

DOINGWHATWORKS



Slideshow

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

Engaging Teachers and Students Through Strong Leadership

Dodge Renaissance Academy, Illinois • June 2008

Topic: Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools

Practice: Improved Leadership

Highlights

- In restructuring a school, this principal first held meetings to learn what stakeholders wanted and continued to engage the community through bimonthly parent meetings and by being visible at school events.
- The principal spent time with teachers at the end of the school day, and used a weekly newsletter to provide information and professional development.
- The principal focused on helping teachers continually become better instructors and on being open to feedback.
- The principal also focused on student achievement and took responsibility for the school's results.

About the Site

Dodge Renaissance Academy

Chicago, IL

Demographics

99% Black

1% Multiracial

93% Free or Reduced-Price Lunch

12% Special Education

The turnaround process in Dodge Elementary included:

- Communicating clear expectations for student behavior and consistently enforcing school policies with carefully spelled out consequences for infractions
- Recruiting teachers who may not be fully developed but are eager to learn and willing to do whatever it takes to help their students learn
- Providing teachers with intensive professional development
- Aligning the curriculum with state standards

Full Transcript

Presentation Title: Engaging Teachers and Students Through Strong Leadership

Dodge Renaissance Academy, Chicago, IL

Leading school turnaround effort is a challenging task for all school leaders, and for newly hired school principals especially. A new principal needs to quickly get up to speed, learn about the school needs, build relationship and trust with the current school staff, and set a direction for the change. Watch this slideshow to learn how the new principal of Dodge Elementary School met these challenges.

Slide 1: Setting a Direction

Slide text: The new principal of Dodge Renaissance Academy set a clear direction for the turnaround approach. This approach included focusing on a data-driven culture that took into account multiple sources of data for decision making, creating a caring community in which all individuals' needs were met, and setting high behavior and performance expectations for all students and staff.

Audio: The school closed and was closed for an entire year and was reopened the following year with the exact same students. The turnaround process began in the fall of 2002. There were subsequently two principals in that first year. In the second year I was hired as the principal. I am a New Leaders for New Schools principal, and our training focused on two primary drivers that I believe facilitated my growth and prepared me for a turnaround school. The first lever focused on creating a data driven culture that sought to focus on continuous improvement of learning and teaching. Specifically I learned the importance of being an instructional leader who visited classrooms daily and provided weekly professional development and sought really high quality teachers. The second lever, I think, that assisted me was really creating an orderly caring community, where high expectations were the norm and not the exception.

Slide 2: Student Behavior

Slide text: The principal identified student behavior as a necessary condition for other changes to happen. Students learn better in an orderly and safe environment. The principal and teachers established explicit expectations for student behavior including how to walk in the halls and how to behave in classroom.

Audio: The very first order of business was helping to create order within that. When I first began, the entire staff set out to explicitly spell out expectations for student behavior. We discussed and agreed upon the small details: how students would walk in the halls, exactly what one should do once inside the classrooms. We were very intentional in every detail, and I believe this created the climate and culture that ultimately prevails today.

Slide 3: Staff Collaboration

Slide text: The principal held himself and the teachers responsible for making changes in their instructional skills before expecting students to show academic progress. He encouraged teachers to share ideas, model instruction, and provide feedback to their colleagues. The principal maintained an open door policy to listen and share ideas with staff and students.

Audio: I think, initially, we sought to create a new frame of reference, if you will, for how Dodge would be operated, and there were initially several different core components that I sought to try and create. The first was simply just to walk the talk and demonstrate a commitment to ongoing learning. For me this was putting a high premium on helping all teachers become better instructors. I think one of the things we said at the onset was, "not perfect practice, but public practice," and recognizing the need to ensure that we all would live up to the expectation that we would all be lifelong learners. I think secondly having an openness to feedback, a willingness to have an open door policy and have teachers participate and learn from each other, as well as me learning from them, allowed for us to have a very open and trusting relationship.

Next, I think focusing relentlessly on student achievement and utilizing the office of the principalship to help the students, to help the parents, to help the teachers understand that that was our real reason for being. As well as myself taking personal responsibility. It helped that I would really implement opportunities to listen, to share, and to again use the mantra and idea that Dodge is a high quality school of excellence, and so those were my initial strategies for seeking out change at Dodge.

Slide 4: Collecting Data from Stakeholders

Slide text: To construct a turnaround plan that addresses all the school's needs, the principal held parents-only, students-only, and teachers-only meetings to start a dialog and to elicit their ideas about what a successful school should look like.

Audio: I initially started implementing these in the summer of the year prior to beginning. One of the first things that I sought to do was to invite all the stake holders—the teachers, the parents, the students—to an Ice Cream Social. And it's there that I began a dialogue, if you will, with them to learn exactly what they wanted their school really to be about, and through those conversations—and that was the initial conversation. But we had them throughout the summer—with the parents only, with teachers only, with students only—to learn exactly what their vision of a successful school would look like.

Slide 5: Building Relationships

Slide text: The principal built strong collegial relationships with each teacher. He visited classrooms, oversaw professional development, and met with teachers to discuss ways to improve the school. Building on these relationships, the principal relied on teacher leaders to continuously emphasize the school's vision to other teachers. In this way, he gained staff support to lead the school through these dramatic changes.

Audio: Throughout the year we utilized several different mechanisms to interface with the staff. One of the things that I think was most beneficial was the interpersonal relationship that I sought to have with each teacher. At the end of the school day I spent an inordinate amount of time going around to teachers and just checking in with them, really finding out what worked and what didn't work and finding out what their struggles were and creatively finding ways that we could address areas that the school needed to improve upon. I think in addition to our one-on-one meetings, I also created teacher leaders, and we called them anchor teachers, who would provide the various different school messages that needed to go out to teachers. So they didn't just hear it from myself, but they heard it from some of their colleagues who I would meet with on a weekly basis to share the school message and the school vision and to reinforce various different situations we were trying to improve. So my idea was to help permeate it throughout the entire school and throughout the entire staff in various different ways in an effort to ensure that they heard it not just from me but from various other individuals.

Slide 6: Instructional Leadership

Slide text: As an instructional leader, the principal modeled instructional practices to teachers and created a weekly newsletter that included articles and information on instructional strategies. These steps also contributed to staff working together to improve instruction.

Audio: I also had a weekly newsletter that staff received, and that communication was not only an information tool, but it was also a professional development tool. Throughout I would have articles, or I would have various different strategies that teachers might want to utilize. And as a result I would then co-model with them different strategies. Some worked, some didn't, but again it went to implementing that public practice and not perfect practice.

Slide 7: Parental Involvement

Slide text: The principal maintained ongoing communication with families to inform them about the school challenges and to celebrate its successes. He carefully explained to parents the differences between the new school policies and procedures and the earlier policies at Dodge. In addition, the principal communicated the increased expectations for students' behavior and academic effort needed to raise student achievement.

Audio: One of the ways that I engaged the greater community is by meeting with parents bimonthly and offering them updates on exactly where we were. So as an example, we would provide them real, clear data on student disciplinary referrals. We would help them to understand exactly where we were a year ago and where we were now, and so we were celebrating the successes. I think it was also very, very important for me to, again, be very visible during dismissals; be very, very visible at various different opportunities we had throughout the year in terms of math night, reading night and to again try and portray for parents the expectation of what school really is. We spent an inordinate amount of time to this end, also, trying to educate parents on how students really have to do school. We taught many parents, for example, how it is that they are supposed to help their children to study, and so we just provided a great deal of professional development to our parents to help them understand: Why is this schooling different from what I experienced? Or why is it different than what we experienced at Dodge previously? And that spoke to my attempt to try and raise the rigor and the expectation for the entire school community on what our students could do and what they were capable of doing.

Slide 8: Leadership Results

Slide text: The strong leadership of Jarvis Sanford, the new Principal of Dodge Renaissance Academy, improved student performance and increased students' love of learning. Students now enjoy coming to a school that provides a safe, caring, and challenging environment for learning.

Audio: The number one success I think that we have been able to accomplish is our ability to help our students to, number one, enjoy school and to have a passion and a real love of learning. In many school settings where I have been previously the students did not have a desire to come to school. We've increased the attendance. We're at 94%. Our goal is 95, and while we haven't reached it, we are well on our way. I think we have helped students in terms of understanding the importance of a real education.