

Hardy Elementary School

2100 Glass St.

Chattanooga, TN 37406

Principal: Natalie Elder

Hardy Elementary School is located in Hamilton County Public Schools district, Chattanooga, Tennessee. It is an inner-city school serving a student population that is nearly 100% African American as well as 100% low-income. In 1999, Hardy was a deeply troubled school, ranking the worst in the state out of 860 schools based on the Tennessee Value Added Assessment System (TVAAS). Its aging and decrepit building was surrounded by housing projects where most of its students lived. At that time, teachers were embarrassed to say they taught at the school. Today, Hardy Elementary School is located in a sparkling new building where student work is prominently displayed and teachers and students are proud to say they teach at and attend this school. Everyone connected to Hardy refers to it as a “School of Excellence.” In 2008, Hardy was ranked as the top elementary school in the state on the TVAAS.

- ◆ Elementary (Pre-K-5)
- ◆ 97% Black
- ◆ 100% Free or Reduced-Price Lunch

Recognizing the Problem

At the same time that the news regarding Hardy’s low performance was released, the Benwood Foundation, a philanthropic organization in Chattanooga, identified education as one of the greatest community challenges in Chattanooga. Given the foundation’s interest in improving education in Chattanooga, its leaders worked with the superintendent of Hamilton County Public Schools to create a plan to eliminate the district’s lowest-performing schools, including Hardy. The district reconstituted its nine lowest-performing schools, obtained funding to develop teachers leaders and train principals, and adjusted district regulations and provided additional support to give greater latitude to those nine principals so that they could make dramatic changes. The community was poised for change. Coupled with the Public Education Foundation’s mission to improve the district’s schools and the Benwood Foundation, the two organizations partnered with the school district to create the Benwood Initiative. The initiative’s goals were to improve literacy instruction and teacher effectiveness in seven low-performing schools in the district.

Initiating Change

In spring 2001, the district leadership chose a new principal for Hardy, Natalie Elder. The district wanted a strong, young leader with high energy who could build a team, provide a strong instructional background, and connect to the community in order to transform Hardy. Prior to taking on the principalship in fall 2002, Ms. Elder visited the “old” Hardy and was dismayed to find chaos and poor instruction throughout the building. She immediately asked that the staff be reconstituted. To that end, the new principal carefully chose a new staff to start the 2002-03 school year. All teachers at

Hardy had to reapply and interview for their jobs. When Hardy moved into its new building, it also began with a new vision and new staff. The principal brought five teachers with her from her former school, selected 12 teachers from those that reapplied for their jobs, and scoured the pool of teachers to find the best ones to complete her staff.

With a new staff in place, the administration and teachers bonded together and laid out their plans to improve instruction and raise student achievement in a three-day summer retreat. The principal set high expectations for her staff, clearly communicated those expectations, and provided the staff with the resources they needed to meet those expectations. Resources included targeted professional development to establish a schoolwide set of instructional strategies, a clearly articulated lesson plan structure, a balanced literacy program, and the regular use of student assessment data that included monitoring and adjusting instruction based on a careful analysis of data.

Building a School Culture

There were several immediate changes when the new school opened in fall 2002 that surprised the community and students. In prior years, students roamed the halls and were generally out of control. Parents would barge into the school unannounced, loudly voiced their complaints, and regularly interrupted classes. The principal knew that she had to immediately establish order. She implemented a behavior program for parents and students. Parents were taught to respect the building as an institution of learning. Teachers filled out daily behavior sheets that parents had to sign and return. Behavior charts began to be displayed in all classrooms.

As parents dropped students off each morning, the principal recognized the need to establish an atmosphere that allowed students to transition from their home environment to focus their attention to learning. Thus, the morning assembly was started. Each morning all students and teachers would assemble in the gymnasium and engage in short character education lessons. Then they would turn, arms crossed in front of them, and move in absolute silence to their classrooms.

At the same time, teachers were grouped into teams for planning and developing a coherent instructional program. An outside consultant worked side-by-side in classrooms with teachers for eight weeks each year for three years to improve literacy instruction. Teachers began to meet weekly, developed curriculum maps and pacing guides, and communicated closely with the administration to share their areas of concern. Teachers were held accountable through their lesson plans; they were required to turn them in weekly. The principal meticulously reviewed them and then looked for the instructional activities outlined in the plans as she did her daily “walkthroughs.” The teachers bonded as a team out to accomplish a common mission—teach students and raise student achievement.

Sustaining Improvement

Once Hardy was on the road to improvement, the principal initiated further strategies to sustain and build upon the initial improvements. For example, the principal led the staff in making community connections. Teachers made home visits and learned about the culture of poverty to better understand their students. They learned to translate the abstract concept that all children can learn into actual practices that demonstrated that belief.

To promote professional development, two model classrooms were established where teachers can observe master teachers and receive coaching. As well, during summers, teachers attend professional development and the staff continues to gather for retreats. To increase academic instructional time, additional time was scheduled for intercessions, a Saturday writing academy, and the Early Bird Program for before-school tutoring. Although students are not required to attend the intercessions, 98% of the students participated. The intercessions provide opportunities for enrichment and intervention support. They take place three times each school year during the breaks in the year-round schedule. Further, 100 students attended the Saturday writing academy week after week. Students at Hardy are now eager to learn and view the school as an inviting place to be.

Hardy's turnaround effort involved strong leadership, strong instructional staff supported by coaches and mentors, building of community, and high expectations. Together with district and foundation support, Hardy has become a "School of Excellence."

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