

Where teachers look beyond the assembly line

Tallahassee offers a bleak future today for someone who's suited only to work on an assembly line. The 21st century will be bleaker.

At Fairview Middle School, Caroline Milhan and the other sixth-grade teachers of Project TEAMS are doing something about that.

Under the direction of Anna Jordan, the Project TEAM teachers are trying to create a new kind of education — one based on the students' own creativity, confidence and ability to work independently and in small teams.

There's no question how the teachers and administrators feel about Project TEAMS — they're sold on it. Fairview Principal Kae Ingram regards the program as "remarkable." Director Jordan thinks it's the wave of the future. Classroom teachers like Milhan say the project is more work at first, but they notice their students are quieter, calmer and more self-disciplined.

But what do Andrew Wood, Essence Hinson and Camille Thomas think?

"It's a lot more ... comfortable," says Andrew, 12, one of three students picked at random by an adult visitor. "This is a lot better." The two girls nod agreement.

"You learn more because you get to see stuff yourself," says Camille. "Independent," chimes in Essence. "Yeah, you feel more independent," Camille says.

By now, they're forgetting the suit-and-tie stranger in their midst. The pace of their comments picks up. Essence: "Like, we just finished a project in geography — Camille, what was it?"

"Spain," supplies Camille.

"And we had to look up stuff. She gave us a month to do it..."

"A month!" Andrew says, rolling his eyes.

"Yeah, and we got it done in a week!" Essence says, glowing. "And I got an A!" The other two smile, savoring that shared victory.

The good feeling of working together

Shared victories are a big part of TEAMS. This teaching experiment is built on changing the role of the only adult in most classrooms — the teacher — from lecturer to guide on the path to knowledge. Rather than having all 30 kids in a class do exactly the same thing at exactly the same time, working under the rigid control of the teacher, TEAMS divides each classroom full of kids into small work groups.

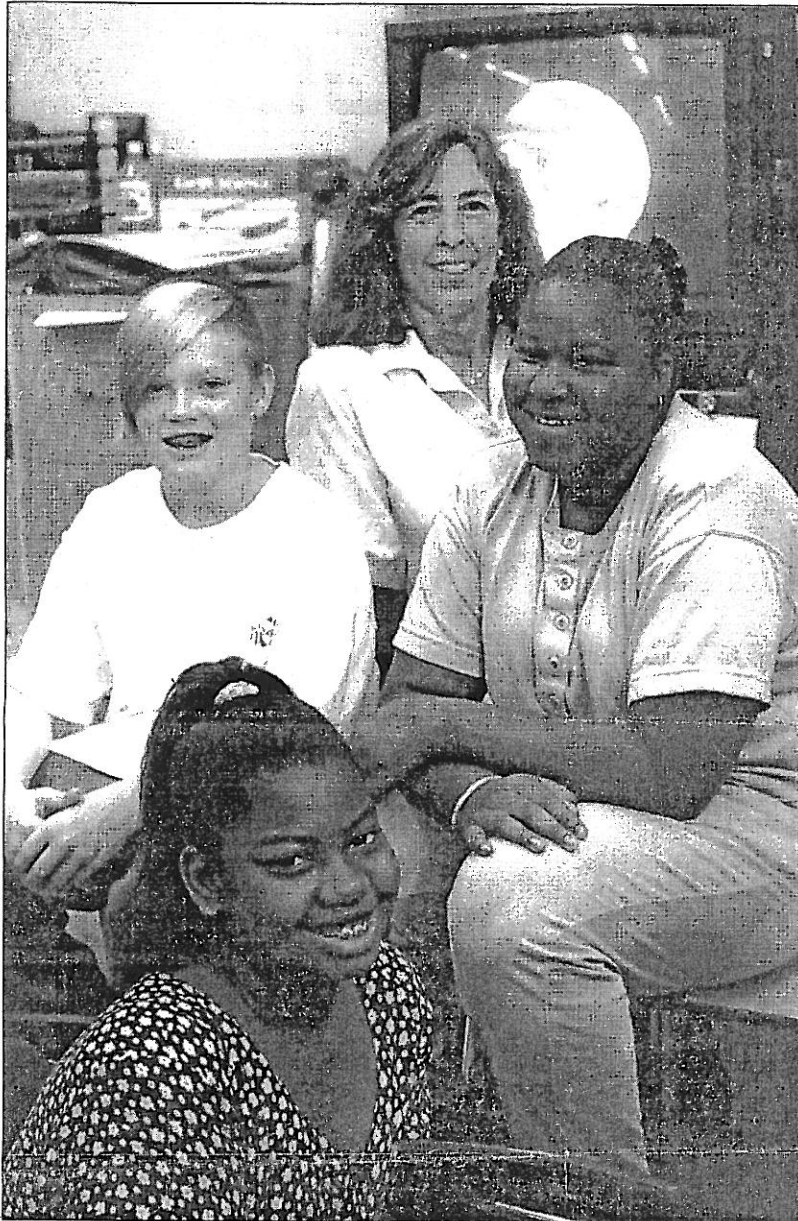
Why split them up? Partly, the reason is technology. Few schools have the money to put a computer on every student's desk. Instead, computers too often become reward machines, set off in a corner of the classroom and turned on only by extra-bright, extra-fast students who have earned the coveted prize of time on the computer.

But most of these kids will enter a world where computers are as much or more a part of daily working life as Social Security deductions and office gossip. TEAMS is built on actually using a school's often limited, outdated computers to learn.

Students use computerized math games to supplement work-



Dave Bruns
ASSOCIATE
EDITOR



Trying a new approach to learning at Fairview Middle School are, clockwise, from top: teacher Caroline Milhan, Camille Thomas, Essence Hinson and Andrew Wood.

book mathematics drills and language exercises. Multimedia computers supplement the classroom encyclopedia, offering students another place to research questions.

The heart of TEAMS: Students work alone and with their team members to learn, rather than relying primarily on a teacher's lectures. That means students must take responsibility for their own education.

Students do research to find answers on their own

Teachers are still present, answering questions and spending time helping individual students over hurdles. And yes, teachers still lecture, too.

But lectures come less often than in a traditional classroom. The rules even discourage asking the teacher frequent questions — kids are supposed to check three other sources, including their classmates, before

asking a teacher. Knowledge is not being poured into students; instead, they're being pushed toward it and make of it what they will.

Even at age 11, they understand what this means for their future. "We're working harder," says Andrew. "Last year, you didn't get to see your friends much, so when you saw them, you were like, wow! This year, we're spending so much time (with friends in small groups) that we..." Buckle down and get to work? "Yeah," Andrew says, smiling.

Camille agrees: "Yeah, it makes you feel more independent. The teacher has got a lot of work to do, and while she's doing it, we're working on our stuff."

How will Project TEAMS help them when they grow up? "We'll be more independent," says Camille.

"Yeah, most people want people who can think for themselves at jobs," says Andrew.

"I think it'll also pull you up in college," says Essence.

"Project TEAMS helps you learn to work with people better," Andrew announces.

Will changes result in higher test scores?

But does it help them learn better? That's debatable.

Project TEAMS is only in its second year at Fairview Middle School; so far, the school's performance on standardized tests hasn't improved much. But teachers believe it would take more than a year for TEAMS effects to be seen — if they would appear at all.

Jordan acknowledges that initial efforts at measuring TEAMS' effects have been troubled by procedural glitches. A Florida State University doctoral student is now at work comparing TEAMS kids' sixth-grade performance with their fifth-grade work.

The subject of test scores is somewhat of a sore point. Teachers all over Leon County got the news in that morning's *Democrat* of an e-mail memo from School Superintendent Richard Merrick to school principals, challenging them to raise scores on standardized tests. The memo ruffled some teachers' feathers; many are unconvinced that standardized tests offer meaningful measurement of educational achievement.

"My gut feeling after 20 years of middle-school work is that it's got to be working," Jordan says. "But will it show up on the California Achievement Test?" She makes a wry face of doubt.

Though the final evidence is not yet in to support Project TEAMS' success, children enrolled in an elementary-school version of TEAMS have gotten better grades and ended up in more advanced classes than their peers who weren't in such classes.

Research also indicates that knowledge acquired independently by the learner usually is retained better and integrated better with things already known. Simply, it's easier to use in everyday life.

But will that ease of use show up on a multiple-choice standardized test? Nobody is sure. The tests don't measure independence, confidence or maturity, anyway, Jordan points out.

Traditional approaches are gaining ground, too

Some educators prefer the traditional approach instead. At Hartsfield Elementary School, math scores on standardized tests soared after teachers there implemented a very traditional teaching scheme that emphasizes lecturing, workbooks and repeated drills.

It's an open question whether such an approach would work as well with older students or more advanced topics — or whether it's even desirable to try, TEAMS fans say.

The authoritarian, teacher-talks-and-students-listen learning style that worked well to prepare generations of Americans for factory and corporate assembly lines may not be suited to producing people ready for the challenges of the 21st century, they say.

As proof, Jordan points to the games that paper the halls of Fairview's sixth-grade wing. Each game was created by a team of kids, working with bright-colored markers and recycled-paper file folders to create game boards. The kids devised learning games — vocabulary games like "Learn That Word!"; maze-like geography games; complicated mathematics games. Each game has its own set of rules, its own playing cards giving questions and correct answers. The sixth-graders did all the work — teachers gave the assignments, supervised and answered questions when no other source of information could be found.

Spend a few minutes walking along the wall full of games, and the range and scope of questions and answers becomes apparent. What is a transitive verb? What mountain range divides Europe and Asia? How do you figure the circumference of a circle given its diameter?

Jordan surveys the wall full of brightly colored board games. "You can't tell me they didn't learn something from all this," she sighs.