

DOINGWHATWORKS



Audio

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

A District Strategy to Improve Nine Struggling Schools

Hamilton County Schools, Tennessee • August 2008

Topic: Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools

Practice: Committed Staff

Highlights

- This district “reconstituted” its teaching staff to improve quality of instruction.
- Principals chose which teachers to keep based on commitment and ability.
- Test scores immediately went up; this process combined with professional development has resulted in continuing score increases for the last eight years.

About the Site

Hamilton County Schools

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

I am Ray Swoffard, Deputy Superintendent for Campus Support, Hamilton County Schools. In 1999, the state identified low-end performing schools, and Chattanooga as the community was shocked to find out that nine of the lowest 20 were in Chattanooga. So at that particular time a foundation, the Benwood Foundation, stepped forward with a \$5 million grant to support the schools.

In the fall of 1999, it was decided that teacher quality was an issue and it would be in the best interest of all for us to reconstitute the nine Benwood schools. So, principals observed to determine the quality of the teacher in each individual school, and in the spring of 2000, principals were allowed to select the quality teachers to stay in those schools.

The component that made this a success is the fact that we worked closely with our union, the HCEA. All teachers were notified of the dates and timelines involved in the reconstitution, and teachers had the option of saying that they wanted to opt out or transfer out or if they requested to stay in, although the principal had the final decision on the list of teachers that would remain in each individual school. All teachers that opted to remain in the school had a structured interview with individual principals, and I think what principals were looking for was not only commitment, but content and the ability to deliver. I think most teachers took it on a positive note, and, in fact, those that were leaving felt like a new environment or atmosphere might be beneficial to their career.

When you improve teacher quality, your test scores automatically spike up. We had improved test scores the first year of this project and I think with the staff development opportunities that we have afforded our teachers, we have had improved test scores in these nine schools for the last eight years.

During the reconstitution process, the district learned that we had to have strong leaders in the school before reconstitution. I guess reconstitution served as a driver for the district to create an urban leadership academy, and our focus in the urban academy was to develop leaders, first of all, that had an instructional background. That was number one—that you could actually go in a classroom and identify good instruction. We wanted leaders with courage that was going to do the right thing for kids no matter what.