DOINGWHATWORKS

Using Data to Improve Instruction

Richmond Public Schools, Virginia • July 2008

Topic: Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools
Practice: Focus on Instruction

Highlights

- Using data to assess school performance—data about suspensions, attendance, and academic performance—is critical.
- This district meets with a team at each school, and reviews the data with them in order to design appropriate supports.
- District staff perform follow-up visits at least monthly, and data are used to monitor the school's progress toward its goals.

About the Site

Richmond Public Schools
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

I'm Yvonne Brandon, and most recently I was named Interim Superintendent for Richmond Public Schools.

Data and understanding data was extremely critical. We had teachers when we interviewed them and ask, "Just how do you know that your children are attaining the skills that are being taught in the classroom?" and most of the comments were, "I think," "I feel," "I saw." But it was not anything that was supported by data. So, again, we had to blend the art of teaching with the science of teaching. And understanding how data works within the science of teaching was a primary focus for us in Richmond.

We have a document called "Charting the Course," and this document pulls in a lot of data elements that we are looking for in order to help schools: attendance data, suspension data, academic data to include our benchmarks. And we give nine-week benchmarks, and some schools, based on their level of performance, were required to do more frequent benchmarks. And then we go out, once we collect the data, and review it with each school. The entire central office, with the exception of our superintendent, went out school by school, 51 visits between the end of September and the first of November. And we would spend two to three hours with school teams—those teams were made up of the principals, the APs and teachers—because most of our instructional products were developed with the support and the help and assistance of teachers. So we wanted them to make sure that they were able to talk to us about data. And in Charting the Course visits, generally we have an introductory statement, and then we turn it over to the principal and that team, and they explain the data to us. They look at it; they know how to look at trends. They can tell us what the trends indicate to them. They can help us to understand what focus they may be taking for that year, and we provide the supportive help, assistance from the central office, in those areas where they need the greatest help and where they have asked us to provide for them. It is a very, at first it was a very intense process. Of course, it wasn't comfortable for many people at the beginning. But when they understood that the reason we were having these conversations, so we could better direct the assistance that we were there to support them, it no longer became a big brother type of meeting.

Depending on the level of performance by that school, we come out at least monthly to revisit. We break

up our large team into sub-teams and assign schools to those sub teams, and we visit at least monthly. If it is a school that is in need of critical care, a top priority school, we may go as frequently as weekly. And the reports come back in many different ways. They can be from the district level. We can see it from the district level. We can see it from the school level. We can see it from the teacher level. We can look at individual students, and the teachers also have the ability to look at their classroom and individual student performance. They also are able to drill down to the actual skill that is in need of some additional support by either group of students or by an individual student.

The professional development was done, first, on how to do it, and then we did professional development on once you receive the data what to do with it— how you use it, how to analyze it—to help them to understand that the data tell a story and that that story can be interpreted in order to increase the performance of individual students as well as the entire classroom. We gave them samples of the data. We used a process of allowing them to look at some test questions and providing them with additional manipulatives and other supports that would dovetail with what this particular question was asking so that they would know that the data would show them where the skill deficits were, and these are the tools that you can use to address that. So we tied it into the overall instructional process.

We wanted to make sure that our teachers were able to understand that assessment and the data that comes from assessment are not separate issues. They have to be embedded because that's the way we drive the instruction. It has to be something that is so routine that children aren't anxious about it and teachers aren't anxious about the results. That it tells the story. It's not about pointing blame; it's about finding the issues that need the critical care and addressing those critical care issues right away rather than waiting until the end of the year, which it could have been a skill that was a building skill or scaffolding skill that caused all the rest of the instruction throughout that year to not be retained. So we try to make sure that they understand that it is a more efficient way of providing instruction and it should drive what is done in the classroom.