

DOINGWHATWORKS



Video

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

The Persistent Principal

Lake Forest North Elementary School, Delaware • October 2010

Topic: Improving K-3 Reading Comprehension
Practice: Teach Comprehension Strategies

Highlights

- A principal and district elementary supervisor discuss the critical role of building-level instructional leadership.
- Brenda Wynder, principal at Lake Forest Elementary School, explains how staff development, data meetings, and classroom walk-throughs have helped bring about instructional change.
- Planning and collaboration help staff work toward schoolwide goals.
- Ed Cutler, elementary supervisor for the Lake Forest School District, attributes this change to the principal's "single-minded" focus on providing clear expectations and ongoing support to teachers, classroom observations, instructional monitoring, and direct feedback to staff.

About the Site

Lake Forest North Elementary School
Felton, Delaware

Demographics

71% White

23% Black

4% Hispanic

1% Asian

53% Free or Reduced-Price Lunch

1% English Language Learners

13% Special Education

Lake Forest North's data-driven culture drives every aspect of the school. Administrators and instructional support staff work closely with teachers to ensure each classroom offers heterogeneous instructional practices.

- Strategies like whole group read-alouds and partner sharing, graphic organizers, and modeling and strategy explanation help students understand text structure.
- Comprehension instruction includes an emphasis on what good readers do and the strategies they use.
- Grade-level articulation meetings are held weekly with the reading coach for the purposes of collaborative planning and data review.
- Teachers build on student development of comprehension strategies across grade levels.
- Teachers are provided opportunities to observe peer instruction to better understand student learning in previous grades and comprehension goals in future grades.
- The principal provides strong leadership and motivates teachers to sustain effective comprehension practices, for example, through the use of classroom walk-throughs.

Targeted professional development is created from benchmark assessment data for improving teaching skills.

Full Transcript

Brenda Wynder: My name is Brenda Wynder. I am the principal at Lake Forest North Elementary. I'm beginning my sixth year here at Lake Forest. When I came to Lake Forest, I was the fifth principal to be placed here in six years, and so we had a lot of work that needed to be done.

The school's main focus was on fluency and phonics, with minimal input or work on reading comprehension. I knew that change had to be a process and not a one-time event. So I began by working with the master schedule and putting the school on a block schedule by grade level so that we would know who was teaching what, when, and how long, which would then give us the opportunity to do the walk-throughs and the monitoring that we needed to gather information to figure out where everyone was. Because an important

part of staff development is to give teachers exactly what they need so that it will be useful.

Teachers receive the changes with the new staff development as it would be anywhere. Some people are ready to go and elated to have it—jump onboard. Some people are almost there, and they watch to see what’s happening before they make their choice. And then some people just flat-out won’t receive it. So I would not spend all of my time with the people who did not and leave the people who were receiving the change just waiting.

So we did one year observing. Second year, we gave you some tools to work with. And then the third year, there was now going to be the requirement—or the accountability piece—of, we would still be providing for staff development, but there was now a goal, or a bar set in place, for you of an expectation. And so I created what we called “data meetings,” and those data meetings happened with the teacher and myself. We sat down, we looked at the data sheet—who you’re getting from the start—and then we discussed and we set goals where those children needed to be individually at the end of the school year.

Ed Cutler: My name is Ed Cutler, elementary supervisor for the district, and we are in Lake Forest School District, in Felton, Delaware.

Over the last three years, we’ve seen at North Elementary School a rapid change in the culture. That, I believe, is directly attributed to the principal. She has a single-minded focus, and that’s student achievement through staff development. And this is also through her actual involvement, making sure that the teachers get the best support that they can and that they perform. And she monitors that and provides direct feedback. But Brenda’s idea is real simple: You do what you say you’re going to do, and if you make a mistake, we work to improve it.

Wynder: The planning, the collaboration just really helped us all be going in the same direction. But I can’t leave out the third part, which is the walk-through. The administration, the assistant principal, myself, and the literacy coach: We are in the halls; we are in the classrooms; we are monitoring; we’re giving back notes on what we have seen—making sure that they understand this is not just something we are asking you to do, but we are monitoring it.

Cutler: The role of the principal in the Reading Comprehension Program is critical. I believe that you need to be in the classrooms. You need to let the teachers know what it is that you are going to come in to observe, to see. But then when you’re in there, you need to pay attention to the students. When you see students learn, you need to let the teachers know. You need to talk to the youngsters and ask them what they’re learning and why.

We need to keep our communication with our principals and with our teachers constant. We are in the buildings: myself as elementary supervisor, all the other board support people come in. We talk to the people; we attend their articulation meetings; we attend all other meetings, school improvement meetings. So support is number one.

Wynder: It's time now that administrators, instructional leaders learn we really have to be a resource. We can't be "I need you to go do that," but we have to be "Let's work on that together." I think the more teachers see that, it kind of pulls out of them the willingness to try to work towards it. And I tell them every year, "This is going to be your hardest year yet. We are going to work harder than we did last year." But notice I say "we"—not "you," not "I," but "we"—and I try to model that.