

# DOINGWHATWORKS



Video

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

## Building a Personalized Culture Using the Five Big Rocks

Foxfire Center for Student Success, Ohio • January 2009

Topic: Dropout Prevention

Practice: Learning Environment

### Highlights

- Foxfire High School operates according to principles known as the Five Big Rocks: Core values, Wellness, Communication, Building and Celebrating Success and Relationships, and Non-Academic Barriers.
- Foxfire High School implements a Core Value Honor Roll where students are allowed to nominate teachers who have demonstrated Foxfire's core values. Teachers also nominate students for this honor roll.
- "Curbside Coffee" and weekly postcards are two ways in which the faculty of Foxfire High School builds a relationship with the school community.

### About the Site

Foxfire Center for Student Success

Zanesville, OH

### Demographics

75% White

17% Other

9% Black

47% Free or Reduced-Price Lunch

20% Special Education

Foxfire Center for Student Success is an alternative high school in Zanesville, Ohio. It serves as a dropout recovery school for students from the local and surrounding districts.

The school provides:

- Ongoing monitoring of student interventions and immediate adjustments in these interventions if needed
- Invisible mentoring for all students
- Extensive academic supports for credit recovery through project-based learning
- Wrap-around services with an on-site community health nurse
- Small, personalized classes
- Instruction that is relevant and provides opportunities for students to work in the community

## Full Transcript

My name is Todd Whiteman. I'm the Principal here at Foxfire. Foxfire began with the five founding principles that we refer to as the Five Big Rocks. And any decision we make or evaluate is based around these five areas. They start with number one, the core values of our program. Number two: wellness, student and staff wellness. Number three is the communication process. Number four is building success, celebrating success, and building relationships, and the fifth one is the non-academic barriers that our kids face.

The typical student of Foxfire looks very similar to the following: Legal issues, in and out of jail, on probation, in and out of adult prison, juvenile detention centers. Credit deficient is a huge thing that we see when kids come through the door. They've been in school two, three years and have one to five to six credits. They deal with mental issues whether it's anger management, depression, bipolar. The majority of our students are poverty based. We utilized ten core values here, but there is one core value that stands out the most and that's of the utmost importance to our students, and that's the value of caring.

Whiteman: Warren, what'd you find out about your truck?

Warren: Nothing.

Whiteman: Nothing? Did you have the keys in it? Did they hotwire it?

Our students, a lot of times, don't understand what caring looks like and what appropriate caring is. From the staff standpoint we have to care about these kids. We have to care about them unconditionally.

Warren: They said that the two cars that caught on fire in Avondale, they think that my truck was linked to

it.

Whiteman: You're kidding me. I'm sorry to hear about that, buddy.

And most important we've got to get our students to care about themselves. A lot of our students typically say they care about their education, and I say, "Well, let me see your past record," and, "You have been absent, truant, 90% of your academic career."

Whiteman: If you're not going to be here, what should you do?

Student: Go and get work.

Whiteman: Well, how about call? That would be the first step. If you weren't going to make it to work, what would you do?

Student: Call.

The core values that we've embraced here are simply the same ones that I've utilized as a coach over the years, and they're a critical component of what we do because they hold us together. We fully believe that embracing these values, success will become a byproduct of an embracement of this. We also fully believe that during adverse times, or when we come up against failures that the core values is what will hold us together as a staff as a community and for our students.

Whiteman: Well, the concern is there still has to be some accountability. You still have to have the accountability to get there. I can get you all the jobs in the world, but you've got to go.

Student: Right.

Whiteman: Right now we're oh for three. Three strikes, you're out. I'll be over there in a few minutes, I'll talk, and if we can still continue getting in the program, great. If we can't, we're going to have to move on and look at something else, some other option.

The core values that we really focus on are honesty, commitment, teamwork—especially teamwork. We also put a huge emphasis on accountability. We fully embrace it. We have a core value honor roll that we utilize with our students and staff. And we do that every nine weeks—quarterly—and as a staff the students get to select the values that they see depicted by our staff, and on the flip side of that we depict what values are being demonstrated by each individual student.

Student: What's going on, how are you?

Whiteman: You still going to football?

Building relationships is one of the big rocks that we focus on, and it is critical in what we do in a number of ways, but one of the small things that we do is our staff is in the parking lot as students come into the building everyday to greet them. Sometimes we have a thing called a Curbside Coffee where we give coffee to the parents and the students, or hot chocolate, and it's important because for a lot of these kids this

might be the first smiling face they've seen in the day.

Another thing we do here at Foxfire is that we've embraced the concept of "Positive Postcards." Staff is required to send two postcards each week to students, and those postcards are very simple. They could have a message as simple as "You're doing a great job. Keep up the good work." One of the focuses is that with Positive Postcard there has to be one postcard out of two that is to a student who is struggling, and it could be, "I understand what's going on. I know the things at home aren't easy." Those things go a long ways. The core values have greatly impacted the culture here at Foxfire from the student standpoint and staff standpoint, but most importantly from the school standpoint. When people walk into this building they recognize and they feel the value is being embraced. They see the passion, but they also—they've clearly defined the expectations what Foxfire is about. We provide opportunities for kids, but they have to jump through some hoops and some of the hoops they have to jump through are displaying these core values.

Student: I've got my two paragraphs.

Teacher: Okay, for you scholarship applications?

Getting our kids to high school graduation is not an easy process. Obviously the big rocks and especially the core values we use as a vehicle to get them there, but that's just one vehicle that we get there. We do what is ever best for the students. We do what's best for the program, and we have to be very flexible. We have to treat each individual student as an individual.