

A hot trend in public education—funded by Bill Gates—is unfolding at a Columbus high school known more for athletics than academics. **Alice Hohl** reports on the difficult transition from old school to small school.



# Fixing Brookhaven

**T**he small stuff matters to Talisa Dixon. As she walks the halls of Brookhaven High School on a fall Tuesday, she casts a careful eye. Dixon picks off threads of Silly String clinging to a set of lockers, a remnant of a homecoming decorating project gone a little too far. She talks to the students and knows their names—all 1,100 of them—and she calls out to nearly every student who passes her. She asks questions that reveal she knows more than just a name, rank and serial number.

"Hi, Jeremiah. We called Grandma yesterday. Did she tell you?"

"Denise, you're just now getting to school?"

"Is your cold better?"

"Let me see your hall pass."

Later, Dixon pauses outside the library. "Is that Brandon?" she asks about a student who appears to be sleeping. She knocks on the window, and the boy (who indeed is Brandon) lifts his head off the table, sits up straight and flashes Dixon a wide grin. "Thank you," she calls out.

Last year, heavy drapes hid the library from view. When Dixon took control of the school, the drapes came down. Removing visible barriers, like the drapes, was easy. Removing the invisible ones, like walls between wary students and their teachers, is proving more difficult.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY TIM COLEMAN



Brookhaven High School principal Talisa Dixon in the school's main hall.

**B**ad news pummels Columbus Public Schools like an endless hailstorm. Just this past year, the headlines have been about a sexual assault at Mifflin High School, alleged drinking and sexual behavior by a principal during work hours at Wedgewood Middle School, an exodus of families enrolling in charter schools, a looming battle over school closings, teacher layoffs and budget woes.

Yet there's a quiet revolution brewing in the halls of Brookhaven. Dixon is at the head of a bold experiment, with her students and staff as the guinea pigs. It's all about going from old school to small school. The traditional model wasn't working; chaos and futility ruled the day. Now, Brookhaven is trying to downsize. There actually are three schools under the roof of this sprawling facility. Each has its own principal, group of students and defining purpose. The three schools are called Legacy, the Leadership Institute and the North Star School of Exploration. Leadership offers most of Brookhaven's college-prep courses, and the curriculum is based on the book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens*. North Star emphasizes hands-on educational activities, with teachers trying to include physical activity for students who learn better by pacing than sitting in a chair. Legacy focuses on teaching students *how* to learn, encouraging critical thinking and self-evaluation.

The concept is the brainchild of a group in Cincinnati called KnowledgeWorks Foundation. "Small schools give us a chance to develop better relationships, improve the rigor of our schools because of those relationships, and improve the relevance of how we present the instructional strategies to our kids," says Jim Osborn, a former Mifflin middle school assistant principal who works with KnowledgeWorks. The idea has gotten the attention of none other than a very rich guy near Seattle with an interest in computers: Bill Gates. In fact, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is the main money behind the project. So far, 17 public schools in Ohio are participating; two are in Central Ohio, Brookhaven and Linden-McKinley High School.

While Linden just started this year, Brookhaven is into its second year—and it knows full well the upheaval wrought by change is painful. All three of last year's small-school principals have been replaced; some parents aren't even aware of the changes; several teachers left, and those who didn't are adjusting to a new workload. Also, the school still hasn't fully switched to the small-school setup—this



Inspirational phrases adorn the walls in the section of Brookhaven reserved for the Legacy school.

year's senior class isn't part of the experiment—and many students are concerned about what will happen after the complete transition occurs next fall. Yet, there have been tastes of success: The small schools are carving out strong identities, teachers have been galvanized and inspired and some students are buying into it.

As the head principal, Dixon is at the center of the transition, which will lead either to a failed attempt to rescue a struggling school or a cure for the ills of

urban education. "I'm a third-generation educator," says Dixon, 35, with pride. Born and raised in Oxford, Mississippi, she started her doctoral degree while working as a principal at an Akron middle school and finished it after moving to Brookhaven. In 2002, Dixon persuaded Brookhaven's principal to pursue a grant through KnowledgeWorks Foundation. Dixon completed the application herself and Brookhaven and Columbus Public Schools received \$800,000 to start the initiative.

The teachers embrace Dixon's leadership because she hasn't forgotten the struggles of the classroom. And her knack for remembering names is a key to building relationships with students. As



history teacher Phil Hayes says, "If a kid is screwing around in the hall and you say, 'Hey you!' they're not going to listen. If you say, 'Hey John!' they're going to listen."

Brookhaven, predominately poor and African-American, was a good candidate for the KnowledgeWorks program, which targets troubled urban schools. In 2003-

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2004, the year before small schools started at Brookhaven, the graduation rate was only 57 percent and just 14 percent of students passed both the reading and math portions of the Ohio Graduation Test. Nearly 540 suspensions were handed out that school year. When you heard about Brookhaven, it was for its powerful athletic programs—including the first City

League football team to win a state championship (in 2004).

The change has brought, well, change. Scheduling was revamped to allow teachers to plan together and students to meet with their instructors. At the same time, study hall and other "empty" periods were eliminated. The staff was overhauled. When small schools started, the 70 teachers at the old Brookhaven had to reapply for their jobs. About 15 to 20 instructors who were not interested in the extra hours and the large-scale transformation sought transfers or retired. "It gave the people who didn't want to be here a chance to get out," says Hayes, the senior union representative at Brookhaven who happens to be the grandson of Woody Hayes. He says the school is now teeming with young teachers committed to making Brookhaven known as much for academics as for athletics.

**B**rookhaven is one of the prettier Columbus high school campuses, with a long tree-lined drive leading from Karl Road to the facility. Inside, the school looks mostly the same as it did before the transition: a fortysomething building with stained ceilings and aging floor tiles. But there are subtle differences. The two-story structure is loosely sectioned into parts to house the three schools. In the Leadership Institute,

Marcus Houston, a junior in the Legacy school, chats with Carla Hegyi, one of his favorite teachers.

"trustworthiness" and "empathy" are among the words painted on the stairway steps, and teachers have placed house plants on top of metal lockers. The main North Star hall features a large banner touting the school's theme of exploration and a wall display highlights the alma maters and degrees of each North Star teacher. At Legacy, student work is exhibited alongside inspirational phrases.

Many aspects of the small-schools philosophy are working at Brookhaven. Teachers and students no longer frequent the main office, instead gravitating toward the small-school principals' offices near their classrooms. Students take most of their classes with the same teachers they had last year. At the Leadership Institute, students attended the first in a series of lectures in the school auditorium in October; four students welcomed the speaker in different languages. There was a field trip to the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati. Students compile the best of their academic work in a portfolio for job or college interviews.

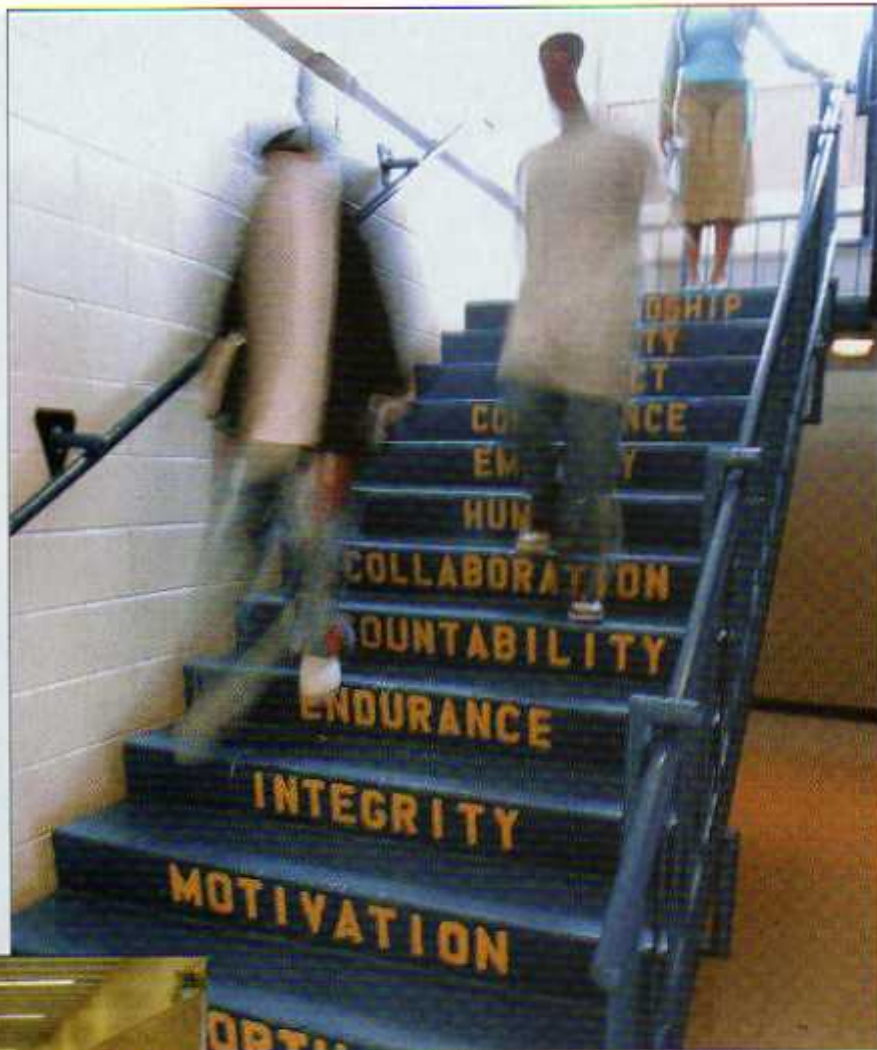
You might think Leadership is for the

smart kids—for instance, it offers the most Advanced Placement courses. But KnowledgeWorks strictly prohibits assigning students to a school based on ability, and, as it turns out, Leadership is the school of choice for some below-average kids and a few of Brookhaven's special-education students. The students make their own choices, and about 270 of them are enrolled in each of the three schools.

Engene Barrett, an English teacher, says he was drawn to Legacy because of its educational philosophy. "To teach somebody how to think, that was my greatest draw," he says. He struggled with getting his students to relate to the classic *Frankenstein*, which usually attracts kids with its title, then repels them with its slow pace and unfamiliar imagery. The training he received from KnowledgeWorks helped him come up with a new idea. Before even showing the students the book, he spoke with them about father-son relationships. "We have many kids who have been abandoned by their fathers," he says. "We started with that, and then put the book in, and now they have a desire to read it."

The students of the junior class know both the before and after version of the new Brookhaven. They enrolled in the old Brookhaven as freshmen, and are now in their second year of small schools. Chris Hairston, a Leadership student, says the most obvious impact for him has been losing friends he made two years ago. "We don't really get to see all the people we were with as freshmen," he says. He, like other juniors, worries about how such high school traditions as graduation, homecoming and prom will be changed when the separation into small schools becomes complete next fall. (There still will be all-school sports teams, though.)

Tiffany Smith, also in Leadership, praises her principal, Alesia Gillison. "She's real interactive," Smith says. "She's a principal, but she can also be a mentor. She knows everyone in Leadership." Marcus Houston, who plays football, says his relationships with teachers have made a big difference in his grades. "They knew a lot about me because I played football freshman year, but as my sophomore year went on, they learned my hobbies, what I liked and disliked," says Houston of Legacy. One teacher lets him eat lunch with her in her classroom. "When you



The second floor at Brookhaven now is reserved for the Leadership Institute.



have the same people every day, you know what to expect," he says. Houston was no slacker before small schools started—a 3.3 GPA his freshman

year—but he's now earning straight As and was named to the National Honor Society.

The strongest dissenting voice belongs to Jessica Pace, a North Star student. She says the KnowledgeWorks model bears no responsibility for any improvements at Brookhaven. "Brookhaven is run how it is today because Ms. Dixon is who she is," Pace says. "It has nothing to do with small schools." The other students nod. Pace disapproves of small schools, saying the formula traps students and teachers together for years, exacerbating tense relationships. "You're stuck with the same people all day long," she says, pointing out that her arguments with others go unresolved. Pace has a 3.5 GPA, but credits

her own drive and focus, not closer relationships with faculty.

Nuajee Byrd, who plays basketball and runs track, used to get in trouble for arguing. "I have a smart mouth, and I have to have the last word. Last year I just followed my instinct, and that got me in trouble," the Leadership student says about an incident that earned her a suspension. "We have a lot of instigators. They like to see a fight." This year a familiar enemy gave her a familiar hassle, but she ignored the girl. "If we have problems, we have advisers we can go to," she says. "They give you better skills."

Something called advisory period is supposed to be where teachers show students how to manage conflicts with each other and their teachers. Students choose their adviser, and they meet twice a month in a small group with other students. Some teachers struggle with the structure-free period, which requires no textbooks or lesson plans. Others, though, find success. For instance, teacher Erica Womack orders in a pizza for her advisory

students and, at one session, a young man is standing in front of the class reading a poem he wrote about judging the opposite sex by their physical attributes. It sparks a 10-minute discussion about boy-girl relationships, self esteem and status symbols.

Although small schools are designed to give students consistent relationships with administrators, each of the three small schools was assigned a new leader after just one year. Last year's principals "did a very good job, but there are other nuances to leading a small school that they frankly just had not had the experience in," says Jacqueline Ralls, executive director of high schools and career centers for Columbus Public Schools.

Harold Brown, vice president of school improvement at KnowledgeWorks, says it's hard enough to attract principals to urban public high schools, and the small-schools model requires three or four times

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as many of them. "The pool of principal recruits is pretty shallow," he says. "So that's been a challenge."

The changing of the guard at Leadership was the smoothest; Dixon shifted from running Leadership to overseeing the entire building, and Gillison had worked at Linden with KnowledgeWorks. (Linden began its conversion to small schools this year, after two years of planning.) Gillison is personable and kind with individual students, but can be firm. At the start of a lecture by an invited speaker, she scolds the students for seating themselves haphazardly in the auditorium. She later tells them, "There is not another student in another school at Brookhaven that has had the experiences that you have had. We will empower you to be leaders."

Charles Richardson, the principal at Northwest Career Center last year, is the new Legacy principal. Richardson wasn't assigned to his new office until after Labor Day, and many students didn't know him the first few months of school. North Star

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principal Adorea Harris, formerly an assistant principal at Brookhaven, spends much of her day resolving problems with parents and students, struggling to engage in the long-term planning required to fulfill the school's hands-on identity. "Being an instructional leader is the hardest part of being a leader," Harris says. To make North Star successful, it needs to build

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relationships with community groups and businesses so students can benefit from meaningful field trips, job shadowing, service projects and internships. It's been a struggle, Harris says, since the small-schools concept is alien to the

organizations and companies she's approached.

Many parents, too, seem oblivious. Some mothers and fathers arriving at the attendance office to pick up their children for a doctor's appointment or family obligation are puzzled when the staff asks them which small school their student attends. "Oh, when did you all start doing that?" a parent asks innocently on an October day.

**D**uring one school day, a door opens into a hallway and a student is ejected. The teacher says she can't take his attitude anymore. The boy shoots back, "I'm not arguing. I'm just talking. Shit."

Angry outbursts are not uncommon, even among the girls. School resource officer Allen Blackmon has a 16-camera system to record activity in the halls and outside the building. Before small schools, unruly students were sent to an administrator assigned to their grade. Each fall, the troublemakers started over with a new staff member. "Kids would play on an administrator not knowing them, not knowing their past patterns," Blackmon says. "Now [small-school principals] know everything you've done, which makes a big difference." The first year of small schools at Brookhaven was more orderly than the previous one, according to state statistics. Minor discipline doubled, but suspensions

**Junior Jessica Pace meets during lunch with other students to form a new student council for the North Star school.**

resulting from fights dropped from 151 to 120, and Blackmon says there are even fewer fights so far this school year.

Dixon's requirement of hall passes for any student not in class has gone a long way toward calming the previously chaotic atmosphere. Ending open lunches for upperclassmen cut down on students causing problems off school grounds. Still, many students come from combative homes where whoever yells loudest or hits hardest wins. A number of otherwise successful students at Brookhaven, teachers say, are just unwilling to back down, be diplomatic or tolerate a minor negative remark. In some classes, there is a constant undercurrent of talking as students make comments under their breath, mock other kids and make sure they get in the last word when a teacher corrects them.

For example, on a fall Wednesday, trouble is brewing near the end of the main hall; a young man, who has stripped off his shirt, is yelling. Teachers seem to appear out of nowhere, diffusing the situation and sending the student, fully dressed again, back to class. The problem? He'd been insulted.

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**T**alisa Dixon knows it will take time to fix Brookhaven. There's still doubt to conquer: Some teachers fear small schools won't allow for enough electives and AP courses. And there continue to be real-world hurdles to overcome: KnowledgeWorks wants students exposed to all kinds of technology, but Brookhaven kids can't have cellphones or Palm Pilots in school since a few used them to cheat on tests or call for help in a fight.

Columbus Public Schools is committed to the project—whether the grant from the Gates Foundation runs out or is withdrawn for noncompliance. Ralls says if Brookhaven (or Linden) shows increased test scores and graduation rates, the district may spread the program to other Columbus high schools.

That's heartening news for small-school advocates at Brookhaven, but their bigger wish is about Dixon. Next fall, her job should be eliminated. In the

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KnowledgeWorks plan, there's no need for an all-school principal. Even though Dixon is working on a transition schedule for her departure, she's also trying to figure out how to stay for one more year—even if she can't keep the same position.

Can the experiment survive if Dixon leaves? Barrett, the literature teacher, sighs. "At this point, no," he says. "Because she's been the one that has spearheaded this whole thing, and I don't think we have the right people in each small school. If they remove her, collapse."

Dixon's goal is to give her staff the tools to lead—with or without her. "I hope that people are not believing in Talisa Dixon instead of the model," she says. "We cannot go back to the way we were." ■

Alice Hohl is an associate editor for Columbus Monthly.