

Fairfield Court Elementary School

2510 Phaup St.

Richmond, VA 23223

Principal: Dr. Irene Williams

Located across the street from a housing project in the mid-sized southern city of Richmond, Fairfield Court Elementary School serves a highly disadvantaged population. The average family income is under \$10,000, only 30% of the parents have high school diplomas, and the school is in the highest crime area in the city. Yet, in

just three years, Fairfield Court moved student achievement from pass rates of zero on some tests (such as history and science in fifth grade) to pass rates of 84-99% on all Virginia Standards of Learning tests. Although the school clearly achieved turnaround in three years, it continued to improve in the fourth year of reform when the rates of students passing English, Math, History, and Science tests were 93-100%. During turnaround, Fairfield Court continued to work with the same student population. However, led by a new and dynamic turnaround principal, staff and students changed their expectations for what they could accomplish. To help staff and students meet these high expectations, the principal focused on building staff unified by a common mission and motivated to work hard towards their goals, improving instruction with the use of data and extra instructional time, and actively involving the community in supporting the students. Richmond City Schools was actively involved in improving schools across the district. The district developed a system for collecting, organizing, analyzing, and using data on student learning and worked closely with schools to use these data in changing instruction. The district worked especially closely with the most challenged schools, such as Fairfield Court.

- ◆ Elementary (K-5)
- ◆ 99% Black
- ◆ 97% Free or Reduced-Price Lunch
- ◆ 20% Special Education
- ◆ 3% English Language Learners

Building Committed Staff

The principal set and modeled high expectations for staff and for students, and provided staff the support they needed. Although there were a few staff changes, the principal worked with the existing staff to create a vision statement and mission statement, and reminds them of these commitments in her weekly staff newsletters.

Vision: To create the ultimate learning environment where students, staff, parents, community, and educational partners work together to build competent, skillful, lifelong learners.

Mission: To provide an academically rich, nurturing environment that educates the whole child through collaboration with parents, staff, community, and educational partners.

Teamwork is an essential part of how Fairfield Court operates. The teachers meet in grade-level teams to analyze data, collaboratively develop lesson plans, and discuss specific instructional needs. The principal believes that by openly discussing teachers' accomplishments and problems in these team meetings and by posting class test results in the hallways, an environment is created in which teachers want to learn from each other and feel some accountability to perform well.

The principal praised staff accomplishments frequently and visibly. She also noted areas for improving. For example, she provided "Kudos" to staff who have done something exceptionally well in her weekly newsletters and over the intercom. For example, she announced to the school that Ms. Jones had all of her students working on task on a recent classroom visit. Staff offer "drops in the bucket," where teachers note what other teachers have done well. The principal also conveys—publicly—where teachers need to improve. For example, she distributes a weekly "time-on-task" log to all teachers, sharing observations about how focused and productive each class was on her frequent, unscheduled classroom visits—and names the teachers in the log. She notes that this motivates teachers to do their best every day.

The principal expects staff to work hard, and models that. She works late in the evenings and most Saturdays, and points out that she is never alone—other teachers follow her example. Most weekends, she gets calls at home from teachers who want access to the building to work.

The principal provides teachers substantial support to help them meet high expectations. She asks the teachers, individually, what they need to accomplish their job. She solicits and uses additional resources to support the teachers. She arranges for professional development that helps teachers build skills and a sense of community. For example, more than half of the teachers participate in a professional book club, in which they read and discuss a research book on education for each session. The principal supplements this with brief reviews of relevant professional articles or books in her weekly newsletters. The teachers participate in summer staff retreats, which include team-building activities. These opportunities are in addition to the more traditional menu of classes, grant-related training, district professional development, university-sponsored institutes, and other similar professional development.

According to the principal, not all teachers at Fairfield Court agreed with the vision for the school or were prepared to put forth the hard work required to make it a reality. Some teachers left in the first years of the turnaround effort. In hiring new teachers, the principal is quite explicit in her description of the challenge and her expectations for staff. She feels that this clarity helps ensure that teachers who accept positions at Fairfield Court are committed to improving the school. She also has substantial community support to attract the most qualified teachers. For example, local banks provided loans to teachers for cars and local supermarkets gave teachers discounts. In recent years, teacher turnover has been quite low, suggesting that most teachers are committed to the school's vision.

Using Data and Additional Time to Improve Instruction

The principal set the goal of having the school fully accredited within a year, which required dramatic improvement in test scores. Two primary strategies to achieve this were to collect and analyze data to identify gaps in learning and then to provide additional instructional time.

The school is an active participant in the district's data use initiative. Richmond City Schools developed Charting the Course, in which schools (and the central data office) record data such as test scores, pass and graduation rates, disciplinary action rates, dropout rates, and other data that might help staff understand the strengths and needs of each school. At the beginning of the year, a district team met with each school for several hours to go over the data and discuss the implications. The district team follows up with regular meetings with school staff—weekly for the schools with the greatest challenges and quarterly for schools that are doing well. The district also provides professional development on interpreting and using the data, with a special emphasis on how to improve classroom instruction in response to problems identified in the data.

Fairfield Court has taken to the data use initiative enthusiastically. The principal reviews the data and talks with each team weekly. The staff meets in grade-level teams to discuss the data and implications for instruction. Coaches work with teachers to help them make changes in their instruction based on the data. The school continues to collect, analyze, and apply data on a weekly basis, long after the test scores had risen and the districts' expectations were for less frequent analysis.

To bring students' learning up to state standards, teachers needed to reteach some skills even as they continued to teach new skills each week. There was not enough time in the regular school day. Therefore, Fairfield Court extended the school day and instituted a Saturday Academy. These programs help meet the needs of students for additional academic support as well as the needs of parents for adequate child care for their children. Consequently, most students participated in the programs. The principal also ensures that school time is focused on academics, adding 30 minutes of reading time per day and instituting time-on-task checks during school opening, midday, and at the end of the school day.

Involving the Community

Fairfield Court called upon the support of business, community, and faith-based partners in its turnaround effort. For example, a program called Keeping Kids Warm donated coats to every student in the school. The principal negotiated with the district and other partners to ensure that the food brought to the school would be healthy and not include junk food and that there was an extra meal provided in the extended day program. By addressing nonacademic needs such as clothing and food, the school was better able to focus time at school on academics.

Moving Forward

Fairfield Court has met its goal—it is fully accredited, and test scores are consistently high. According to district interim officials, based on test scores, Fairfield Court is indistinguishable from Richmond's high-resource boutique schools. However, as the principal points out, this is not a one-time effort. The students who enter the school every year continue to be highly disadvantaged and need substantial support to reach the standards set by the school. The principal is working to maintain the level of funding and effort necessary for the programs that have made a difference—extended day, Saturday Academy, professional development, time for data analysis, etc.—so that Fairfield Court students can continue to achieve at high levels.

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