Doing What Works
ED.gov

Video
FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

Building a Sense of Community

Fairfield Court Elementary School • July 2008

Topic: Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools
Practice: Committed Staff

Highlights

- The principal built morale by establishing an open-door policy, planning team-building activities, highlighting teachers' successes within the school, and emphasizing to staff that she was there to support them.
- Teachers who did not buy into the changes at the school were encouraged to leave; the remaining staff are committed to doing "whatever it takes" to improve student learning.
- Teachers strengthened their commitment through grade-level team planning and support from master teachers.
- As the school begins to improve, principals can celebrate successes by recognizing teachers' hard work.

About the Site

Fairfield Court Elementary School
Richmond, VA

Demographics

99% Black

1% Hispanic

97% Free and Reduced-Price Lunch

3% English Language Learners

20% Special Education

The turnaround process at Fairfield Court Elementary included:

- Developing and communicating a clear vision for improving student achievement
- Mobilizing teaching staff and the community to support the changes at the school site
- Reviewing assessment data to inform instructional planning
- Releasing staff who did not support the change and selecting new staff who were committed to the turnaround

Full Transcript

My name is Irene Williams. I am principal of Fairfield Court Elementary School, Richmond City Public Schools located in Richmond, Virginia. One of the first challenges that I really faced was a school that felt they had been forgotten, just tucked away in a corner of the city.

The first thing we had to do was to build morale, staff morale, and how do we do that? I think the first thing that you have to do is listen to the staff because you have to feel the pulse of your organization and the heartbeat. That took a good year, it really did and with us working together. I had an open door policy. I made sure that they could come in whether it was early morning or—I am a late person, so I work in the building late—and so my office door was always open to them to hear their suggestions.

And then we began to plan activities, basically team building activities. How are we going to get this done? And I would let them know that I was here to support them. I was here; I was not going to ask them to do anything that I wouldn't do. In addition, I was going to supply them with all the tools they needed to be successful, and I kept saying it. I was just relentless in what I was saying to them, "I know what it looks like. I know what our data looks like, but we are going to make it. We are going to do that." And if you tell people that so long they begin to believe it as you put actions with your words. So if I am going to be here working with you, if I am going to give you everything that you are going to need to be successful, then I am going to support you. Then my expectation is that we will see student achievement improve, that we will have a building of people who are really becoming a professional learning community and teachers who are willing to work to make sure children understand that they can do. Because once you get the teachers on board, children love their teachers, they will do just almost anything for them. And so once the teachers began to believe that then we had students who really began to make a lot of progress.

I did make some changes with staff. Some teachers decided they were going to leave and that was fine because I think in an organization if people cannot get on board, they need to try to do something different. So I encouraged that, I supported that because I wanted to make sure that everyone was in the same place and we were all on board.

We have master teachers who are coaches, who are grade-level coaches. So they go in and support teachers even—I think about evaluation when I come in to evaluate—but there they are first so they can talk to their peers. So you put teams together according to… You put a very strong team leader, which we could consider a coach or grade-level chair, and there are still lot of strong members on that team, but they support the weakest link bringing that link up to where they should be. And so we put them together by grade levels, and then we plan together I think that's a critical piece. This school is an open school wherein teachers and children can just come in and enjoy what's here, and what's here is a lot of love and nurturing and a lot of beliefs that they can do. So that was a paradigm shift in teachers' belief about students. There was a paradigm shift in what teachers believed about themselves. They realized, yes, I can be successful. And teamwork: the cliché "teamwork makes the dream work" is really true here because we work as a team. And there are no secrets. If you are doing something good everyone in the building needs to know about it, not only everyone in the building, everyone downtown, everyone everywhere.

We celebrated the small victories, okay. We don't have to wait to be accredited, celebrate that we had gained 20 points in an area, that was great. We did kudos and in kudos, I give out a weekly memo—the principal's weekly memo—and we highlight successes, personal or educational, that teachers have done. So the kudos was great because teachers were always looking for their names. I would have a spotlight on instruction where at any given time—they don't know when—I will put it in the principal memo or state it over the intercom. I went into Ms. Jones's class and this is what we saw, all her students were on task. They were involved in activity where she had small groups, one group was doing this, one group was doing that. So they want to hear their names; everyone wants to be successful. And we did drops in the bucket. Drops in the bucket were glows, and the teachers talked to each other about how they had supported them. And so those were some of the little things we did, but we have is a core of committed and dedicated professionals who are willing to do whatever it takes to make sure that children are successful.