

DOINGWHATWORKS



SAMPLE MATERIAL

Description of Turnaround With New Leadership

Dodge Renaissance Academy, Illinois

Topic: Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools

Practice: Improved Leadership

This document describes the overall school turnaround process for Dodge Renaissance Academy. It details the rocky start for the turnaround and the processes that the third principal put into place to remove obstacles to success and make dramatic improvements. These processes included developing a disciplined environment, building a cadre of talented teachers, and implementing standards-based instruction.

Dodge Renaissance Academy

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Principal: Jarvis Sanford

Closing and Reopening Dodge:

Dodge Renaissance Academy, serving students in kindergarten through eighth grade, was one of three buildings closed by Chicago Public Schools (CPS) for its persistently low performance. It reopened a year later in fall 2003 with a new staff and a new governance structure as part of the district's Renaissance 2010 Initiative. However, these changes did not immediately raise student achievement. Rather, the school got off to a rocky start with two principals in the first year it reopened. In fall 2004, Dodge began to make a shift with the arrival of a third principal, Jarvis Sanford. Two years later, Dodge was recognized as making the greatest gains in the state's student assessments.

The school is nestled amidst a newly gentrified neighborhood in Chicago's East Garfield Park area. Regardless of its locale, the school draws from a low-income population of nearly 100 percent African American students. The community and district had lost faith in the school when approximately 85 percent of its students were scoring below national norms in reading on standardized assessments. In 2008, 62.8 percent of its students met or exceeded proficiency levels on the state reading assessment. Essentially, the principal addressed three areas to remove obstacles to success and to make these dramatic improvements: developing a disciplined environment, building a cadre of talented teachers, and implementing standards-based instruction.

Developing a Disciplined Environment

The first goal of Principal Sanford was to establish order and an environment that fostered learning. Clear expectations for student behavior were communicated and consistently enforced with carefully spelled out consequences for infractions. Teachers expected students to walk through the school hallways in orderly lines. Although some staff resisted the regimentation, the principal felt that an orderly environment was essential for maximizing student learning time. He did not want teachers to waste valuable time getting students in order. Each day, the principal opens school by holding up his hand to signal silence and time to begin learning whether students are in the multi-purpose room or on the playground. Even at the end of the school year when it is easy to let order slide, students are expected to wear their uniforms through the last day of school. The principal believes that this

consistency must be maintained from the first day of the year through the last day. This standard is maintained for teachers as well. Jeans are not acceptable. Further, the principal serves as a role model and willingly fills in as a substitute teacher or works in the lunchroom handing out lunches. This sends a clear message that all staff must pitch in and support the overall school mission—educating students.

Building a Cadre of Talented Teachers

To build a strong staff, Principal Sanford recruits teachers who may not be fully developed but are eager to learn and willing to do whatever it takes to help students learn. Sanford seeks out teachers who want to serve students in urban schools who are at risk for low achievement. When he interviews prospective teachers, he sends the message that Dodge is not the place to work if the teacher wants to leave each day promptly at 2:30. He expects teachers to work as a team collaborating and serving the school in such roles as tutoring or coaching sports. As part of the interview process, teachers must come to the school and teach a lesson while he and several other staff members observe and then question the teachers regarding the lesson and their teaching craft.

Teachers are further supported through intensive professional development. Dodge teachers have common planning time five days a week. Since Dodge serves as a training site for a leadership academy, teachers also attend two weekly 90-minute training sessions and receive additional compensation for their time. In his second year at Dodge, the principal adjusted the schedule to create weekly meetings for teaching clusters (K-2, 3-5, and 6-8). Teachers also have the opportunity to visit their colleague's classrooms and receive coaching support.

Along with the teachers, Principal Sanford sits in all the professional development sessions to send the message that a culture that values ongoing professional development is integral to the school's success. This also allows him to understand what he sees as he conducts daily classroom walkthroughs. Over the years, professional development has transitioned from creating basic knowledge and common understandings to more targeted teacher-driven sessions tailored to individual needs.

Implementing Standards-based Instruction

Instruction in reading is based on the standards and guided by a balanced literacy approach where teachers seek to develop the basic reading skills and help students derive their own meanings from text. Teachers receive support through two literacy coaches who know this approach well. One coach supports teachers in the early grades while the second coach supports upper-grade teachers. Literacy instruction is organized as workshops that include hour-long blocks with mini-lessons followed by the application of strategies through small-

group guiding reading lessons and independent activities. After refining their craft in Reader's Workshop, teachers began to implement Writer's Workshop. Writing instruction focuses on teaching students to write extended responses.

Additionally, the staff began to focus on improving math instruction in the second year following Sanford's arrival. As part of this effort, the upper grades were departmentalized. This process took several years as the principal sought teachers who were subject area experts. A math coach helped teachers refine their ability to teach students strategies for successfully writing extended responses in math. The teachers worked together to score student work according to a rubric they developed. In this way, teachers were able to recognize weaknesses in student work and concentrate their instruction accordingly. The math coach also helped teachers align their instruction more closely to the content of the standards to ensure all students were taught what they needed to know to be successful on the state math assessment.

Moving Forward

Although Dodge has experienced significant gains in student achievement, the staff knows that there is more work to do. They are working on providing additional interventions for students who have not mastered the skills. Teacher's aides provide additional instruction for struggling students individually and in small groups.

Further, the principal sought to expand efforts to strengthen instruction and student achievement in science and social studies. He also worked with parents to teach them strategies for supporting their children's learning. Dodge is an example of a successful school turnaround but the administrators and staff still consider it a work in progress and know that they have room for further improvement and continue to work tirelessly toward even greater student achievement gains.