John Marshall High School

Glen Dale, West Virginia

REVEILLE

John Marshall High School sits between steep hills and the Ohio River.

"NCLB woke us up," admits a teacher at John Marshall High School, in Glen Dale, West Virginia. Just four years ago, John Marshall was in need of a bugle call. Special education students did so poorly their scores were routinely assumed to be in error; in fact, only 7% of the school's special education students were mastering some subjects. Annual student discipline incidents surpassed 2,000. There were other troubling realities, too. Instruction consisted mostly of lectures. Teachers rarely collaborated—nor, for that matter, did administrators. Support for integrating technology into instruction was weak, data use was scarce, and teachers focused on covering content far more than on student learning.

Although NCLB may have woken the school up, two administrators—Principal Thomas Wood and Assistant Principal Connie Young—in concert with a deliberate County-wide effort[1] and a dedicated teaching staff helped John Marshall get out of bed.

Roughly 1,400 students from grades 9 to 12 attend John Marshall, a public high school in rural West Virginia ten miles south of Wheeling. Glen Dale rests in the northern panhandle of West Virginia, a stretch of land tapering from 13 to 6 miles wide that sneaks into a crease between Ohio and Pennsylvania. The drive from Wheeling meanders between the Ohio River to the west and the stegosaurus-backed hills that loom over the narrow highway. The landscape aches with old factories, some still churning, others shuttered.

Student Demographics

John Marshall High School
Glen Dale, West Virginia
http://jmhs.mars.k12.wv.us
1357 students, 9 – 12

White	99%
African American	1%
Students eligible for free/ reduced price meals	41%
Students with Limited English Proficiency	0%
Special Education Students	13%
Student Turnover rate	64%
Average Teacher Turnover rate	11%
Student/Teacher Ratio	15:1

[1] West Virginia Local Education Agencies are called Counties

Inside John Marshall, ten department heads squeeze around a conference table. At the head of the table sits Connie Young. Assiduous and warm, she has mastered the art of being punctilious and likable. She joined John Marshall as Assistant Principal for Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment in 2005. Slightly away from the table, in a corner to Young's right, Principal Thomas Wood surveys the events. Though unassuming in groups, in one-on-one conversation his quiet demeanor contains his passion for John Marshall for a few minutes at best.

The meeting begins and ends on time, covers each order of business on the agenda, and is well attended. Experienced observers of schools know that is no trifle. "Prior to three or four years ago, there were few meetings," says Young—not administrators with administrators, teachers with teachers, or administrators with teachers. Granted, meetings themselves are only a structural change and structural changes alone rarely transform schools. They have nevertheless been an important enabling condition for other reforms—in academics, student support, student behavior, motivation, instruction, leadership, and parent and community engagement—that have transformed this school.

RIGOROUS ACADEMICS AND CURRICULUM

Outstanding high schools have higher-than-average expectations for their students. It's not just the advanced placement set, but all students, that an effective school pushes to take on academic challenges. Of course, few educators today don't know this mantra, and most can mouth it eloquently when the right audience enters the room. John Marshall administrators and teachers were no exception. To move everyone from knowing it to believing it, Wood and Young, in conjunction with the county office, began the change process.

For one, Wood jettisoned policies that diluted academic expectations, such as exempting students with "good" academic records from final exams. "What message did that send?" he asks. To crank up rigor and expectations, John Marshall, and the county as a whole, have moved courses into greater alignment with state Content Standards and Objectives (CSOs). The West Virginia Department of Education's website defines CSOs as "broad descriptions of what students should know and be able to do in a content area," says Young.

In the summer of 2007 an art teacher and a history teacher were the first at John Marshall to capitalize on county in-service days to deconstruct the CSOs in their courses. "Three or four years ago I would say I enjoyed my job," says the art teacher. "Now I can say I love it." The buy-in from this pair may rise a standard deviation above its peers, but observations of other classrooms, talks with other teachers, and reviews of lesson plans show that CSOs have now enmeshed themselves in the school. Teachers have now unpacked CSOs in all four core content areas and linked them to their courses.

The focus on state standards means greater continuity in instruction and expectations across grades and content areas. It means a student is less likely to see As on her algebra two report card and still miss proficiency on the state exam. Not everyone at John Marshall swears by CSOs yet, but the school has come a long way. Back at

the administrator and department head meeting, Young discusses a survey recently conducted with faculty. Only 6% of respondents oppose using standards; at least 40% are actively implementing standards in their teaching.

To gain buy-in, Wood employed his ability to listen strategically and shape others' ideas. He talked with individual faculty members to "bring their visions up," as he puts it. A modern Dale Carnegie, he advises, "You can fine-tune other people's visions" more easily than you can persuade them to accept yours. Wood is quick to share credit for the changes. When the new superintendent took over, Wood said, he "got up on a soap box" and made it clear the county would focus more on student learning and student needs. Part of that meant cleaving to what CSOs indicated, rather than what individual teachers believed students should know and be able to do.

For all their benefits, however, state standards are no panacea. Often they are too numerous and too vague to guide instruction. In response, the school is developing chunks of standards, or what education researcher Doug Reeves calls "power standards."

PERSONALIZATION AND STUDENT SUPPORT

With around 1,400 students John Marshall isn't mammoth, but it isn't cozy either. Without intentional systems to meet the needs of every student, there would be plenty of places for a young person to fall off track. In the last few years John Marshall has advanced three initiatives to address the needs of every student—credit recovery, looping, and school-based assistance teams.

Art students design and build larger-than-life insects.

Credit Recovery

Until recently, students who failed a course had to attend summer school to recover missed credits, and students in danger of failing a course might be required to attend after-school study. In both instances, however, the extra time was more about "paying dues" than learning. Today, John Marshall offers an after-school program of individualized computer-based study that enables each student who has failed a class to complete lost credits. Called Credit Recovery, the program uses a vendor's technology to deliver instruction aligned to the state CSOs at a student's own pace. Students appreciate the pace, but it's the link to the West Virginia CSOs that gives the program heft. "It holds on to students that might otherwise step away," says a parent.

In the past, students who failed a course could avoid summer school and repeat the course, but with the stigma attached to that option, it garnered scant enthusiasm. Compound that fact with the reality that students who failed one course likely failed others, and dropping out became the greater face-saving option. Credit Recovery now overflows with students.

Looping

Today, John Marshall offers greater continuity in student-adult relationships. Students now attend a dedicated discussion and activity group, essentially a homeroom period, called Advice, Orientation and Communication (AOC). The school further deepens the support faculty can offer students by looping students and AOC teachers, keeping students with the same AOC teacher throughout their careers at John Marshall. Similarly, students with disabilities who receive support from a special education teacher now engage with that same teacher year after year.

Students are also coupled with the same counselor throughout high school. More than just looping with the same students, counselors have tweaked their approach in recent years. "We're proactive, now" says the head counselor. "We're not just waiting for students to walk in the doors," she explains. At least ten times a year each counselor spends the day visiting classrooms to tell students about the support counselors offer. As a result, teachers are more aware of the counseling services available and often refer students for counselor support.

School-Based Assistance Teams

For years the school lacked a system to ensure that individual students didn't fall through the cracks. When students were identified, it was often too late to offer effective help, and only a small pool of adults was available to assist students in any event. Through School-Based Assistance Teams (SATs), John Marshall can now identify risk early and rally the knowledge and skill of a team of administrators, specialists, and teachers to address individual student needs. The SAT "pushes us to pick up students with risks" and problem-solve, adds a teacher.

Here's how it works: The County office regularly generates a report showing the students in each school with grades of "D" or "F" as well as their discipline and attendance records. Teachers and specialists continually review the reports, referring students with identifiable issues to an SAT. Referrals may also be made for emotional or health concerns; what matters is the evidence, including samples of student work, that a student is not succeeding. In addition, Young regularly reviews the county reports herself. Every student has a handful of adults minding his or her progress.

Within a week of a referral, an SAT meeting convenes. Also attending are a parent, a principal, teachers, and a specialist related to the area of concern, such as a counselor or psychologist. Once at the table, the team explores data related to the concern, such as grades, test results, student work, and behavior logs. Next it discusses modifications attempted to date and recommends interventions. If necessary, the team develops a Modified Education Plan. It appoints a case manager for continued monitoring and sets a follow-up date. At the follow up meeting, the SAT follows a process similar to the initial meeting and determines whether to continue its course of action, close the case, initiate testing, or recruit other faculty members for heightened review.

POSITIVE BEHAVIOR SUPPORT

One of Wood's first actions when he became principal in 2007 was to champion the Positive Behavior Support (PBS) program. With student suspension numbers skyrocketing, faculty and student morale was draining and countless hours of instructional time were vanishing. As its name implies, the PBS program focuses on rewarding positive actions rather than suppressing negative ones. "Monarch Mentions" encourage any faculty, staff, or student to nominate another student—or faculty or staff member— for exceptional behavior. The names of Monarch Mention recipients plaster a wall outside the main office.

With support from gift card raffles, John Marshall celebrates students with exemplary individual attendance and discipline records; freshmen, sophomore, junior, and senior classes compete for prizes given for the fewest discipline issues. Data show that PBS, now in its second year at John Marshall, is working. Discipline referrals have dropped 33%, from 600 for each six-week grading period to about 400.

PBS is about more than rewards and incentives, however. Ultimately, it's about culture and systems. Between classes, for example, silent and empty hallways give way to the clangs of closing lockers and colorful blurs of moving students. Animated as they move through the halls, students are orderly, though not automated. Outside one classroom a history teacher greets every student at the door by name. He attributes the lack of discipline problems in his class to forging a personal connection with each young person.

As for systems, the school employs a new online discipline referral system, which, according to the Assistant Principal for Discipline, presents two virtues: 1) teachers can report infractions instantly at the click of a mouse; 2) a graphing feature allows teachers to see their patterns of discipline referrals and gain insight into their own behaviors. The system has given an immediate boost to organization and consistency. Parents now receive calls the day of an infraction. Parents applaud the new system, but so too do students. It has "gained our respect," says one.

MOTIVATION AND ENGAGEMENT

Many schools effectively celebrate success in athletics; fewer have cultures that celebrate academic excellence. John Marshall has instituted several programs to reward academic achievement, such as the Gimmie Five program, which awards a tee-shirt to any student who raises his or her grade point average at least 0.5 points. The hallway walls boast the names of students earning the distinction.

Students can also earn "Roar Cards," featuring a roaring lion and the text, "We caught your student doing something…Great!" that are sent home to parents. Teachers dispense the cards for academic accomplishments. Through a partnership with the local PPG Industries plant, teacher-nominated students are celebrated for academic excellence at a school breakfast each grading period.

Students find support for more than good behavior, however. One student yearned to play alto saxophone, but couldn't afford an instrument. The music teacher called a local benefactor for a special favor, and within a week

the student was practicing. After all, as Young says, music may be what keeps a student in school. Every young person has "an ability to find their path" at John Marshall, says a parent.

MAKING DISCIPLINE ACADEMIC

In line with both its focus on academic rigor and proactive stance toward behavior, the school abolished its former "instructional resource support room." The old resource room jumbled students who were serving punishments with those seeking academic support. Teachers may now send students who disrupt learning for others to a new "instructional resource support room" where teachers qualified in special education and the core subjects support—and yes, sometimes, prompt— students to undertake their academic work while serving punishments. No longer do students with discipline mistakes simply pay dues by sitting idly.

John Marshall also offers a Resource Room exclusively for support, untethered to discipline, where students can recover failed credits, receive tutoring, or simply go instead of study hall.

As Wood thinks about building on the success of PBS he recognizes that discipline, engagement, and preparing all students for success after John Marshall are connected. The achievement gap, he says, "is more of an engagement gap."

INSTRUCTION

It's well known that effective schools generate shared understanding of their values and purpose. At John Marshall it is accepted that no longer is it sufficient to march through the curriculum and text book. What matters is student learning. Four key instructional strategies see life in John Marshall classrooms: co-teaching, technology integration, project-based learning, and assessment for learning.

Co-Teaching

In 2005, with special education students' proficiency mired at 7%, administrators and teachers knew aggressive action was needed, and regular education and special education teachers began co-teaching. In core courses for freshmen, sophomore, and occasionally juniors, regular education teachers provide foundational instruction while special education teachers (called interventionists) provide supplemental instruction. This occurs inside the classroom and may entail one-on-one instruction, re-teaching, or the use of visual representations and oral language to supplement written materials and scaffold student learning.

The new expectations of teachers were accompanied by new support. Several training days during the summer of 2005 helped teachers prepare, and didn't end after the initial sessions. Professional development time during the school year is devoted to strengthening regular education and special education collaboration. Meanwhile, in content areas where an interventionist offers instruction, he or she joins the relevant department meetings.

Since the introduction of co-teaching, special education referrals have fallen 33%. Yet the effort has helped more than just special education students. "We are seeing self esteem and student competency rise" for all students, says Young. For regular education and special education students alike, John Marshall staff credits co-teaching for the ascent of WestTest scores and nosedives in discipline problems and dropout rates.

Technology Integration

Her fingers dance over a nearly 10 square foot whiteboard, manipulating an interactive tutorial program on multiplication facts. The student's ease with the technology belies her steep challenges with mathematics. Demonstrating applications for art, money counting, and a host of others, students in John Marshall's mildly mentally impaired classroom repeat her confident performance.

A student manages the video feed in the school's professional quality broadcast studio.

After the demonstration, students move to individual computers, poring over word-decoding, arithmetic, and measurement programs, differentiated for each student. Meanwhile, from a perch in the opposite corner, the teacher monitors the progress of all seven students simultaneously from his screen. When a student gets stuck, he knows immediately. He may maneuver the program from his station or go to the student's side to offer personal intervention. Since the advent of the course, the teacher explains, attendance and discipline issues have plummeted for these students. They find school fulfilling.

Technology integration extends beyond this class and in fact pervades John Marshall. Whiteboards abound. Alongside the professional level broadcasting equipment, bevies of computers and vocational electronic equipment expand human capacities. This technological prowess isn't just lying fallow, either; it's actually used, consistently.

A geometry classes applies a computerized adaptive math program for supplemental instruction. The software customizes its content and pace for each student and also includes a collaborative group problem-solving dimension. Since the class began using it, a teacher observes, "I see the introverted students join others and the extroverted student being more manageable. Students have learned to work cooperatively in groups, to listen to others, communicate mathematically, and have more self-esteem." Perhaps most important, the school has achieved consistency with use of the program. All applied geometry classes now employ it.

Project-Based Learning

Upstairs, students in a history class screen videos they created to demonstrate themes across world religions. The teacher cues one student presentation, turning the volume of the heavy rock score up until the sounds slap against the walls.

The teacher describes his educational philosophy as rooted in inquiry, progressing from inquiry or "hands-on" learning to problem-based learning that engages students in open-ended, messy, real-world problems. Every project is situated in a problem scenario—connecting the Dust Bowl era to the present day, for example. Working in teams, students explore the issues and formulate solutions. "Someone once told me that schools are a place where kids go to see old people work," he says to his class. "We don't want that to be the way it is."

Small group work is a feature of instruction at John Marshall.

Assessment for Learning

A pilot group of teachers meets regularly to develop proficiency in assessment FOR learning. This involves communicating learning targets, giving students precise feedback on their current performance relative to the target, helping students plan how to reach the target, and involving students in assessing their own work and that of their peers.

Project-based learning and assessment for learning intersect in a 12th grade AP English class. Clustered in groups of four, students are completing an annotated bibliography on the use of literature and media as venues for discussing social issues and changing social values and norms. Annotated bibliographies are new to these students, and part of their work is figuring out what they know and what they need to know in order to create one. "They're going to drive what I need to teach in the next six weeks," the teacher explains.

Teams create their own rubrics and contribute to a class-wide rubric. At the end of the project, they will score another rubric to indicate whether the project actually hit the intended CSOs—giving the teacher feedback, too. Students even receive rubrics for their teacher-student conferences, which require students to articulate what they must accomplish between the present moment and the point in the near future when a number of big products are due. "It's not me saying, 'you need to learn this, this, and this,'" the teacher says: "You tell me what you need to learn." As a result, she says, the students "wonder and they get frustrated and they have problems figuring stuff out, and that's the real world. And they fix it and they figure it out."

POST-SECONDARY EXPLORATION: READY FOR COLLEGE, READY FOR WORK

Like many large high schools, John Marshall offers both vocational and college preparation; all students are given the opportunity for college and all are supported to explore careers. No matter what decision a student makes, it is nonnegotiable that every student leaves ready for college or work. That means each student must know how to work in teams, recruit familiar knowledge to solve unfamiliar problems, communicate complex information, and learn how to learn.

A Calculus student learns hands-on engineering.

A tour through the expansive vocational facilities shows this mission served in a multitude of venues. In a broadcasting class, students operate state-of-the-art equipment for a morning news program, assuming every role, from anchor to writer and director. A master welder steps away from a torch to boast, "Last year my job placement was 100% in post-secondary or work." In automotive technology, computer work and written reports are the rule. Upstairs a sophomore disassembles a PC in a class on server maintenance. Through the Pro-Start program, students train in the culinary arts by running a restaurant for faculty.

Engagement, for John Marshall, is enabling students to go in the direction of their interests. "If they want it and if parents want it, we will try it," says a faculty member. The goal is for every student to be challenged, to engage his passion, and spend time in the company of a caring, knowledgeable adult.

This goal also finds special expression through John Marshall's partnership with institutions of higher education. Students can leverage vocational work to gain college credit through the Northern West Virginia Community College and West Liberty State College. Under development is a formal Middle College High School program through which John Marshall students can graduate high school with an Associate's degree in hand. This year West Virginia University (WVU) professors began instructing an Algebra III and College Trigonometry course via satellite exclusively to John Marshall students. Students access the course in one of six newly built computer intensive classrooms, which WVU sponsored.

LEADERSHIP AND STRUCTURE

Leadership is a distributed enterprise at John Marshall. For the school to change rapidly, Wood and Young knew the staff had to not just acquiesce to, not just participate in, but share leadership for the change process. Department heads, for example, now receive an annual stipend for leading professional development and communication. A teacher was allotted one period daily to spearhead the SAT initiative. A new assistant principal and team of teachers were empowered to develop the PBS program.

Hampering many schools is an inability to have difficult conversations, to openly hash out hard topics. Young recalls a teacher who "came to me clandestinely to say here are some thing that need to be improved," but said, "'Don't tell anyone. I don't want to be seen as a turncoat.'" Today John Marshall is a safer place to share contrary opinions. In the administration and department head meeting, Young explains the administrator classroom walkthrough rubric and details how classroom data will be aggregated throughout the school and county levels. One teacher raises a concern: Isn't this just collecting a snapshot? How can it be trusted to provide a fair assessment of a teacher? Concerns from other voices swell.

Tom Wood is a former West Virginia principal of the year.

Young responds that the walkthrough data are not, as contended, valid for diagnosis, let alone evaluation, of individual teachers. Rather, data from the hundreds of individual observation are aggregated to determine professional development and resource allocation priorities across the whole district.

PARENT, FAMILY, AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Relationships with the community defined John Marshall long before the present administration's tenure. Under its guidance, however, community connections have thickened. Beyond its links with local universities and PPG, John Marshall claims several community connections.

The school's community service projects are legion. Students and faculty raise funds for teen parents, fashion luminaries for the all-night Relay for Life, coordinate dances to benefit a Children's Hospital, and offer art lessons to mentally impaired citizens, to name only a few. At the same time, community connections advance the school's work readiness mission. Consider the automotive repair and maintenance class, where an 85 x 75 foot garage shelters the ten cars—some less than a few years old—that crowd the bay. Area dealers and mechanics donate the cars. The proverbial days of students waiting their turn to install and uninstall an engine from a single '85 Chevette are long gone at John Marshall, if ever they did exist.

Community engagement sometimes confers immediate benefits. The new Center for the Performing Arts, the gift of an anonymous benefactor, is suitable for a university or a wealthy town. When not used by students, the Wheeling Symphony Orchestra uses the space for performances as well as rehearsals.

The grand auditorium belies the scrappy school orchestra that makes its home there. The young musicians hunt for opportunities to give performances in the community. "We're small, but we're mighty," says Young. She makes no secret of the fact that the concerts aim to build enthusiasm in the community for the music program.

Community connections are about good citizenship, but Wood and Young aren't shy about revealing their instrumental intentions also. "Knitting the school to the community," reduces dropout rates, says Young. The school even plays a role in reducing teen pregnancy. Students in a life skills class may "check out" electronic babies, programmed to demand the round-the-clock care infants need; students learn whether they are ready for 20-pound diaper bags and sleepless nights. Pregnant students also receive support that enables them to graduate.

Electronic babies make parenting real.

ParentLink tools allow the school quick communication with all parents. Bus delays, cancellations of afterschool program, even an absent student—emails and phone calls reach parents within minutes. Parents appreciate John Marshall's new automatic system for dialing wake-up calls to students with tardiness problems, though students are less congratulatory.

COUNTY ROLE

As determined and strategic as Wood, Young, and the John Marshall community have been, their progress relies on a close relationship with an equally committed and strategic county office. The year before John Marshall got its wake-up call in 2005 from the state, the county had hired a new superintendent who was motivated to raise expectations and provide new support county-wide.

Recall the two teachers who accessed county PD to incorporate CSOs into their teaching. Following them, the county supports grade-level teams in linking CSOs and discipline-specific concepts, and pays selected teachers to convert CSOs into classroom-usable language and create a pacing guide for the whole county. John Marshall acquires much of its PD through cross-county offerings. "That's how things are happening now," says Ms. Young, "through cadres of teachers across the district."

That push towards richer integration of technology in the classroom at John Marshall? The district initiated the impulse. The partnership with WVU to build the six high-tech classrooms? Negotiated by the new superintendent. And PBS and the enhanced student supports? Promoted by the superintendent again.

Not every improvement is so glamorous. County-wide principal meetings were once ill-attended, largely because they occurred during school and principals were reluctant to leave their buildings. The county moved the meetings to after school. Most principals now attend.

The district provides John Marshall with resources generously, but it's no open spigot. Says one assistant principal, "If we ask for something, the superintendent is going to say to us, 'show me the data.'"

One way county support occurs is through county office liaisons, one for each school. The constant interaction between liaisons and their schools makes the relationship work. “We don’t wait until a monthly meeting” to intervene, says a county official. “We have a direct line [to the county office],” adds Wood. Several other support structures exist. Countywide assistance in math, reading, technology, and special education is rendered informally and continually, but can also occur formally. For instance, schools can file a County Administrative Assistance Team request, which triggers the district to provide advice and broker support. “There is a feeling that you can call us and we can give you assistance quickly,” says a county representative. Finally, three to four times a year each school receives a visit from a County Support Team to aid deep thinking and problem-solving.

On the surface, Wood and Young’s welcome of the district role is a no-brainer. What principal wouldn’t want more resources? Yet some ego had to be sacrificed, some control relinquished. From the county liaisons to the coordinated countywide professional development, all meant less site-based control for the school’s administration. Embracing these offerings, however, has meant better results for students.

NEXT STEPS

As Wood and Young reflect on where John Marshall has come and where it needs to go next they see common expectations as a present goal, and common short-cycle assessments across classrooms as a future goal. Staff members feel they’ve made progress on the present goal and are ready to tackle the future one. Those who have put common short-cycle assessments in place know it requires structures and time for teachers to work collaboratively, a facility with data, a comfort level with adults observing other adults teach, an ability to weather setbacks, and access to external support. John Marshall should be in good stead.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Students are often attracted to a school for its non-academic classes such as Art, Music and in John Marshall’s case, Auto Mechanics. Will the school be able to financially maintain its commitment to these course offerings in the current economic climate?
- Culture and climate changes, although laudable, are often preludes to the work of changing professional instructional practices. Is there an overall professional development plan for the County/School?
- What practices are replicable in an urban high school with different student demographics?

John Marshall High School West Virginia Educational Standards Achievement Test % proficient and above: 10th grade English Language Arts					
	2003–04	*2004–05*	*2005–06*	*2006–07*	*2007-08*
All	69	72	76	84	75
Low income students	53	59	64	79	65
Special education students		32		48	43
% proficient and above: 10th grade Mathematics					
	2003–04	*2004–05*	*2005–06*	*2006–07*	*2007-08*
All	60	68	72	81	75
Low income students	47	56	63	73	65
Special education students		18		45	37