

Creating a Culture of Instructional Excellence

School Profile

Metro Status: Suburban

Total Enrollment: 817

**Eligible for Free or
Reduced Lunch:** 58%

Graduation Rate: 100%

ELL Students: 91

Special Ed Students: 178

Attendance Rate: 97%

“[The Rigor/Relevance Framework] felt right, it seemed to fit where we needed to go and it was the framework, it was the road map that we needed at that time.”

GOALS

- Develop strong community of high expectations by building student-staff relationships to re-engage the student population and shift school climate.
- Build system-wide commitment to students through programs, interventions, inclusion, and accountability to put student success at the forefront of the district’s priorities.
- Prioritize instruction in order to fully implement the Common Core and ensure both students and teachers are prepared for the higher standards and application-based assessments.

CHALLENGES

The focus of the staff and administration in Colonial School District was on organizational management. At George Read Middle School, things were so bad that families were making up addresses to get out. Students were disengaged, disciplinary referrals were increasing, and teachers were showing up, doing their jobs and leaving at the end of the school day. This was present at many of the other schools within the district as well. With a new superintendent at the helm, Colonial School District knew it was time to start fresh by shifting the focus in the district from management to instruction.

When Lori Duerr joined the district as Manager of School Improvement she was determined to bring innovation, change, and school improvement to Colonial Schools. Having attended a Model Schools Conference, Lori was already familiar with Bill Daggett, the Rigor Relevance Framework, and with the incredible work that had taken place under Sue Szachowicz’s leadership at Brockton High School. When she got to Colonial, one of her first orders of business was sending a group of teachers and administrators on a trip to Brockton High School to see rigor and relevance – and Principal Sue Szachowicz – in action. After this eye-opening trip, the team came together, invigorated, focused, and motivated to institute change. “As simple as this might sound, the rigor, relevance, and relationships just felt right, even if we didn’t know the depth of what all that meant yet,” said Lori Duerr.

Superintendent Dr. Dorothy Linn made relationships a priority, sending teachers to the Model Schools Conference and then tapping them as teacher leaders to enhance professional development toward new relationship goals. A second visit to the Model Schools Conference with a bigger cohort including school board members increased the momentum, shifting the climate at many of its schools –especially George Read Middle School -- and increasing student achievement along the way.

“One of the first things we learned is that you have to focus on the relationships before you can have students focus on the rigor. Without relationships the kids won’t work for you.”

SOLUTION

■ Move from a market economy (Positive Behavior System) to an inclusive community

The staff at George Read knew that they first needed to shift the climate in their school to have any impact on learner engagement and student achievement. However, it wasn’t until the administration and two teacher leaders attended their first Model Schools Conference (MSC) that they had the tools to tackle their relationship problems.

MSC attendees walked away from the conference with the knowledge to provide opportunities for students to make choices, to define how to teach new functional behaviors, to allow options for increasing inclusion, and to support staff training needs. The result was an unrelenting focus on creating an all-inclusive community in which students became active stakeholders within the school community. “We found that positive inclusion was more of a motivator for our students. Several of the students excluded from activities had never had the opportunity to attend any events in the past and, therefore, the student did not know what they were missing. Including everyone has led to behavioral improvements.” Holly Sage, Principal, George Read. Improvements in learner engagement and student achievement at George Read directly correlate to improvements in relationships between staff and students.

■ Collaborative grade-level meetings, implementation of high-impact instructional strategies, and the development of a common academic language

With the help of the International Center for Leadership in Education (ICLE), stakeholders throughout the district spent countless hours prioritizing, organizing, and sequencing learning during the summer, which helped the teachers focus on data and modifications to lessons during the school year. Together, they developed a common language and common goals, so everyone was focused on the same objectives.

ICLE partnered with school and district leaders to conduct needs assessments and strategic planning. The first step in executing upon that plan was providing deep, hands-on professional learning experiences for all staff – focused on developing instructional strategies focused on Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships. After introducing these strategies and providing the opportunity to practice them in the classroom, building leaders monitored their use and clearly articulated what they were expected. The utilization of graphic organizers, the implementation of higher-order thinking questions are now utilized in every lesson at George Read. Additionally, extended thinking activities were added to every unit and collaborative pairing was added to every period along with multiple check-ins for understanding per period.

■ Implement an intervention program, which includes acceleration and remediation, and have all stakeholders be accountable when it comes to making choices

Staff members are given autonomy to implement programs that best meet the needs of individual students rather than using cookie cutter approaches. In addition, students are always asked, “Why did you make that choice?” during conversations regarding behavior, forcing them to take ownership of their actions and brainstorm alternative behaviors.

By implementing a policy that will not allow students to earn a zero on assignments, teachers are given assurance that students will be held accountable for completing assignments, projects, and assessments. The policy is further enforced and supported by “working lunches” and Z-days, which allow the 30-minute remediation time to be used as a reward for students who have completed all tasks.

ICLE worked with Colonial Schools to help refine climate culture so that students had behavioral models and understandings of expectations. At George Read Middle School, their shift to a school-wide positive climate approach made a huge difference in behavior successes.

■ Matching the current curriculum to the new Common Core State Standards and developing Next Generation Assessments

In grade level content meetings within the district, teachers collaborated to create an outline for each unit, which included the overall goal of the unit, the goal of each lesson, essential vocabulary, and skills necessary to reach each goal. Both students and teachers use these outlines during the planning and teaching of each lesson.



Instructional planning, an emphasis on relationships, and the sharing of data with students were main contributors to this increase. With online, computer-based assessment tests, teachers are able to access fall test scores and share that information with students, providing a talking point for discussions and enabling student goal setting.

The district has worked with ICLE to provide guidance to all schools to enable the creation of Professional Learning Communities and School Based teams that discuss current formative and summative student assessment data, ensuring that all stakeholders are present in problem-solving instructional strategies and scaffolding or appropriate supports are built in for students with special needs. By pulling together teachers and Education Diagnosticians for constructing common rubrics with defined levels of support for students with disabilities, ICLE helped Colonial Schools provide clarity and consistency in student expectations.

SUCCESS!

After completing a two-year partnership with ICLE, Holly Sage, principal at George Read Middle School says her school “has set up a positive atmosphere and has a formula of team building and collaboration that will enable us to take on the challenges of the Common Core Curriculum and continue to show growth and success.”

According to the WE Surveys provided by ICLE, 79 percent of her staff feels as though students can discuss academic problems and concerns with them and 81 percent of students feel as though teachers help them. The number of sixth grade referrals dropped from 1,038 to 741. Comparing those students from sixth grade to seventh grade, the number of referrals reduced by 404.

Colonial Schools have noted that more students are eager to come to class, are ready to learn, and are enthusiastic about being at school overall. The pride students and staff have in their school has grown and prospered. Students have started to develop a positive identification with their school, their peers, and staff members. This positive identification has given many students the confidence boost necessary to excel in other areas of their lives and academics as well.

