

Excellent Not Average: The Hardy Elementary Experience

The motto at Hardy Elementary School is, “Excellent Not Average”. This motto is indicative of my philosophy as a principal of a southern urban elementary school with a predominately working class and poor student body. The majority of my students are African American with the remaining minority composed of Asian and White pupils. The majority of my students confront the challenges of being disadvantaged and in most cases lacking the means to acquire adequate out of school support for the pursuit of intellectual activities. They also face the challenge of not having receptive or expressive language skills. Sixty five percent of the kindergartners enter school with some notable academic deficiencies. Given this context, the Hardy Elementary experience is characterized as one that presents a number of challenges as a result of social inequality in American life. While it is the responsibility of schools to provide an education, it becomes extremely difficult when your student body lacks an adequate educational support system in the immediate home and community. While the challenge may seem formidable, I have developed a philosophy and set of pedagogies that have been successfully applied and shown results in these children’s overall academic achievement. As I will allude to further in this testimony, I have been very successful in my efforts to create a school of excellence.

My career in education has spanned twenty-seven years. I have been a teacher, assistant principal and a principal primarily in the elementary school setting. I became principal of Hardy Elementary School in the summer of 2001. It was a challenge. After reviewing the data of the school, I felt discouraged, fearful and even apprehensive in my ability to move the school to academic success. Hardy Elementary School was identified

by the State of Tennessee as the lowest-performing school not only in the district, but in the entire state. The reading and writing scores faltered at fifteen percent, while the math scores were flat lining around ten percent.

The mentality or state of mind of the teachers was defeated and unmotivated to the challenges of academic success for the students. The norm for the teachers was a daily public reminder that they were “low performers” either by the media or upper administrative management. The students were accustomed to working in an environment of chaos that was not conducive for learning. It began as a dysfunctional learning community; however, unaware it was on the verge of a cosmetic change.

We were in a state of urgency and everyone was held accountable. With the support of Karen Hollis, my assistant principal, we reconstituted the staff in our quandary for high quality teachers. We were in search for highly effective teachers whose methodology consists of “thinking out the box,” which was the catalyst for academic improvement. Secondly, we had to develop a school-wide code of acceptable behavior in our transition within and outside of the classrooms. The mind-set of how we viewed ourselves, students, parents and the community was pivotal in reaching our goal of “excellent not average”.

Student disruptive behavior in the classroom was not tolerated. Students understood that their classmates, based on the constitution, were entitled to a free education and the staff would no longer allow them to infringe upon other students’ rights to achieve a high quality education. If those rights were violated, students were immediately removed from the classroom and placed in an intensive environment (in-

school suspension) for retooling their behavior, but continuously focusing on their class work.

It was imperative to invest in effective teaching to ensure the teachers were knowledgeable of their content, savvy in their deliverance and maintained a disposition of professionalism and respect for the people they were serving. Although we were confronted with a plethora of challenges, it was clearly understood that we would all sail together or sink together. We decided to sail.

As a professional learning community, we developed a clear vision, reviewed data continuously, built strong leadership teams, and invested in professional development that was purposeful and focused. We incorporated a two-hour literacy block that consisted of the five building blocks of reading (phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, comprehension, and fluency). The teaching strategies reflected guided reading and writing (small group instruction), shared reading and writing, read alouds, and individual reading and writing. The teachers modeled and shared new comprehension skills (utilizing the seven keys to comprehension), reading strategies, and working with words strategies. Six Trait Plus One Writing was integrated into the literacy block to ensure the students were able to develop ideas, organization, voice, word choice, fluency and conventions throughout the writing process.

Class-reorganized data (data organized by current classroom) served as a catalyst to identifying strengths and weaknesses by student, class, and performance indicators. The disaggregation of the data illustrated patterns and trends of the percentage of students scoring proficient/advanced in reading and math. It also revealed losses or gains based

on adequate yearly progress. The teachers administered quarterly formative assessments. Teachers used these results to group and re-group students based on the students' need.

Strong leadership teams were developed to provide support for novice and veteran teachers. The role of the grade level chairs increased by holding them accountable for productive and focused meetings on student performance. Extensive leadership training was provided and professional learning communities were developed. Grade level teams conducted meetings that were purposeful and focused. Teachers' discourse was horizontal and vertical to make certain there were no gaps within the curriculum. Quality professional development replaced housekeeping faculty meetings. High-quality professional development influences students learning. The most important person in the classroom is the one that stands in front of children. Quality professional development focuses on individual, collegial and organizational improvements. It also reduces teacher turnover and eliminates complacency.

Hardy Elementary School's stance on "Excellence Not Average" has a 360 degree attitude towards high performance that permeates our culture daily. In a climate of a strong nurturing family atmosphere, we challenge one another and strive to foster a productive and positive thriving environment. We profit from a strong professional staff with a set of enacted principles, where we walk the talk and hold all accountable. The strong collaboration, shared decision making, disaggregation of data for all core subjects and professional development have all served as the catalysts for our academic gains. Our primary focus is to seek the best interest of the child and we strategically use every available resource to facilitate success.

Although Hardy has made significant gains throughout the past eight years, we recognize there is still a great need for improvement in the areas of reading/language arts, and especially math. Due to our recent disappointment of not making AYP with a target in math, as a professional learning community we have set into motion an effective plan to counteract our loss. Teachers will conduct one-on-one conferences with all students allowing them to take ownership to the learning process. The teachers will review last year's test scores with the student deliberating on the process that will be used to assist the students in reaching their goal. This conference will provide valuable information and identify students who need extra support.

Grades K-2 will continue a 1 ½ hour math block. Teachers will utilize journals, Skill Links, Home Links, Math Masters, EveryDay Math Games, supplemental lessons and the assessment assistant. Teachers will bring journals to their weekly grade level meetings to ensure close proximity to the EDM pacing guide. The administrator will provide feedback to the teachers to determine student mastery. Grades 3-5 will follow the same procedure, however the math will be an one hour block. The students will have an additional thirty minute math block at the end of each day. The students will be taught two skills a week and at the end of the week an assessment will to used to determine student mastery. Interventionists will be an additive for grades 3 and 4. They will assist students in the classroom who were targeted based on the State test, occasionally with the option to work with them in a small group setting. They will employ various assessments such as Think Link Learning, Star Math, EDM Assessment Assistant, Accelerated Math, and FASTTMath. Study Island and Think Link probes will provide daily practice for the students. Hardy's 212 Degree Math Challenge Program for Parents will be an essential

component for increasing the level of urgency for our students in math. The parents and students will be engaged in a mathematical process to guarantee students are skillful solvers of a wide range of math problems. This program will be available to parents and students every Monday evening.

Hardy Elementary School's vision of developing a community of lifelong learners, creative and abstract thinkers, fluent readers, creative writers with involved and supportive stakeholders is built on the premise that all students deserve to be surrounded by high performing teachers and provided an effective support staff, who believe that all students are capable of learning and achieving at high levels. As palpable throughout this plan, communication, collaboration and shared decision making includes all stakeholders and is applicable to providing a safe, caring environment conducive to a continuous process of high student performance.