

DOINGWHATWORKS



Video

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

Establishing a Climate for Learning

Hardy Elementary School, Tennessee • August 2008

Topic: Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools
Practice: Improved Leadership

Highlights

- One of the first things that the new principal of Hardy Elementary established was an improved school climate.
- Students were taught how to walk between classrooms in a way that promoted a safe environment.
- Struggling students received additional reading and math interventions early in the school day.
- Character education was incorporated into the school life to promote positive values.

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

Elder to students: Good Morning! How is everyone this morning? Well, great! Great!

Elder: My name is Natalie Elder. I am the principal at Hardy Elementary School in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

When I came to Hardy, my first impression of the school was not a great feeling. I was concerned about the climate of the building, and I say climate because the students were not under the control that I like for a building to be under control. It wasn't organized the way I would like for it to have been. But I saw true potential in the students, and I felt like the community deserved an opportunity to see their children at their best. So my first quest was to gain control of the building.

We sat down and met with the teachers, and we had to get them in a new mind-frame. We had to look at what were the things that were keeping our students from learning, and what was our responsibility in making sure that they were able to reach those goals. We started with the McGraw-Hill series for reading, which was adopted by our district, but what we found out—the easy book wasn't easy enough because our kids were very low. So we had to look at that. We started morning interventions for our students, we had what you call an Early Bird Reading and Math that starts at 6:30 in the morning, and parents were sending the kids in the morning. I was surprised, but it worked. 6:30 to 7:30 we have reading and math, and the teachers would come and work with the students. And the kids, it helped them get focused on just school. So when they walked in, we want them focused on school.

One thing that we did establish in our building was transitioning kids from home into the school, greeting them at the door, and I don't mean at the front door of the school. I mean at the car door. We will open the door for the parents and say good morning to the parents, and we'll tell them, "Let us have your babies for

a minute so we can enrich them.” And I’ve asked all teachers, “Always smile at parents. Let them know when they drop their kids off, they are so precious even to us.” And we’re greeting them at the door; they will come into the multipurpose room.

We have a set of teachers who work in the multipurpose room, and a lot of times we do different activities with them. They can range from doing a character ed piece, which we do every single day—we do a character ed piece in which we focus on particular trait for the month. For example, if we were doing caring, they would see a board that says, “The character ed trait for the month is caring.” After they look at the character ed trait, we have different words to go with those traits because we are still trying to increase the vocabulary. And the kids get very involved, and we do incentives for kids who come in and they really engage in that activity with us. The teachers sometimes allow the kids to come to the stage and read because we want to increase our students’ writing, but we want them to read a piece that they have written not a piece from the book. Even now and then we use textbooks, but we would like for them to read pieces to us. And we have had kids write cute short stories, and we would clap, and we would talk about the main idea so we’re still focusing on the school. The kids are just enjoying themselves because they are on the stage, they have a mic in front of them, and they are allowed to express themselves because we want them to have a voice in what they are doing. And the reason why we started that, I wanted the students to understand once you leave home everything here is about educating you, and we are going to start it from the minute you walk in the door.

Students: Good, better, best. Never let it rest. When you’re good, get better, and when you’re better, best.

Elder: Another thing we had to do was teach kids how to take ownership. One thing about poverty, kids sometimes have a tendency to be reactive. And that’s just a missing resource that they haven’t learned. Not all kids are like that, some kids. So I am not saying all kids, I want to make that clear, some kids are.

Elder to students: Let me see you traveling.

Elder: So one thing to counteract that: we travel, and I call it travel when we are moving through the halls. We are traveling, and the kids like that. And we fold our arms like this in a traveling position, and that means that they are keeping their hands and their arms to themselves. The other key thing we have to do is make sure that our top and bottom lips are touching because if they are touching, we are not talking. My expectations are high. Every single morning when we are in the multipurpose room, before we walk out of the multipurpose room, I always say to them, “We are a school of what?” And they always say excellence because I told them we are going to be excellent in everything that we do. From the moment we walk out the multipurpose room down the hallway to the moment we get into the classroom, we are going to have our paper and pencil. We are going to be ready to go to work.