

On the office door of Diane Campbell Hathaway, principal of Joseph E. Hill/Sampson L. Freedman Middle School, hangs a Chinese proverb: Those who are saying it cannot be done should not interrupt those who are doing it. Perhaps no other saying better exemplifies the can-do spirit that permeates Hill-Freedman.

Located in Philadelphia's Germantown, Hill-Freedman draws more than 250 students from 20 elementary schools in the city's Northwest Region. Fourteen years ago the former middle school was combined with a school for special education, creating a new school that is today a magnet school for high-achieving 6th-8th grade students, a school for students with special needs, and a home for two classes of at-risk preschoolers.

Joseph E. Hill/ Sampson L. Freedman Middle School

250 students, grades 6-8

<http://webgui.phila.k12.pa.us/schools/h/hill-freedman>

African American	95%
Students eligible for free/ reduced price meals	48%
Student to teacher ratio	16:1
Student to computer ratio	0.8:1

All prospective students for the regular middle school must apply and demonstrate at least a sixth-grade reading level. No new students are accepted after seventh grade, Hathaway explains: they would be too far behind to catch up to Hill-Freedman's rigorous curriculum. The school also contains one learning support class, two autistic support classes, a life skills support class, and two multi-handicapped life skills classes. Learning support students are screened for strong work ethics, as are all students, and attend advisories (homeroom) with regular education students.

Both staff and parents refer to Hill-Freedman as the "best kept secret" in Philadelphia. Application packages are given to all feeder elementary schools, passed on to potential students by the principals or guidance counselors. Hill-Freedman doesn't need to advertise for students; its reputation resonates in the community. There is a waiting list to get in, and many of the school's families have more than one student who has attended or is attending Hill-Freedman.



“At some point, the district forgot about us,” says Hathaway. This both forced and enabled her to become more independent, an opportunity she used to increase the school’s adoption of technology and introduce a humanities-infused curriculum. Besides the high numbers of computers available for core coursework, Hill-Freedman’s music room contains electronic keyboards for student music composition. Students have the



opportunity to join band or orchestra, all take dance in 7th grade, and all take drama in 8th grade. Staff members believe these arts opportunities build self-confidence and self-reliance, bringing the concept of independence full circle.

Because of block scheduling and the school’s small size, students at Hill-Freedman don’t circulate among classes as they do at most middle schools. Instead, all grade level teachers at Hill-Freedman have dual certifications. Each grade has one ELA/social studies teacher and one math/science teacher. In the current 7th grade, which has the greatest number of students, an additional ELA/social studies teacher and a math/science teacher spend half their day teaching and half their day coaching and/or providing student support (pull-out or in-class).

Additionally, resource teachers, many of whom are professionals in their field, provide instruction in art, music, dance, physical education and drama, technology, and Vo-Tech (for life skills students). Eleven paraprofessionals work with the special education classes, some of them providing one-on-one services to profoundly disabled students.

Working One Year Ahead of the Curriculum

For many years, the Philadelphia school district allowed each school to design its own literacy curriculum. Four years ago, however, the district began requiring a core curriculum. As luck would have it, Hill-Freedman was already using



the chosen program—but at one grade level above the district requirement. Hathaway insisted that Hill-Freedman be allowed to continue teaching the curriculum at the school’s historic level and today, Hill-Freedman’s students continue to study one grade level above their peers.

The point to teaching one year ahead, says Hathaway, is not so that students can opt out or test out of classes when they go to high school, although some students do chose to do that. Her hope, and that of the coaches, is that students will feel more comfortable transitioning to high school because they will be familiar with the material and encouraged by their success, which will motivate them to continue to achieve.

Teaching one year above the curriculum in literacy has other benefits as well. The districtwide curriculum was designed to make sure students reached the “proficient” level on Pennsylvania’s state test. By teaching students a year ahead of the curriculum, even

students at Hill-Freedman who are struggling with their coursework can score “proficient.” Says Hathaway, “Before we were only the best of the worst. Now, the staff knows their students can perform when pushed.” Adds a staff member, “When you set high expectations, you find students can usually meet them.”



Given the pace of their school work, students have to be ready to perform at

high levels when they enter Hill-Freedman. Applying students must read at the 6th grade level, for example, because the school begins teaching at the 7th grade level. As a result, Hill-Freedman does not have the kinds of adolescent literacy problems many middle schools face. Hill-Freedman students who need more intensive instruction are pulled out of class in small groups by the literacy coach.

Literacy concepts, grammar, and writing are also reinforced in the school’s Spanish curriculum: all students receive instruction in Spanish for one hour every day. Some test out of beginning level courses when they reach high school, says the Spanish teacher, but all have an increased sense of confidence when they take foreign languages later.

In math, Hill-Freedman combines curricula, including a software program designed around state and national standards that pits school teams against each other—class versus class, school versus school. The math and science teachers at Hill-Freedman brag about their classes’ trophies and the number of months in a row they’ve won. “Apparently, we are the school to beat in the district,” Hathaway says, adding that competition is a great motivator for students and staff.

In addition to core coursework in language arts, math, science, social studies, and Spanish, Hill-Freedman students benefit from regular instruction in the arts. All students can choose to participate in band or orchestra. Says a 6th grader, "The music program is great.... It gives you determination and courage and the teacher doesn't let you fail." Seventh grade students receive dance lessons, in lieu of P.E., with a professor from the College of Performing Arts, a program that has been in place for 12 years. All 8th grade students participate in drama, from creating and choosing scripts to researching costumes and history and to performing in and producing an end-of-the-year show.



High Expectations

Given the demands placed on everyone at Hill-Freedman, teachers have high expectations for their students and the principal has high expectations for her staff. Teachers are expected to move to a higher level of teaching each year. Resting on one's laurels is not acceptable. "Always question," says a ELA/social studies teacher. "Every time I do a lesson, I always make a note for next time, what I would do to make it better." Hathaway is adamant that everyone in the school believe that failure is not an option. Teachers echo the sentiment. "I give them everything I have, but I expect everything too in return."



To that end, all students have portfolios that contain their grades and assessment results. Portfolios are reviewed annually and students set new goals and targets, which progress teachers monitor. The projects and homework can be overwhelming, admits one 6th grader. "It's hard but fun," says a 7th grader. Peer teaching is encouraged, particularly in math, giving students a feeling of self-worth. Teachers suggest students interact with each other to solve problems and strategically seat students to "feed off" each other competitively.

The school is focused on transitioning students from childhood to pre-adulthood. None of us are “cuddly,” says Hathaway—“nurturing, but not cuddly.” While she realizes the approach might seem harsh at times, she believes students will thank them later. Some already do. Says one 8th grader: “It’s a lot of work but not more than you can handle. When I go to high school I know I’ll be prepared for the work.”

Leadership Means Keeping a Screwdriver Handy

The principal has vision, says a math and science teacher: Her leadership inspires the staff and sets the direction for the school. A second teacher agrees that the motivation to be different comes from the top.

But the school was not always ready for Hathaway’s no nonsense, no excuses leadership. Early on, she says, “I felt like I was at the top dragging people along.” Although she tried to recruit teachers with the same belief system, the district didn’t let her select her own teachers though, so she became good at “deselecting.” She says her goal has always been to “create a school good enough to send my children to.” She’s had to keep that in mind when evaluating teachers. If they’re not good enough, something needs to be done.



In the beginning, Hathaway needed to be literally hands-on. When she realized how far behind Philadelphia was in technology, she bought computers by using school funds creatively, and in 1994, Hill-Freedman was the first school



in the district to be wired for the Internet and have e-mail. “I didn’t have a tech person,” she explains, “I was it.” She went around the school in an apron filled with screwdrivers and instruction manuals, fixing technology problems as they arose. The district ended up having her sit on technology committees to help build district capacity.

Today computers outnumber students at Hill-Freedman. All classrooms have computers, all teachers have laptops, there is a computer lab, computers are used for musical composition, and all students receive technology instruction that supports classroom instruction. Classrooms are beginning to have interactive whiteboards installed to further

enhance instruction. The district IT department often turns to Hill-Freedman to try new technology before going districtwide, coming to the school for ideas, fostering competition and a drive to keep ahead of everyone else.

Over the fourteen years, Hill-Freedman began to build a reputation and consequently a strong team of teachers. Hathaway is more concerned about teacher determination to help students succeed than qualifications. None of the original middle school staff remain, and only one of the special education teachers. The school experiences turnover in one to two teachers per year. New teachers are hired with the understanding that they believe in the same principles as Hathaway: that all students can reach high levels. Anyone who is not willing to work hard and dedicate him or herself to that work ethic does not stay long.

Hathaway maintains an open door policy for students, staff, and parents. “She’s a very good leader,” says one parent “She’s results-driven and demands that parents do their part; leadership trickles down.” Agrees another parent: “She’s like a mother, she makes the kids grow up and the parents let go.”

Parents are very important to the Hill-Freedman community; they make themselves available to teachers and staff through email, cell phones, or even at work. In helping their children at home and adopting the “can do” spirit, parents make the Hill-Freedman wheel turn, says Principal Hathaway.

Hill School was an historically African-American middle school before it was combined with Freedman school. Hathaway believes Hill-Freedman has a responsibility to show the world that African-American students can be successful. Staff members agree. “I would follow the principal into a burning building,” says the vo-tech teacher, “because she understands.”

Student Opportunities

Whatever a child’s talents—academics, arts, sports—he or she will find it, says a parent. Despite its small size, Hill-



Freedman offers a wide range of extra-curricular activities. Staff members believe that extra-curricular activities encourage students to be at school, and being at school fosters learning and personal growth.

Besides regular instruction in music, dance, and drama, all students are involved in two annual performances: a holiday show and an end-of-the-

year show. Students also participate in service learning, such as volunteering in the special education and pre-K classes, perform music for the pre-K classes, and cleaning and beautifying the school building and grounds. A day in early October is dedicated specifically to painting and maintaining the building. Students get to choose which colors to paint their classrooms and hallways, giving them greater ownership of the building.



Hill-Freedman's extra-curricular emphasis in the last several years has been on sports, led in particular by one teacher's dedication to providing students with diverse opportunities not often found in city schools. Currently, the school offers 16 sports, including the typical ones such as basketball, track, and soccer, but also less typical sports like tennis, golf, lacrosse, and field hockey. The most recent addition is crew—Hill-Freedman is the first school in Philadelphia to offer it—and the school hopes to offer swimming soon as well. Staff members view these sports in a broad context. The vo-tech teacher explained that golf, lacrosse, and crew are sports that will give students the chance to gain college scholarships.

Hill-Freedman's unique character means teams usually must compete against other magnet or private schools. Games are arranged by the vo-tech and dance teachers. Funding for sports is acquired creatively, and staff seize on all available opportunities. "We get equipment however we can," the vo-tech teacher said. That means hitting the thrift stores, trading with other schools, and the occasional long drive to pick up a cheap piece of equipment and refurbishing it with student help. Students must maintain at least a B average to participate in more than one sport; teachers can revoke privileges if work declines.



For students who show undeveloped potential, Hill-Freedman offers the opportunity to participate in Outward Bound. Each session, 11-15 students who staff believe would benefit from the experience, are chosen for the program. Slots aren't just available to students in the regular middle school, however. Recently, a high

functioning autistic student attended, amazing staff members by his growth. Outward Bound scholarships are available, but most families are able to afford it; if not, the school finds a way to cover the \$25 fee.

Student Supports

The school's open house for prospective 6th graders includes a parent tea and an assembly for the students to explain the school's program, expectations and requirements. From entering 6th graders to exiting 8th graders, Hill-Freedman provides students with multiple support systems.

In August, all incoming students receive a weeklong orientation designed to help them absorb the school's culture; work on the school's mission statement; review the rules, expectations, and study skills; participate in team-building activities; and gain a sense of familiarity with the school. Hill-Freedman also introduces 6th graders to Steven Covey's Seven Habits of Highly Successful Teens and gives them an agenda taken from the program.



During the year, the school counselor gives monthly presentations on Covey's ideas. Parents said they loved how the program helps prepare students for life post-high school. Students said they liked how the agenda keeps them focused and organized—"there's no excuse for procrastination," explained one student.

During morning homeroom "advisories," staff and students review how to follow the rules and apply them to "real life" and adulthood. Staff stress that for most students Hill-Freedman is an extraordinary change: once they were given



"lots of slack," and now they are given none. All staff members, from the nurse to teachers to the principal, feel compelled to stay alert and on top of the students. Occasionally, Hathaway says that she wonders if she is too intense for some students and whether they would be better off in a neighborhood school. Still, in her fourteen years at Hill-Freedman, only one student has ever been retained in 8th grade. The cohesive message across classes and teachers helps students with focus and studying, says the counselor.

From October to March, students at risk of not achieving “proficiency” on the state test must attend an hour of tutoring Monday through Thursday; an additional hour is available for homework help. Other students may sign up too for the first hour, but if they do, they are expected to attend for the duration. For those students still having trouble academically, extra tutoring is available on Saturday. The school uses a blend of Title I and other funds to support the program. Teachers also try to accommodate students in need of help during the school day. “The teachers are patient and willing to work with you,” said a seventh grader, “They’re genuine, and you can talk to them during lunch.” They want to see you succeed, added an eighth grader, “but they don’t enable you, they encourage you.”

In the fall, the counselor works with the graduating eighth graders to identify their top five choices for high school. Together, they prepare portfolios with students’ 7th and 8th grade transcripts and all assessments. Students request recommendation letters from teachers and prepare a writing sample. In March, students get their acceptance letters from the high schools.



In spite of being located in a relatively high crime area, Hill-Freedman is not confronted with violence. One reason, suggests a teacher, is because the students want to be here and don’t want to jeopardize their position. Staff members also credit the basic rules that all students must learn at the week-long summer orientation. The school has a zero tolerance policy for behavior issues and low attendance.

Special Education

Special education classes at Hill-Freedman are integrated with the regular middle school whenever possible, but integration depends on the severity of students’ needs. In general, special education students join the middle school students for assemblies, lunch, and occasional trips.



Learning support students at Hill-Freedman join their regular education peers for advisories and, like other students, are screened for their work ethic before being admitted. The learning support teacher models her classes after the regular education classes: her students complete the same research projects and participate in the school science fair. “It’s amazing what comes out when you push them,” she says. Unlike the other special education teachers, she participates in all the grade-level

and content-area teams, choosing which teams to meet with based on her students' current needs.

The life skills support class contains students with a variety of abilities, some of whom function academically at early elementary grade levels. They learn interpersonal communication, domestic management, personal maintenance, and recreation and leisure. The life skills support students, autistic support students, and multiple disabilities life skills students are given an alternate state test at their skill level. After three years at Hill-Freedman they move on to high school, staying until they reach 21. In any given year, 20% of the school receives alternate testing. "Our job is to lead these students to good choices," says the vo-tech teacher, "to teach those who can master them the skills they need to be productive members of society."

The Team Approach

School staff responsibilities don't end at the classroom or office door. Hathaway has instilled the concept that all teachers are responsible for all students, and "We all back each other up," says the counselor, adding that students know they can't play one teacher off against another. "The intimate culture means students can't hide and staff must communicate. You can get five or six perspectives on any child," notes a teacher, "because everyone knows everyone else."

Although Hill-Freedman does not have a leadership team per se, the principal, coaches, nurse, counselor, and learning support teacher meet regularly. Grade-level teams meet and provide their own direction. The system seems to work well for everyone. Teachers expressed appreciation for the freedom to come up with ideas, develop plans, and present them to Hathaway—adding that they invariably receive full support, financially and professionally. Confirms the drama/P.E. teacher, "This is home for an eclectic group of teachers; we are allowed to expand and explore."

For her part, Hathaway appreciates that her teachers can develop ideas, support them with solid data, and plan how to implement them, leaving her with very little work to do to initiate the recommended project. "The coaches have diminished my role," she says, with pride, adding that she likes knowing that whenever she retires the teams and the projects can carry on, even when new teachers come aboard.



Because most grade levels only have one teacher per content area, they have no opportunity to discuss issues with other teachers using the same curriculum. They are encouraged to work around this by reaching out to colleagues in other schools and taking advantage of professional development opportunities. Teachers also work together to monitor each other and share techniques and strategies, and the two coaches collaborate to integrate literacy across the curriculum. Everyone knows the school's success depends on each of them.



Nor are parents or students left out of the process. At regular town hall meetings, staff, students, and parents gather in the auditorium to discuss issues and resolve problems. Staff members also work to educate parents, holding workshops to help parents understand student assignments, such as research papers and the science fair; to interpret student grades and test scores; and to explain the high school application process.

Parent-teacher conferences take place three times a year.

Parents laud the school's open door policy, especially the principal's willingness to discuss progress or problems. When the district decided to require uniforms, parents worked closely with school officials to determine the best way to approach the issue, from style and color to methods of enforcing the rules.

Staff members admit that the school's small size makes it easier. "Having a small staff makes everyone more accommodating to each other because we can meet more often," says the learning support teacher. It also makes for challenges: All staff members perform multiple duties and most teach multiple disciplines.

No one thinks their subject is more important than any other subject, explains one of the coaches. And this affects the way students think about their courses. Everyone knows and does what they teach. We don't always agree, she adds, but we can respect each other on a professional level, and the students sense that.

Ready for the World

With their recent Blue Ribbon award, the school, once overlooked by the district, is suddenly finding itself in the spotlight. Hathaway is little unsure what to expect now that the "best kept secret in Philadelphia" is no longer a secret. Yet the can-do attitude, independence, and leadership at Hill-Freedman seem unlikely to wane. "We are training the students to take



responsibility for their education,” says the counselor. “We encourage our children to enhance their experiences by maximizing their cognitive ability and utilizing all tools available.”

Says one parent who’s seen multiple family members graduate from Hill-Freedman: “When they leave here, they are ready for the world.”

Joseph E. Hill/ Sampson L. Freedman Middle School State Criterion-Referenced Tests					
% proficient and above: 8th grade Reading					
	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
All	70	76	90	85	94
Low income		61	91	80	79
State Scores	58	63	69	64	71
% proficient and above: 8th grade Math					
	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
All	63	44	85	89	89
Low income		17	86	95	74
State Scores	51	51	58	63	62

