

DOINGWHATWORKS



Video

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

Building Relationships With Parents

Hardy Elementary School, Tennessee • August 2008

Topic: Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools

Practice: Improved Leadership

Highlights

- This principal worked on the school's relationship with parents to gain their trust.
- Meeting structures and communication processes were tailored to encourage parental participation in meetings with staff.
- Events such as parent workshops and family nights were created to engage the parents and win their support.

About the Site

Hardy Elementary School

Chattanooga, TN

Demographics

97% Black

3% White

100% Free or Reduced-Price Lunch

Several practices helped Hardy Elementary School go from being the worst to the top among the elementary schools in the state of Tennessee:

- A new principal bringing in a new vision and approach
- New teachers
- Targeted professional development to establish a schoolwide set of instructional strategies
- A clearly articulated lesson plan structure
- A balanced literacy program
- Regular use of student assessment data that included monitoring and adjusting instruction based on a careful analysis of data
- New school building
- Clear behavior expectations from all students and school staff

Full Transcript

My name is Natalie Elder. I am the principal at Hardy Elementary School in Chattanooga, Tennessee. When I first came to Hardy as the principal, one of the things that was lacking was a strong relationship between the school and the parents. I had to think about, to be honest, was it our approach? Were we unapproachable to them? What was causing the conflict between us and the parents? Because we had a lot of irate parents come in, and I couldn't understand what was going on, but I realized something had to be done because I needed them to be on the team with me. The key thing to me was building strong relationships because they were angry. They were unapproachable. They talked about the community as a whole: "well, this school never had good test scores; well, they've never done this; they have had bad teachers." And I am listening to them, and this is what I am hearing, and I had to build that relationship with them, "trust us, trust us to do the right thing."

My thing with them, I would say, "I promise you I am going to give you the best teacher because you are giving me the best child that you have. I need to give you the best teacher that I have." And I tried to make sure that the teachers understood that. It's one thing to understand, but I had to change the mindset even of the teachers because, again, if you think that you are dealing with "keep people off poverty," your expectations might be low. And I had to help them understand that's a socioeconomic issue. It has nothing to do with their ability to think. So you've got to get past an economic issue. That's all that is. Poverty is just about economics. It's not about a person's ability to think. We can help develop a brain by providing them the necessary skills to be successful. We have to teach them to hear the rules, that there are rules in your community, yes, but we have certain rules in school. We have to understand that people of poverty may speak on a casual level, not all of them, but a majority of them speak on casual register. We have to get them to formal register, to understand in school, we talk in complete sentences. And we have to understand also that some parents feel inferior because they feel they cannot express things to us.

Another thing we had to do was change the way we set up meetings. It was a parent one time came in for a meeting, and I didn't look at it like that until she said it, and she told me she didn't feel comfortable. And I said, "Well, tell me what's the problem." And she said, "You've got your posse in here." Well it was just a team of teachers, but to her, that was a gang, there was a group—it was like a gang. And I said, "Oh, no, we are not trying to gang up on you. I just wanted everybody at the table so you can have an opportunity to hear everybody's voice." She said, "Well, I need to go get my people." And she didn't hear me. "Well, I just need to go get my people. You've got your people, I need to go get mine." And I looked at her and I thought no, that's not what I need to portray, and I realized, "Oh, we've got to change our way of doing business, even with our parents." So we had to create the setting where we will provide refreshments, or we'll say to them, "this person is here for this reason. Are you okay with that?" Because they needed to feel comfortable even talking to us. We had to think about our approach in how we delivered that information to them about their kids because that goes back to creating a relationship, and we were not good at that at first. I have to admit it, our teachers were not good at our approach.

So, we had to look at ourselves and realize in order to first reach them, we have to be better at what we do, and we have to make the situation work on both sides. Now I grant you, not all parents were we able to move over to that side, to that line to cross over with us and be a part of our team, but it set the tone for the community. Because one thing I learned about the community, whatever's said here, it goes right into their community. So we had to be careful how we were doing business, and I needed them to see that we were really about educating their kids. This was an institution strictly for learning. I had to get that point over. So we started developing mini-workshops with our parents. We had family nights with our parents. We had literacy nights. We had publishers' night. We did writers' night. We put on plays. And our parents loved them.

Those were some of the things that we have done to help our parents understand we are here to help our kids, and we want them to be the best that they could be, and we cannot do it without a strong relationship with them. We had to convince them this is a team effort. It takes everyone to be held accountable. It can't be just the teachers being held accountable. We have to hold the students accountable, and we have to hold parents accountable. But the key thing is that we are a team, and it has to be a team effort.