

Letting Teachers Specialize

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Six years ago, South Heights Elementary School was the lowest-performing school in Kentucky's Henderson County School District. The state had placed the school under sanctions. A demoralized staff had many excuses. Teachers blamed poverty, lack of parent involvement, poor discipline, and high staff turnover for the situation. Few expected to meet the state goals.

Yet by 2004, South Heights was the fifth-highest-performing school in the district. How did the school do it? With leadership that embraced an instructional model called Project CHILD (Changing How Instruction for Learning is Delivered).

Project CHILD restructures how teachers manage time. Students from various designated grade levels are all taught core academic subjects by one teacher designated for that subject, and are sometimes taught in multi-age groupings. Students keep the same teacher for that subject for three years.

When a teacher works solo within a "grade," students may lose instructional time at the beginning of each year while teachers get to know them. Students also lose quality instructional time at the end of each school year after "The Test" (you know what we mean), because teachers back off from rigorous topics, knowing that students will move on to another teacher the next year. This

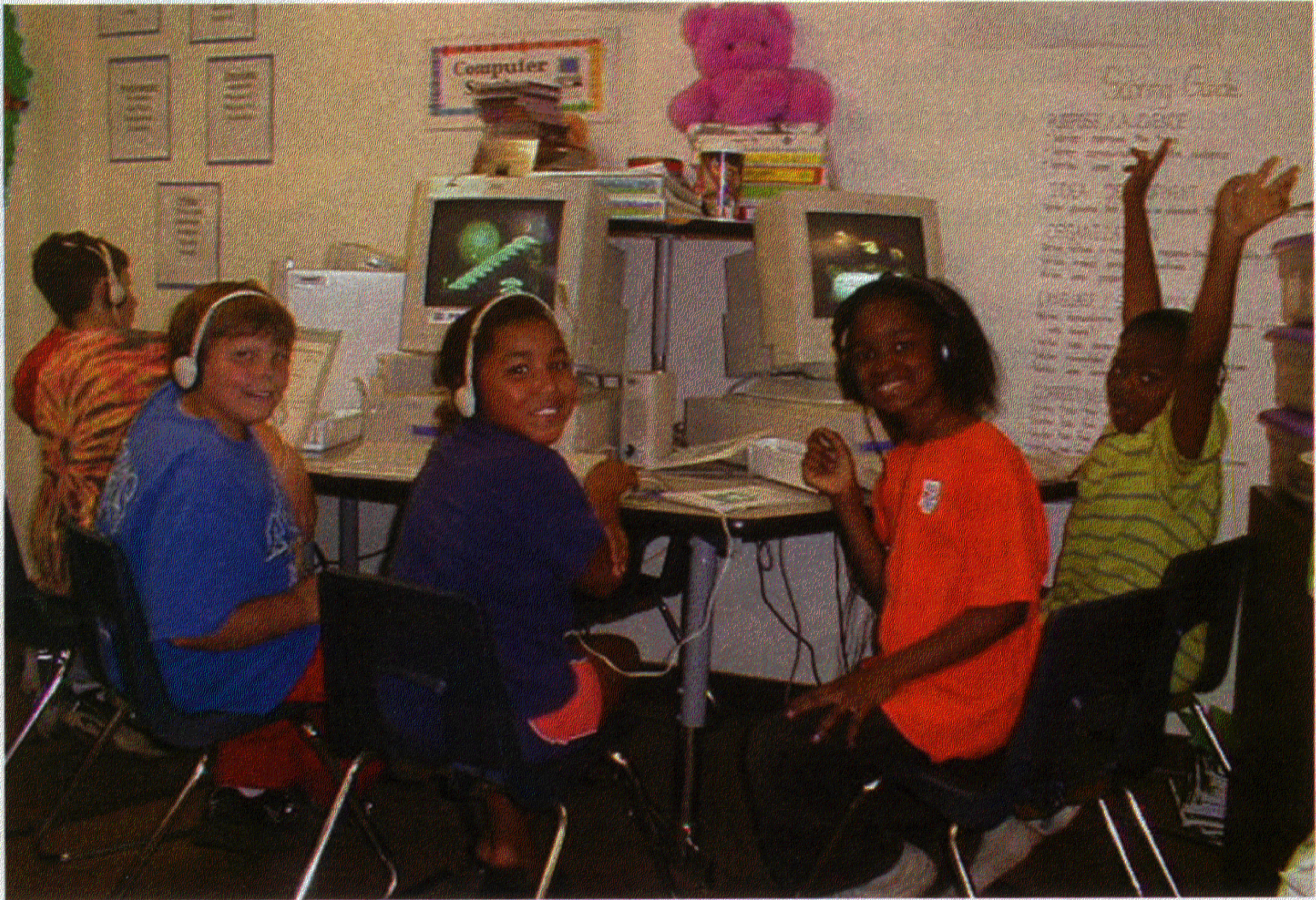


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system wastes valuable instructional time and lends itself to teacher burnout.

In 1998, the South Heights leadership team encouraged a 3rd, a 4th, and a 5th grade teacher to pilot an intermediate CHILD cluster. Rather than the homeroom teacher teaching all subjects, one teacher focused on reading, one on writing, and the third on math, teaching to all grades in the cluster. Students thus had the same teacher for these core subjects throughout 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade.

Each CHILD classroom contained a

teacher station for small-group and one-on-one tutorials, a computer station with three to six computers, a textbook station for work with the district's core programs, and three stations for hands-on discovery learning. Each classroom also featured an "exploration station" for manipulating materials, a "challenge station" with games and puzzles, and an "imagination station" for creative projects. A classroom management system, including "passports," task cards, and daily station assignment boards, kept

students focused and on task.

Students rotated among reading, writing, and math classrooms for 60-minute instructional blocks. Science and social studies were taught in the home base classroom. Most blocks began with a whole-group lesson, but follow-up activities took place at the stations. Thus, each student had multiple opportunities for computer-based and hands-on learning in reading, writing, and math.

Students could now move between stations without having to wait for the

whole group to finish a task, and because they enjoyed the diverse activities, time spent on task soared. Teachers tailored station activities to multiple learning styles and employed differentiated instruction. Each teacher had materials, provided through the CHILD program, that spanned all three grade levels.

At the end of the pilot year, CHILD students were outperforming the students in the self-contained classrooms. In the second year of the pilot, the 3rd–5th grade cluster teachers already knew their students when the

school year began and could hit the ground running.

By 2001, thanks to the performance of the CHILD classes, South Heights was close to achieving the academic goals set by the state. South Heights went schoolwide with Project CHILD the following year.

After five years as a Project CHILD school, South Heights Elementary has exceeded the academic goals set by the state. In 2004, the school was recognized as a National School Change Award winner. South Heights teachers

have moved beyond the single-year, single-teacher model. Their most common reaction is, "I'll never go back." ♦

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Educational Leadership

MAY 2006
VOL. 63 NO. 8

Challenging
the Status Quo