Restoring Hope

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Restoring Hope

Abstract
In 2003, Dr. Freddie Thomas Middle School in Rochester, New York, was in serious trouble. In 2000, it had been labeled a “school under registration review” by the New York State Education Department and was under a directive to make significant progress or face serious consequences. Three years later in 2003, only 3% of eighth-grade students were meeting state standards in mathematics and only 9% in English language arts. The school climate was no better. There was little sense of order, and 911 calls were an everyday occurrence. The middle school had opened in 1995 with much fanfare. It was one of the new schools built with such hope in an area of extreme poverty in Rochester. After only a few years of this hopeful opening, however, the school was threatened to be closed. Within the first five years, three different principals were appointed to Thomas. The frequent changes in leadership did not allow for a consistent instructional vision or clear procedures for keeping order in the building. After only two years, three-fourths of the staff had to be replaced because of transfers out of the school and increasing enrollment. Many of the new hires were inexperienced first-year teachers. Within that environment of stress and disorder, there was confusion about roles and responsibilities and an inability to see beyond the immediate difficulties. Most painful was the lack of hope on students’ faces as they entered each day. The few students who arrived on time coped by beginning each day with their heads down and hoodies up, making no eye contact with anyone. Today, Thomas is ranked in the top third of high schools in Rochester. Student achievement in mathematics and English language arts has risen substantially. Currently, no students have scored at the lowest level in these core areas. Thomas made adequate yearly progress in English language arts this year and, just as significant, has seen a considerable decrease in student suspensions during the last six years. This article describes how a focused and purposeful emphasis on connecting people, instructional practice, and a strong sense of community in three distinct areas—systems, culture, and instruction—turned a school without hope into an education dream.

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In 2003, Dr. Freddie Thomas Middle School in Rochester, NY, was in serious trouble. In 2000, it had been labeled a "school under registration review" by the NY State Education Department and was under a directive to make significant progress or face serious consequences. Three years later in 2003, only 3% of eighth-grade students were meeting state standards in mathematics and only 9% in English language arts. The school climate was no better. There was little sense of order, and 911 calls were an everyday occurrence.

The middle school had opened in 1995 with much fanfare. It was one of the new schools built with such hope in an area of extreme poverty in Rochester. The school was named in memory of Dr. Freddie L. Thomas, a Rochester resident who kept a chalkboard in his home to tutor high school dropouts while urging them to return to school. After only a few years of this hopeful opening, however, the school was threatened to be closed.

Within the first five years, three different principals were appointed to Thomas. The frequent changes in leadership did not allow for a consistent instructional vision or clear procedures for keeping order in the building. After only two years, three-fourths of the staff had to be replaced because of transfers out of the school and increasing enrollment. Many of the new hires were inexperienced first-year teachers.

Within that environment of stress and disorder, there was confusion about roles and responsibilities and an inability to see beyond the immediate difficulties. Most painful was the lack of hope on students' faces as they entered each day. The few students who arrived on time coped by beginning each day with their heads down and hoodies up, making no eye contact with anyone.

The severity of the NY State Education Department citation prompted the school district to reconfigure and "grow out" the middle school to grades 7-12.

Fast forward to summer 2009, a mere six years later. The principal of Dr. Freddie Thomas High School and a representative team of teachers and administrators are on stage at the Teachers College of Columbia University receiving the Panasonic National School Change Award. To receive this award, the school provided evidence of significant change in attitudes, beliefs, and values; instructional practices; achievement; stakeholder perceptions;
Today, Thomas is ranked in the top third of high schools in Rochester. Student achievement in mathematics and English language arts has risen substantially. Currently, no students have scored at the lowest level in these core areas. Thomas made adequate yearly progress in English language arts this year and, just as significant, has seen a considerable decrease in student suspensions during the last six years.

What combination of forces came together to turn a school without hope into an education dream? It took a focused and purposeful emphasis on connecting people, instructional practice, and a strong sense of community in three distinct areas: systems, culture, and instruction.

**Systems**
The systems that were in place in 2003 were scattered and piecemeal. The school had little direction. One of the first systems the then-new principal put in place was a different routine for beginning a student’s day. Every morning, a team of adults gathered at the main entrance to greet each student with kind words and warm smiles. “At first, the students looked at us like we were crazy when we said good morning, but by spring, the kids were responding, and if an adult was absent, they noticed,” recalled one administrator. This simple change served two purposes: First, it created a welcoming environment. Second, it established a safe and orderly entrance every morning. As the team of adults welcomed them, students walked through a security scanner to ensure safety in the school.

The second major systems change was the transition to a meaningful and cohesive schedule that incorporated semester block scheduling. Before this change, students were on a Day I/Day 2 schedule. In most cases, students had one teacher on Day I for English language arts and a second teacher on Day 2 for English language arts intervention. It was confusing and unaligned. In addition, there was a 30-minute unstructured homeroom period at the beginning of the school day that students purposely avoided, leading them to arrive late to school.

Under the direction of the principal and with the unanimous approval of the faculty, the Day I/Day 2 schedule was replaced with a semester block schedule in January 2004. Students were enrolled in four 85-minute blocks each semester so that they could focus on four courses rather than the typical eight. In a school where very few students were meeting standards, the new schedule enabled students to retake required courses for credit in a timely and helpful way.

Another benefit of the block schedule was that it reduced passing times between classes. Instead of transitioning every 42 minutes, the students changed locations only three times a day. That resulted in dramatic and positive changes to the order and the security of the school, which was key to restoring hope to the young men and women who rightfully expected more from the adults around them.

With the introduction of a new schedule, the unstructured homeroom time at the beginning...
of the day was eliminated and folded into the instructional blocks for a more effective use of time and teacher effort. This additional instructional time was woefully needed at a school where so few students were meeting state standards. In addition, the introduction of the new schedule provided consistency in core subject areas, bringing continuity and focus to mathematics and English language arts.

A third system was introduced with the support of central office administrators. Because the school was much too familiar to police officers, the principal successfully petitioned for internal and external security cameras. When discipline problems occurred, administrators were better able to mediate and settle disputes with students and their families because the captured video allowed all parties to know precisely what transpired. This gave immediate credibility to the code of conduct and restored order for students and staff members.

New methods were also employed to improve student discipline and engagement. The principal added five school counselors, increasing their number from three to eight. She enlisted the support of local ministers, who volunteered in the school cafeteria and after school. She also added a home/school assistant who worked with previously suspended students to transition them back to the classroom with counseling and support. The home/school assistant also instituted “kitchen table time” to immediately engage the parents of suspended students by visiting their homes and discussing strategies for the students’ personal and school success.

Culture
Eck and Goodwin (2010) stressed the importance of school culture: “Such intangibles as school climate and culture likely have as much (if not more) influence on student achievement than the school’s physical assets, such as the number of books in its library, computers per student or student teacher ratio” (p. 25). Anyone who has spent time on the Thomas campus can attest to the importance of culture in the transformation of the school.

Beginning with the morning greeting, the leadership team at Thomas established a consistent message of kindness, connection, and safety. Creating a sense of community was important in a school where confusion and conflict had reigned. As a result of increased trust, students began making eye contact, smiling, even saying good morning to teachers and administrators in return. Attendance improved and tardiness was no longer the daily problem it had been.

Many trust-building strategies were implemented. One novel strategy involved senior students. Each senior was “adopted” by his or her favorite faculty or staff member. Families then received a certificate from the school announcing which staff member would be “adopting” their son or daughter during the school day to support his or her success and ensure his or her graduation. The semester block schedule also enabled teachers to spend longer periods of time with students and have smaller caseloads each semester. This, combined with coteaching models in mathematics and English language arts, resulted in greater personalization of instruction and more targeted attention to students (Conderman, Bresnahan, & Pedersen, 2009).

School leaders infused a “hidden curriculum”—an array of celebrations, rituals, and routines—into the schedule to empower and embrace students, staff members, and families. To create a common identity, the principal began “branding” the school. Signage inside and outside reinforced the school’s identity through colors, symbols, and sayings; new lockers were even ordered to match school colors. Fridays became a time for all students and staff
members to wear clothing that displayed the school logo. This created a sense of belonging and common identity. From that point forward, students received a branded item each year—such as book bags, flash drives, water bottles, and various themed T-shirts—to remind them of their connection with their school.

As part of the culture-building effort, every school year starts with an opening day celebration for staff members and culminates in taking a "family" portrait with every staff member wearing a school shirt. There are also regular celebrations to mark individual achievements and special events—for example, teachers and administrators serve cake, ice cream, and milk to every student to celebrate the principal’s birthday. Every June, the entire staff and student community come together at a school picnic to celebrate another successful school year. These and other activities shape classroom, athletic, and club experiences for the school community. Staff members and older students become role models for younger students and orient new students to the school.

A common narrative and history is another important element in building community. New members of the school staff are told about the school's history and its resurgence. Retelling the stories gives new members a context for the spirited community and strengthens the bonds of people who grew together through the turnaround. And although the narrative focuses on the past, it also includes current successes to motivate and inspire ongoing change. As one teacher put it, "By celebrating what we overcame we realize how much more we can and must accomplish."

**Instruction**

Because of the severe achievement gap at the school, many steps were taken to intensify instruction and introduce proven practices. The first step was to provide immediate academic leadership in mathematics and English language arts, which was led by two respected administrators who were certified in each of those areas. Teachers were encouraged to implement coteaching approaches, but they gained much more than merely an assignment to share a classroom together.

Teaching teams were supported in their efforts by daily common planning time that was embedded in the master schedule. The planning block helped create a solid collaborative exchange for lesson and unit planning among interdisciplinary partners, content-area teachers, and special education teachers. In addition, because substantive collaboration only happens with purposeful planning, coteaching teams attended training sessions every other Friday for a year during their planning time. During those sessions, teams focused on curriculum content, communication strategies, and instructional approaches.

Many other instructional adaptations were made, but the most successful initiative to date remains the content-to-content coteaching model. Initially, it consisted of mathematics and English teachers at the seventh- and eighth-grade levels sharing the same students for two 85-minute blocks a day. It has now been expanded to include science and social studies teaming and social studies and English teaming. These collaborative configurations intensified instruction for students and provided academic rigor and support simultaneously.

Another instructional change was the development of common assessments. Formative assessment data is essential to effective instruction. To this end, core content-area teachers at each grade level develop their own common assessments and align them with state standards. In addition, during embedded planning time Monday through Thursday, a vice principal for instruction guides the work of mathematics and English language arts teams on data, student work, and common
assessments. Then, after each common assessment is given, teachers meet with members of the instructional leadership team to discuss student progress. The results from the common assessments help drive and revise instruction.

**Solid Foundation**
The successful turnaround of Thomas was accomplished by focusing on systems, culture, and instruction. Like the legs of a three-legged stool, each of these areas is important and success is found in the balance that is struck. With this solid foundation, the school continues to improve and sets its sights for even greater success for students.

In 2010, the school will begin using an expanded learning schedule that gives students the opportunity to come to school from 7:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. every day. Middle school students will be able to enroll in classes that are more exploratory than the school has offered in the past, and they will also be able to receive additional academic interventions.

Block scheduling will continue beyond 2:00 each day and will build credit recovery opportunities into the regular school day. High school students will be able to enroll in 12 courses each year instead of 8 because of the expanded learning opportunities and additional blocks. Greater access to more courses will allow more students to earn a Regents diploma or a Regents diploma with advanced designation.

Seven years ago, most stakeholders viewed Thomas as a dangerous block of brick and stone. Today, because of the work of teachers, administrators, students, and the community, its beauty and potential are still being revealed. PL

**REFERENCES**


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