing cohort say their new knowledge is already changing their approach to children in the classroom.

The nineteen participants teach pre-K through third grade classes in several CPS locations. They take regular Erikson classes together as a group, with a special summer seminar on advanced teaching methods. Boeing pays half of their tuition and CPS pays a quarter, which makes graduate study financially possible for many in the cohort. In return, participants must agree to teach for at least three more years with CPS.

“This project fulfills our strategy to drive systemic improvement in public schools through well-prepared principals and teachers,” says Anne Roosevelt, director, Boeing Community and Education Relations. “By providing a new push to dramatically improve the teaching talent pool, this program will push CPS in the direction that it wants and needs to go in early childhood education.”

What makes a credentialed, experienced teacher head back to the classroom as a student? For some, it was their teaching experience itself that inspired them. “Once you’re in the classroom, you realize you need to know more; you need to keep learning,” says Denise Malecki, who teaches Head Start at Lazaro Cardenas School.

Her colleague at Cardenas, Matthew Shirrell, agrees. “I think in undergrad we had only one

survey course in human development. Most of our course work focused on methods and tactics—how to teach math, how to teach reading. But you’re teaching children, and you have to know a lot more about them than I did,” says Shirrell, a second-grade teacher.

Ziomara Perez, who teaches in a preschool program at Friedrich Ludwig Jahn School, also finds that she understands her students better. “I think I just question things a little more. Instead of just seeing a child’s behavior at the surface, I dig down to try to see what’s really going on.”

Erikson’s emphasis on understanding the impact of culture and context is another important lesson cohort members have taken back to the classroom. With greater awareness of how child-rearing views differ across cultures, “I’m starting to see why children behave the way they do, where they are coming from, and really understanding their attitudes, their parents, their homes,” says Rosabel Sanchez, also a Cardenas teacher. “I think that’s where I’ve gotten a lot better.”

The knowledge cohort members are gaining also flows to others at their school. They are thinking about issues differently and using a new vocabulary that surfaces in meetings and interactions with their peers. “It happens unconsciously,” Sanchez says.

Photo by Oscar Moresi



Cohesive Cohort

Learning with peers is a bonus for Boeing cohort students (l-r) Matthew Shirrell, Ziomara Perez, Denise Malecki, and Rosabel Sanchez.

“I’m fortunate to have an assistant, and I am always passing on what I’ve learned,” Malecki says. “Most of the time it’s going to instigate a change in the classroom, so I want to explain what’s going on.” Perez also shares information with her four classroom assistants. “In a way, we’re all becoming more sophisticated teachers because of the good foundation I’m getting,” she says.

Like all master’s students, Boeing cohort students will do an internship, but it will take the form of a special, focused improvement effort in their own classroom or preparation for national board certification. Erikson faculty will provide support for either approach. The opportunity to pursue board certification with Erikson’s backing was a major reason Perez enrolled.

Faculty members who teach the cohort enjoy and admire these students, who show up for 4:30 p.m. classes after long, tiring days in the classroom. “They have a very deep commitment to children, and they show real dedication in their desire to be more effective as teachers and to understand the child in the context of families,” says Professor Zack Boukydis. “They’ve worked on the front lines. In class discussion they show they are really integrating what they learn.”

Learning with a group of peer teachers “makes a very engaged, cohesive group,” says Fran Stott,

vice president and dean of academic affairs. Shirrell notes, “We have a lot of similarities, but I’ve been amazed at the range of different communities and environments that people teach in. That brings so much to the classroom discussion. And the support and encouragement we give one another is great.”

Perez agrees: “It’s like an extension of your job, which is like your second family. If it were a cohort that was composed of people from different careers, I don’t think I’d make as many connections or find it as meaningful as I do now.”

With three Cardenas teachers in the program, this “subcohort” enjoys even greater support. Malecki and Shirrell carpool and debrief on the way home after class. “Whenever we have a paper due, Rosabel and I are on the phone all the time,” Malecki adds.

Perez doesn’t have the luxury of having colleagues from her school in the program, but she can see a real benefit for Cardenas. “Normally in schools they have you spiral curriculum ideas through all grades,” she tells her classmates. “With you, that will happen, but a deeper set of issues, like a focus on culture and an environment of acceptance, will be shared. Kids will be exposed to those ideas in your classroom, and then yours, and then yours,” she says with a nod to each of her three classmates. “I can see that happening.”

New Schools Project—Applying the lessons learned

Erikson Institute’s efforts to improve schools have been growing over the past few years, but until now, most projects have been focused on a single group of teachers or a single school.

The New Schools Project, launched March 1, will prepare Erikson to assist more schools, teachers, and administrators. Supported with a \$220,000 grant from the Chicago Community Trust, this project will create opportunities for consultation, professional development, on-site coaching, administrator training, and community involvement. Expanding Erikson’s school reform efforts will help more children and families experience school success.

Building on Erikson’s unmatched expertise in curriculum development, teaching methods, and professional development for teachers, the New Schools Project will hire staff and consultants to create a template for starting or reopening schools. The project will define methods and best practices in key areas of school reform, including

- providing professional development for teachers;
- developing curricula and assessments;
- engaging the community in school change;
- defining the role of an embedded consultant in schools;
- identifying teachers, principals, and others who can serve as consultants or coaches to transforming schools;
- engaging principals in early childhood issues; and
- evaluating school transformations.

Clinical assistant professor Patty Horsch, who has been serving as director of professional development at Williams School, will direct the New Schools Project. Horsch and Erikson will remain active in the Williams School partnership.

The New Schools Project launch couldn’t have come at a more opportune moment. The Chicago Public School system has launched an ambitious renewal program, with plans to create 100 new schools or schools within schools by 2010. With Erikson’s expertise, reputation, and long track record of collaboration with CPS, the Institute is perfectly positioned to assist with this effort; this new project will increase its capacity to do so.

“We believe we can enhance our effectiveness with CPS and other schools by creating a comprehensive program devoted to early childhood school reform,” says Erikson president Samuel J. Meisels, principal investigator on the project. “We believe school systems need the knowledge Erikson has, and Erikson needs to collaborate with schools to put its knowledge to work.

“Many reform efforts fail for lack of a support structure to sustain them. This project will build a long-term infrastructure to support Erikson’s reform efforts.”

News from Erikson

Halpern paper focus of national meeting

Should after-school programs be used to improve children's academic achievement? Robert Halpern thinks not, and his view is attracting serious attention in the field.

A paper Halpern wrote on the issue was the topic of a special meeting held in New York in February. After-school program administrators, policymakers, researchers, and underwriters met to discuss the need to reframe expectations for such programs.

Halpern writes that after-school programs should be used to address a range of children's developmental needs that schools seldom meet. Instead, as concerns over academic performance have grown in recent years, "After-school programs have been pulled into the achievement gap," he says. Schools, parents, community activists and politicians began to expect after-school programs to produce academic gains, especially in traditionally underserved communities. But, Halpern argues, "there's a growing

consensus that it is an inappropriate expectation that these programs can improve academic performance. That expectation has distorted programs—and the agenda for accountability and research."

Organizations funding these programs want evidence that they are producing results. As more programs shift their focus to academics, they also turn to standardized achievement tests to measure effectiveness. Halpern outlines a host of reasons why such tests are ill suited for use with these programs.

Because after school programs vary so widely in goals, approaches, and participation, a more nuanced evaluation is required to tease out effects. That kind of research has been neglected, he believes. "Because programs have been refocused on academics, all big evaluations have also been contorted to find academic effects. They really haven't found any because that's not what the programs are good at," he says. "My argument is that we've lost five years pursuing the wrong research agenda."

Mr. Rogers, Big Bird, and us

Erikson Institute received the 2005 Great Friend to Kids Award from the Association of Children's Museums. President Samuel J. Meisels accepted the award at the association's annual conference in April.

The award honors individuals and organizations that have made outstanding contributions toward strengthening education and advancing the interests of children. The award puts Erikson in good company; previous winners include Fred Rogers, Dr. James Comer, the Sesame Workshop, former First Lady Barbara Bush, and UNICEF.

The award recognizes Erikson's efforts to improve education by researching best practices and preparing professionals to implement them. As a collaborator with children's museums, Erikson's work has helped advance their goal—to bring children and families together to experience play that inspires lifelong learning.

Collins honored for dissertation

Assistant Professor Molly Collins won the International Reading Association's 2005 Outstanding Dissertation Award.

Her dissertation was judged the best in two rounds of blind review, based on importance of topic; methodological and scientific soundness; significance of findings; and other criteria.

The dissertation explores English vocabulary acquisition from storybook reading among English-learning preschoolers whose first language was Portuguese. Collins's research showed that children who heard rich explanations of sophisticated new vocabulary words while stories were read to them learned significantly more of those words than a control group who heard just the story with no explanations of the new vocabulary.

Collins also found that children's baseline knowledge of English was helpful to learning new words. "Those who initially knew more English learned more new words. This suggests a snowball effect: the broader the vocabulary base you have, the easier it is to learn more. This shows the importance of stressing vocabulary development early."

However, in-class explanations made an improvement regardless of the existing level of English vocabulary, she found. "That's critically important because it means that we should provide rich explanations of words, regardless of how little English is known. It's tempting to think that you shouldn't bother with explanations if the children don't speak much English. That's not true. Even children with virtually no knowl-

edge of English learned more words with supportive, detailed explanations."

Collins completed the dissertation in May 2004 to earn her doctorate in education from Boston University.

Bowman honored

Erikson founder Barbara T. Bowman will receive an honorary doctor of humane letters degree from Wheelock College at commencement exercises there in May.

The degree recognizes Bowman's leadership in early education and her long advocacy for better preparation for those who teach and care for young children. Wheelock is a partner school with Erikson in the Four College Consortium on Early Childhood Education.

Bowman also received the Leadership to Children award from the National Association for Education of Young Children Black Caucus at NAEYC's annual meeting in November 2004.



Meisels honored Erikson president Samuel J. Meisels received the Service to Young Children Award from the Chicago Metropolitan Association for the Education of Young Children at its Opening Minds Conference in January. Presenting the award for CMAEYC were Mark McHugh, president elect (left), and Blakely Bundy, president.

Bringing a developmental focus to primary care

Name: Catalina Ariza

Erikson class of: 1990

Current position: Healthy Steps specialist

Mission: Provide clinical services to families while training new physicians to incorporate child development perspectives in practice.

On Erikson: She recently returned to Erikson to supplement her master's degree with a certificate in infant mental health.

Catalina Ariza has found a role that lets her maximize her impact on children and families.

She works side by side with new physicians at a family practice clinic at the Advocate Illinois Masonic

Medical Center, training them to address child development issues while treating children.

For her it's a perfect combination: she provides direct clinical services to families, focusing on developmental rather than medical aspects of children's growth. At the same time, she prepares the next generation of doctors to incorporate this focus in their practice.

Her work is part of the Healthy Steps Program, a national initiative to teach medical residents to address behavioral and developmental issues of children from birth to age three. She teaches residents best practices in developmentally-oriented primary care and trains them in the use of specific screening tools to assess the child's mastery of skills, language, social/emotional growth, mental health, and behavior—all factors that influence physical health and well being.



Photo by Oscar Moresi

There are twenty-four residents in the Advocate Family Practice. "When they see babies, I'm seeing babies with them," Ariza says. "I teach them everything from how to incorporate developmental screenings in the context of a physical exam to how identify issues like postpartum depression." She also trains residents to effectively communicate strategies, offer anticipatory guidance, and build relationships with families—skills they can bring with them into future practice.

While sharing her knowledge of early childhood, she is also deepening that knowledge. Recently she returned to Erikson to earn a certificate in infant mental health. "I always wanted to pursue more understanding and knowledge in this area. It has really expanded my knowledge base and skills. Already I have been able to incorporate a lot of knowledge into my direct work with families and with teaching."

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