

# The Benwood Plan: A Lesson in Comprehensive Teacher Reform

Investing in teachers produces results for Chattanooga schools.

By Elena Silva

**H**AMILTON County, Tennessee, is home to one of the nation's most widely touted school reform success stories. Beginning in 2001, eight low-performing elementary schools began an ambitious upward trek.<sup>1</sup> With \$5 million from the Chattanooga-based Benwood Foundation and funding from several other local organizations, school and community officials launched an intensive teacher-centered campaign to reform the inner-city Chattanooga schools. The effort, now known as the Benwood Initiative, drastically improved student achievement, and education observers took notice. Former U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige cited Benwood's success in his 2003 annual report to Congress. And national media outlets have trumpeted the Benwood story since, including the *Washington Post*, *Reader's Digest*, and *Education Week*.<sup>2</sup>

Most of these accolades have focused on a distinct approach to improving teaching in low-performing schools. In short: get better teachers. To some extent, this is what hap-

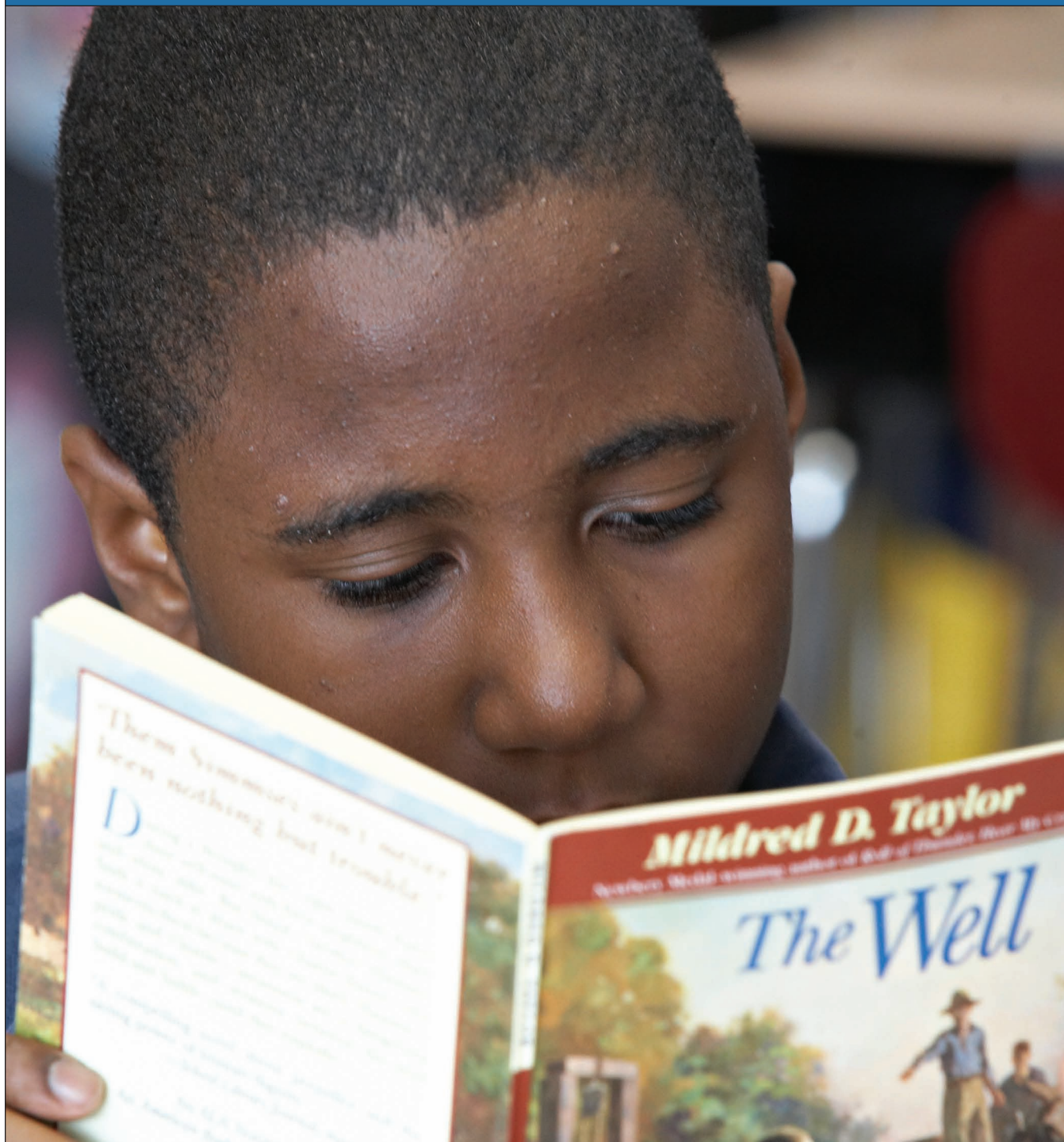
pened. School district officials reconstituted the faculties of the Benwood schools, requiring teachers to reapply for their jobs and hiring replacements for those who didn't make the cut. Community officials established financial incentives to attract new talent, including free graduate school tuition, mortgage loans, and performance bonuses. The press, policy makers, and education organizations have pointed to these incentives as the source of Benwood's success. "They're offering cold cash ... and they're getting results," de-

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clared the *Dallas Morning News* in 2003.<sup>3</sup> Two years later, Arizona Senator Jon Kyl cited Benwood's "incentive package" as evidence of the wisdom of merit pay for teachers.<sup>4</sup>

But the argument that these initiatives brought a flood of new and better teachers into the schools'

classrooms has been overstated. Most of the teachers who reapplied for their jobs were hired back, and less than 20 of the 300 teachers in the Benwood schools received bonuses in the first year of the much touted financial incentive plan.<sup>5</sup>

Benwood's success has had at least as much to do



with a second, equally important reform strategy: helping teachers improve the quality of their instruction. A new analysis of “value-added” teacher effectiveness data indicates that over a period of six years, existing teachers in the eight Benwood elementary schools improved steadily. Before the Benwood Initiative kicked off, they were far less effective than their peers elsewhere in the Hamilton County district. By 2006, a group of mostly the same teachers had surpassed the district average.

This improvement was by design. The Benwood Initiative was about much more than pay incentives and reconstitution; the district invested heavily in mentoring programs to train teachers, in additional staff to support curriculum and instruction, and in stronger and more collaborative leadership at the school level. At the same time, the Benwood Initiative was buoyed by better labor-management relations and a host of other reform efforts at the district level.

These findings have implications for other districts looking to turn around low-performing schools. There is no doubt that disadvantaged students are disproportionately likely in American education to be taught by less experienced, less qualified, less effective teachers. But solving that problem is not merely a matter of redistributing teachers from one school to another.

As the Benwood Initiative demonstrates, individual teacher effectiveness is not a fixed trait. School systems can take many steps, as Hamilton County has, to improve teachers’ work in classrooms.

## A REASON FOR REFORM

The impetus for change in Hamilton County began in the late 1990s when the county school system officially merged with the Chattanooga city system. The county schools were scoring in the 90th percentile on state tests, and the district had no pressing need to improve its stable and successful teaching force. But, when the two systems merged in 1997, the city of Chattanooga became, like many other urban centers, the poorer “doughnut hole” of an otherwise middle-class suburban district.<sup>6</sup> And the newly consolidated Hamilton County district was faced with the challenge of serving the entire community — rich and poor, black and white, high-performing and low-performing.

The extent of this challenge became clear when Tennessee released student achievement results two years after the merger. Hamilton County officials an-

ticipated lower scores. But they did not expect eight of the district’s elementary schools — all located in central Chattanooga — to be ranked among Tennessee’s 20 worst schools. Hamilton County’s then-Superintendent Jesse Register and other city and county leaders were appalled. If the district needed a focus for its reform, this group of schools — with only 11% of its mostly poor and African-American student population reading at grade level — was it.

## Turning around the Benwood schools meant building a better staff.

The Benwood Foundation teamed up with the Chattanooga-Hamilton County Public Education Foundation (PEF) to adopt the failing schools. PEF added \$2.5 million to Benwood’s \$5 million, and together they set an ambitious goal: get 100% of the schools’ 3rd graders reading at or above grade level by 2007. Although the goal was not met, Benwood schools have posted impressive gains, increasing the number of 3rd graders scoring proficient or above on the state reading test from 53% to 80% in the last five years. In 2007, all but one of the eight Benwood schools earned A’s in reading/language and math on a state report card, indicating exceptional progress in student growth.<sup>7</sup>

The Benwood Initiative was decidedly teacher-centered from the start, in part due to the district’s awareness that the predominantly low-income, African-American student population of Chattanooga had by far the fewest qualified teachers and the highest teacher turnover.<sup>8</sup> Register described a “revolving door” of teachers and a “culture crisis” in these schools.

For the next six years, from 2001 to 2007, the district and its community partners, including the local teachers union and business and philanthropy leaders, implemented a series of reforms aimed at tackling the teacher problem in these elementary schools.

## SYSTEM SHOCK

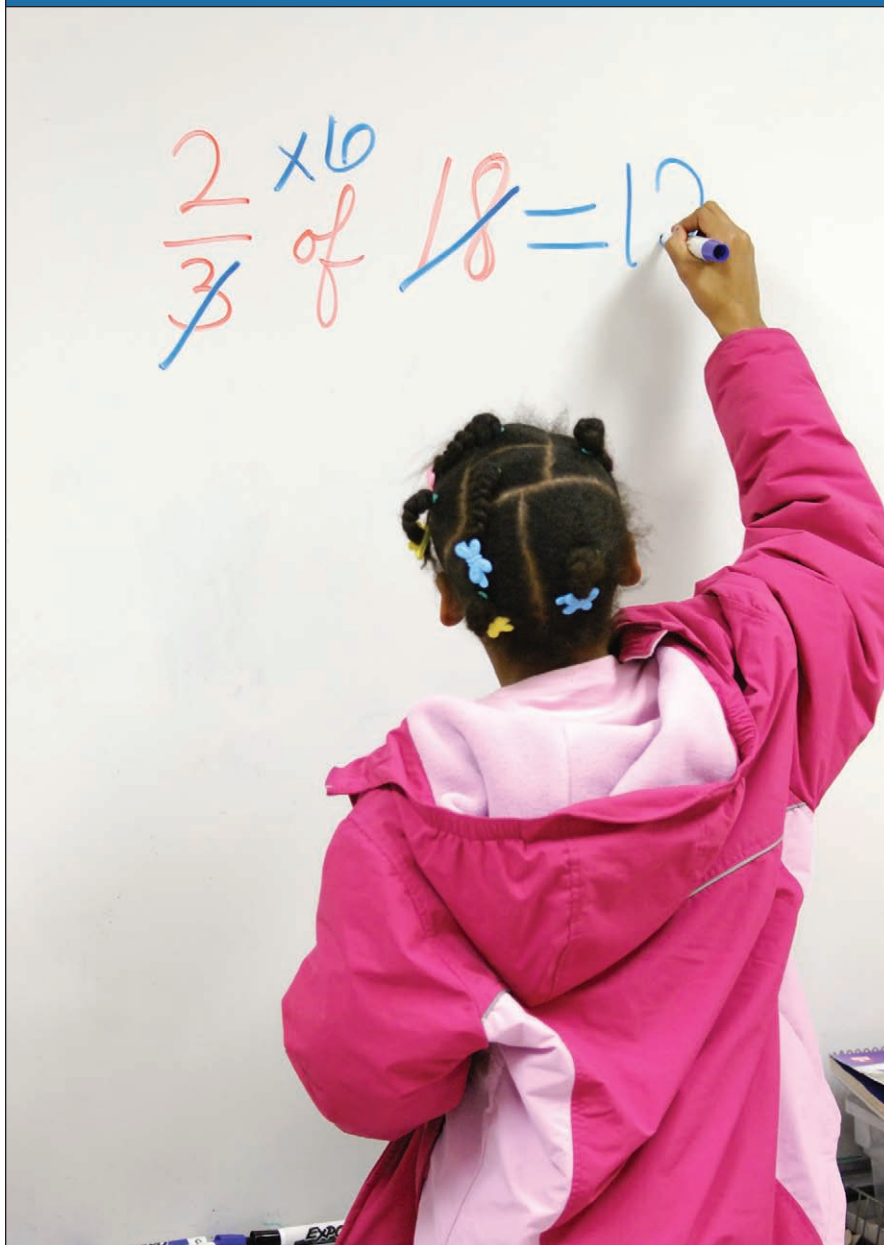
Register quickly moved to reconstitute the schools’ teaching staffs. He dismissed every one of the more than 300 teachers in the Benwood schools at the end of the 2001–02 school year and told them they had to reapply for their jobs for the following school year. The move

was divisive, with some teachers deeming it demoralizing and unfair. But many saw it as a necessary step toward improvement. Stephanie Spencer, who directed the Benwood Initiative between 2001 and 2005, lauds the reconstitution effort. “Turning around these schools meant building a better staff,” says Spencer, now principal of a Maryland elementary school. “We were all about recruiting, training, and keeping the best ones we could. . . . This was the best kind of teacher turnover, [it was done] for all the right reasons.”

Register also credits the financial incentives plan, launched by then-Chattanooga Mayor Bob Corker, with changing the community’s attitude toward these poorer, central city schools. Corker, who is now a U.S. senator, established the Community Education Alliance, an advisory group of a dozen local business leaders, which created the high-profile array of incentives for Benwood teachers, including mortgage loans, a tuition-free master’s degree, and, most notably, pay bonuses of up to \$5,000 for teachers who demonstrated student gains. Mayoral attention helped precipitate change, Register says, and “sent a strong signal to the entire community that these weren’t second-class jobs, that we valued these schools and these teachers.”

Despite support from the local teachers union, the Hamilton County Education Association, the reconstitution and accompanying incentives were controversial.<sup>10</sup> Bolstered by local media accounts that cast the staff overhaul as a tale of teacher redistribution, suburban parents, in particular, feared that the worst teachers would be sent to the surrounding suburban schools, and the best teachers would be recruited with financial incentives to teach in the Benwood schools. In fact, Register did ask suburban principals to take on ineffective teachers, a move that school board member Rhonda Thurman spoke out against, saying, “If a teacher isn’t good enough for one set of students, we should fire that teacher altogether

Within a few years, the performance of Benwood teachers reached and surpassed that of teachers in non-Benwood schools.



rather than ship her off to another school.”<sup>11</sup>

But the dreaded “Hamilton County shuffle,” as one former principal described it, was not much to speak of for the actual number of teachers involved.<sup>12</sup> Of the roughly 300 teachers who had to reapply for their jobs, more than two-thirds were re-hired at Benwood schools. Despite all of the media coverage of city-suburban teacher swaps, most of the teachers who left Benwood schools retired, left for another district, or were reassigned within the city limits. Only a handful of city teachers were distributed out to sub-

urban schools, and only a few more than that were drawn from the outer suburbs of Hamilton County to the inner city.

To be sure, the teacher incentive plan created a lot of buzz. And with teachers making an average annual salary of \$39,000 in Hamilton County, these financial incentives were certainly a selling point.<sup>13</sup> But the argument that these perks brought a flood of new and better teachers immediately into the system has been overstated. Just 16 of the more than 300 teachers in Benwood schools received bonuses in the first year of the financial incentive plan.<sup>14</sup>

## THE TEACHER EFFECT

School reformers in Tennessee looking to improve teacher effectiveness have a unique asset: the state's nationally recognized system for assessing the effectiveness of districts, schools, and teachers. The Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (TVAAS) is a statistically complicated system, but its purpose is fairly straightforward: It provides a way of isolating the impact of instruction on year-to-year student growth. The performance bonuses for Benwood teachers are based, in part, on value-added scores.

A recent analysis of teacher effectiveness data for Hamilton County, conducted by William Sanders and his colleague Paul Wright of the SAS Institute, counters the argument that it was the pay incentives, or any single reform, that mattered most for the success of the Benwood schools. Sanders and Wright compared

the effectiveness of Benwood teachers and non-Benwood teachers and found two trends with important implications for teacher-centered reform. First, they found steady improvement among Benwood teachers over the six years of analysis, compared to a relatively flat level of improvement among teachers in non-Benwood schools. This means that efforts to improve teaching in the Benwood schools were working. Within a few years, the performance of Benwood teachers reached and surpassed that of teachers in non-Benwood schools.

The analysis also found that the improvement of Benwood teachers began as early as 2000, *before* the pay incentive plan or reconstitution efforts were implemented. So, while attracting new teachers to Benwood schools may have helped, the improvement in the Benwood schools turns out to be in large part a function of other reforms, especially the many steps Hamilton County officials took to improve the performance of existing Benwood teachers.<sup>15</sup>

Register, architect of the school reconstitution and supporter of the pay initiative, is the first to make this distinction. "Everyone wants to talk about the pay plan," Register says. "And people did receive it, and it did change community attitude toward these schools. But it was one piece of a bigger puzzle. We did all of these other things too."

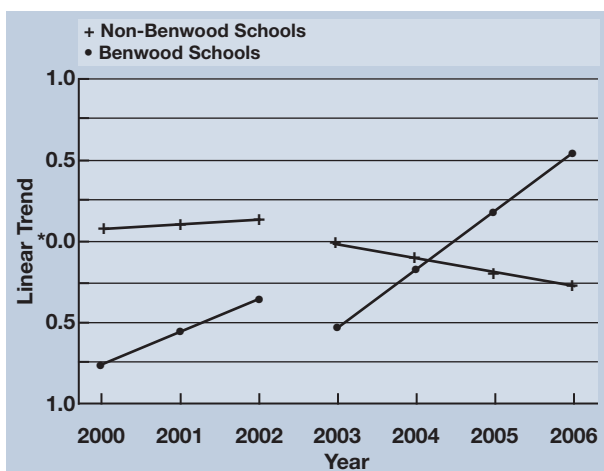
## ALL THE OTHER THINGS

The reforms to which Register refers began with the tough and controversial merger of the city and county districts in 1997, which opened the door for unlikely, yet significant partnerships. In the years before Register's arrival and the Benwood Initiative, the relationship between the district and the union was deeply adversarial.

By 2001, however, the union and the district had made enormous strides, jointly developing a strategic plan for the district and negotiating a new contract with pivotal changes to teacher policy, including a revised teacher transfer policy with a renegotiated hiring timeline for teachers. The new hiring timeline would later make recruiting and hiring better teachers easier for low-performing schools (such as the Benwood schools). The new contract also gave the green light for Corker's bonus pay plan for Benwood teachers.

All of this would have mattered far less without a strong district commitment to quality instruction. Even before the Benwood Initiative, the district began experimenting with a pilot project to improve literacy instruction at Calvin Donaldson Elementary,

**FIG. 1**  
**Value-Added Trends of 4th- and 5th-Grade Math Teachers in Hamilton County, 2000-06**



Source: Special analysis conducted by William Sanders and Paul Wright, SAS Institute, Inc.  
\*Zero represents the average performance for Hamilton County teachers.



When the Benwood funding began in earnest, support for teacher instruction grew enormously in the Benwood schools.



one of the Benwood schools. The “Donaldson model,” which would later be expanded to other Benwood schools, added an assistant principal to the school and required both new and existing assistant principals to spend at least 50% of their time monitoring and supporting academics. Donaldson also added a reading specialist to help teachers improve their literacy instruction.

An infusion of outside funding, prompted originally by the merger of a stable suburban school system with a struggling urban district, paid for a number of other initiatives. The Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation contributed \$8 million to improve the district’s high schools. The National Education Association supported middle school reform. And the Annenberg Institute for School Reform funded a systemwide leadership initiative designed to improve existing principals and to develop a pipeline for new principals.

In addition to the Benwood Foundation and PEF contributions, the Weldon F. Osborne Foundation committed \$2.5 million and partnered with the University of Tennessee to create a free master’s program

for Benwood teachers. The Urban League and Community Impact also contributed funds and offered after-school tutoring and parental-involvement programs. And the Chattanooga Neighborhood Enterprise, a group of local businesses, helped finance teacher bonuses and incentives.

Register was willing to make bold moves to help the staff in the lowest-performing schools become better teachers. He removed all instructional support staff from the central office and placed them inside schools, recognizing that “drive-by” development efforts would not work, nor would any strategy defined and controlled by the central office. He also asked principals and teachers what they needed to be effective. Topping the list for principals was better staff morale and better quality teachers. Teachers suggested more opportunities for collaboration, mentor and peer support, constructive principal feedback, and more time for instruction and lesson preparation.<sup>16</sup>

When the Benwood funding began in earnest, support for teacher instruction grew enormously in the Benwood schools. Register hired a director of urban education to lead the efforts and invested heavily in

professional development that was embedded in teachers' daily work. Using funds from a reduced central office staff, he created consulting teacher positions to support Benwood teachers. With no classroom assignments of their own, consulting teachers

## The Benwood schools became a Petri dish for linking student progress and teacher performance.

could provide full-time support in developing curriculum, aligning instruction with standards and test schedules, and examining and modeling teacher practice.<sup>17</sup> Principals and teachers at Benwood schools also benefited from the expansion of the Donaldson model, which provided literacy coaches for teachers and leadership coaches to work one-on-one with assistant principals, principals, and school-based leadership teams.

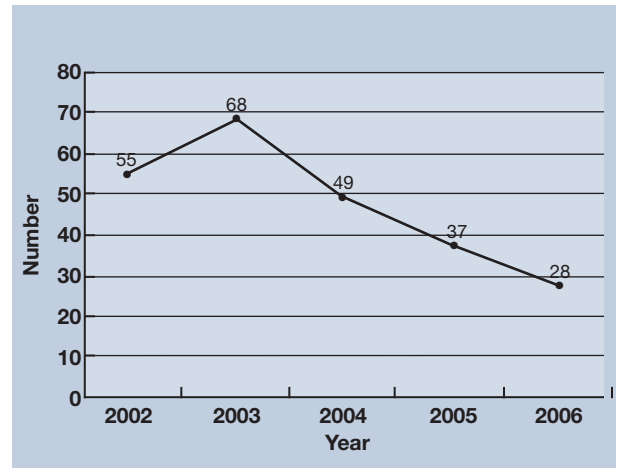
Register also created a new district division of data and accountability to link student and teacher performance. Staff members from the new office were sent into the schools to teach teachers how to read and use student assessments. And with the data and accountability office analyzing and organizing assessment data, and visiting regularly with school staff to discuss their meaning and utility, the Benwood schools became a Petri dish for linking student progress and teacher performance.

### A NEW ENVIRONMENT

All of these reforms added up to schools that were far more conducive to teacher and student success. Teachers became more effective — and more likely to remain teaching in the Benwood schools. According to PEF data, teacher turnover declined in the Benwood schools from 68 new teachers in the 2002–03 school year to just 28 new teachers by 2006–07.

Today, those Benwood teachers who were looking for a professional and supportive climate appear to have found just that. Education researchers Dick Corbett and Bruce Wilson, who have been evaluating the Benwood Initiative through observations, interviews, and surveys for the past several years, find the Benwood schools to be “undeniably more professionally satisfying places to work and more consistently in-

**FIG. 2**  
**Number of Teachers New to Their Benwood Schools**



Source: Public Education Foundation, available online at [www.pefchattanooga.org](http://www.pefchattanooga.org).

structionally focused.”<sup>18</sup> Corbett and Wilson’s 2006 climate survey, administered to teachers in Benwood and non-Benwood elementary schools, shows that teachers in the eight Benwood schools find their school working conditions to be as good as those in some of the highest-performing schools in the county on eight of 10 measures.<sup>19</sup> On the two additional measures, “adequacy of professional development” and “the value of involvement with outside assisters,” Benwood teachers rated their schools even higher than their suburban counterparts.<sup>20</sup>

The combined effect of a stable staff, better leadership, improved training, and community support appears to have remade the Benwood schools into institutions where teachers can and do succeed.

### BEYOND THE BENWOOD EIGHT

In 2006, Jim Scales replaced Register as Hamilton County’s superintendent and inherited the high-profile and hard-won successes of the Benwood Initiative. But he also inherited the pressure to bring reform to other Hamilton County schools. The Benwood reforms have just begun a second five-year phase with more than \$7 million from the Benwood Foundation, and an additional \$1 million from the Public Education Foundation to expand the initiative to eight additional schools. The focus now is on getting students throughout the county achieving above grade level, explains Dan Challener, president of the PEF.

Still, expanding the Benwood reforms will likely be just as difficult and resource-intensive as launching

them. And the original eight Benwood schools have their work cut out for them as they seek to move their students to more advanced levels of achievement.

More broadly, policy makers and school leaders in other states and districts who read the many reports holding up Chattanooga as a national model would do well to consider the full picture of what happened in the Benwood schools. The reconstitution of the schools was a necessary step, removing the minority of teachers who were simply unable or unwilling to give Benwood students a quality education. The pay incentives were positive — although less as a means of inducing talented teachers to relocate than as a way of signaling that the local community valued the Benwood teachers and supported their work.

But it would be a mistake to conclude that efforts to bring different, more effective teachers into the Benwood eight represent the only — or even the primary — lesson of the Chattanooga reforms. What Benwood teachers needed most were not new peers or extra pay — although both were helpful. Rather, they needed support and recognition from the whole community, resources and tools to improve as professionals, and school leaders who could help them help their students.

In one sense, this is a sobering lesson — other districts probably can't replicate Chattanooga's success merely by replacing all the teachers or implementing a performance pay plan. Much more than that is required. But at the same time, the steady, marked increase in the effectiveness of Benwood teachers suggests that, if teachers have the support they need, many teachers who are struggling to help disadvantaged students can do much better. Teacher effectiveness isn't an absolutely finite resource. There can be more good teachers for everyone.

1. Originally, there were nine schools targeted, but one of them was subsequently closed because of low enrollment, leaving eight schools as the focus of the Benwood Initiative.

2. Noam Schieber, "Fixing America's Schools: 2 Schools, 1 Big Idea," *Readers Digest*, May 2005, available online at [www.rd.com/national-interest/education-issues/fixing-americas-schools/P2/article.html](http://www.rd.com/national-interest/education-issues/fixing-americas-schools/P2/article.html); Jay Mathews, "A Move to Invest in More Effective Teaching," *Washington Post*, 10 February 2004; Bess Keller, "Charging the Gap," *Education Week*, 1 March 2006.

3. Joshua Benton, "Good Teachers to Fix Bad Academics," *Dallas Morning News*, 28 August 2003.

4. Republican Policy Committee, "Teachers Are Key to Success of 'No Child Left Behind': Better Pay for Better Teaching." (Washington, D.C.: Republican Policy Committee, 25 October 2005), available online at [http://rpc.senate.gov/\\_files/Oct2505TeacherPayDB.pdf](http://rpc.senate.gov/_files/Oct2505TeacherPayDB.pdf).

5. Claire Handley and Robert A. Kronley, "Challenging Myths: The Benwood Initiative and Education Reform in Hamilton County"

(Chattanooga, Tenn.: Public Education Foundation, March 2006).

6. Chattanooga City Public Schools broke away from the county system in the 1940s when the city was prospering, but after decades of economic decline, the school board voted in 1994 to give up its own system and merge back into Hamilton County. In July 1997, the two systems formally merged, combining the predominantly African-American student population of Chattanooga with the suburban, rural, and mostly white student population in the surrounding suburbs.

7. Hillcrest Elementary received B's in these subjects. A grade of B indicates that student gains exceeded the state growth standard; a C indicates that student gains met the state growth standard; below that indicates negative growth.

8. Public Education Network and U.S. Department of Education Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), "Teacher Quality and Student Achievement: Linking Research to Practice," 2000.

9. Stephanie Spencer, personal interview, November 2006.

10. State law allows the superintendent to assign school staff. This was reinforced by the strategic plan and new teacher contract that were developed collaboratively by the union and district, which included an agreement to re-staff Benwood schools.

11. Rhonda Thurman, personal interview, December 2006.

12. Robert Hope, personal interview, October 2007.

13. This is the average wage for 2000-01. By 2005-06, it had risen to \$43,469, according to the Tennessee Department of Education, State Report Card 2000. Average teacher salaries are now reported in the state's Annual Statistical Report. See 2006 report online at: [http://state.tn.us/education/asr/05\\_06/doc/table5.pdf](http://state.tn.us/education/asr/05_06/doc/table5.pdf).

14. Claire Handley and Robert A. Kronley, *Challenging Myths: The Benwood Initiative and Education Reform in Hamilton County* (Chattanooga, Tenn.: Public Education Foundation, Benwood Foundation, 2006).

15. Researchers with Mathematica, Inc. and Chesapeake Research Associates, both nonprofit policy research institutes, eliminated the Benwood Initiative from a recent study of teacher pay reform programs, concluding that the initiative "included so many different intervention components beyond teacher bonuses" that it was "infeasible to isolate the effects of just the offer of teacher incentives." See Steven Glazerman, Tim Silva, Nii Addy, et al., *Options for Studying Teacher Pay Reform Using Natural Experiments* (Washington, D.C.: Mathematica Policy Research, 30 March 2006).

16. Pamela J. Carter, *Review of Highly Effective Teachers in Hamilton County: An Analysis of Current Trends and Implications for Improvement* (Chattanooga, Tenn.: Public Education Foundation, May 2003). These teachers, identified as highly effective, received TVAAS scores in the top 25% of all teachers in the county or were deemed highly effective based on principal nominations. These included teachers who move from grade to grade, as well as kindergarten through 3rd-grade teachers, and therefore do not have the requisite three-year TVAAS average.

17. The district is now experimenting with a modified version of the consulting teacher model, which splits teachers' time between classroom and consulting. The rationale for this, in part, is that consulting teachers and their support will be better received by classroom teachers if they too are teaching at the school.

18. H. Dickson Corbett and Bruce Wilson, "Report on Benwood Initiative to Chattanooga/Hamilton County Public Education Foundation," unpublished report, October 2007.

19. The 2006 survey was administered to teachers in the Benwood schools and in a sample of non-Benwood elementary schools in Hamilton County.

20. The higher ratings were statistically significant.





File Name and Bibliographic Information

**k0810sil.pdf**

**Elena Silva, The Benwood Plan: A Lesson in Comprehensive Teacher Reform, Vol. 90, No. 02, October 2008, pp. 127-134.**

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