

Juggling It All to Achieve Systemic Change

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The job of the modern day school administrator is an extremely challenging one.

Daily unpredictable administrative demands and a multitude of never ending priorities create a complex web of items that commonly perplex school administrator's nationwide. The demand on one's time can be exasperating! With so much to do and so much to focus on, the job can lead one to feeling caught in a quagmire of futility – accomplishing much but achieving little. The typical administrator's day may be filled with meeting agendas, performing data mining, reviewing test scores and state reports, monitoring the implementation of the curriculum, identifying and providing professional development for staff, improving pedagogy, managing student behavior, facilitating the evolution of student's voices, relinquishing administrative authority to allow for teacher

voice, reflecting on student performance through grade coherence protocols, creating action plans to support student achievement, and many other items too numerous to name. The most effective administrators are those who create a laser-like focus on what is most important... student achievement.

There are countless anecdotes of students feeling lost and invisible in the large, comprehensive high schools evidenced across the State of New Jersey and throughout the country. Reform efforts have focused primarily upon structural changes that have produced mixed results. Children, unlike widgets, are complex human beings who all have a common set of needs, especially the desire to be valued, accepted, and to belong. Students evaluate the behaviors of the adults who interact with them to determine if the individual values and accepts them. This has a pervasive impact on a student's feelings of self worth, and

it is directly correlated with the expectations for achievement that they hold. According to Quaglia and Corso (2014), "Self-Worth occurs when students know they are uniquely valued members of the school community; have a person in their lives they can trust and learn from; and believe they have the ability to achieve-academically, personally, and socially" (pgs. 23-24). This feeling of value and acceptance is also reflected in the extensive Visible Learning study conducted by Hattie (2011). Hattie synthesized over 800 meta-analyses that included more than 150 million students, and he summarized his findings by ranking 150 influences from most impactful to least impactful in producing learning outcomes (2011). Self-reported grades (i.e. student expectations) ranked as the second most impactful influence on learning outcomes (2017). Self-reported grades directly reflect a student's feelings of self worth and can be influenced by school staff members.

At Cherry Hill High School West, we have established an all-encompassing approach to certify that our focus is on student achievement while ensuring that students feel a sense of value, acceptance, belonging, and ultimately Self-Worth. We have named this approach No Child Left Invisible. No Child Left Invisible entails a systematic approach to ensuring that all students experience academic success (i.e. obtain a grade of B or higher in all courses) or be met with a corresponding action plan to allow them multiple opportunities to do so. The No Child Left Invisible approach is not “another thing” necessary for staff to do, rather it encapsulates the core vision and mission of Cherry Hill High School West. Administrative duties were revised to include a Coordinator of Student Success. We created three distinct Success Teams that meet weekly to identify students who are experiencing barriers to achievement. Each team consists of a study skills teacher, Title I teacher and up to three counselors. We use a grade coherence process for the teachers to identify struggling students through an analysis of root causes as reflected in Hattie’s Visible Learning Study (2011). Action plans are then created once a student has shown a struggle in meeting an A or B in a core content course. The Coordinator of Student Success was charged with the responsibility of

working with these teams as well as in tandem with the Principal and department supervisors to bolster classroom pedagogy, to create a content specific in-house professional development academy, coordinate the Quaglia Institute for Voice and Aspirations to incorporate Student Voice, and to enhance the current Intervention and Referral Services (I&RS) model.

We have committed to work with the Quaglia Institute and as a result have been able to develop a teacher-led Aspirations Team. According to the Quaglia research, students who have a voice are seven times more likely to be motivated to learn (Quaglia Institute for School Voice and Aspirations, 2016). This work has incorporated on-going discussion and recognition of self-worth and engagement leading to motivation for learning. We conduct student and teacher voice surveys, and then conduct focus groups to address their observations and ideas about our school. We then incorporate the ideas directly into classroom pedagogy and into improving the school’s environment. This work led directly to the introduction of the West PD Academy and a strong focus on 21st Century teaching and learning. We used a survey to collect the ideas of staff for their desired professional development options, which led to the development

of personalized and specific learning opportunities in addition to the district’s in-service days. We have been able to utilize our Aspirations Team to revamp our use of faculty and department meeting time to develop and instruct biweekly workshops to promote 21st Century skills to engage our digitally native students in a way that is natural to their learning and comfortable to our teaching staff. The use of technology has enhanced teaching and learning through the infusion of programs like Google Classroom, Actively Learn, Edpuzzle, Lexia, Apex Tutorials, ALEKS, and Pear Deck. Additionally, we work directly with prominent consultants to bring in current and relevant professional development to enhance pedagogy and classroom engagement. The staff has worked on Social-Emotional Learning, reaching struggling math learners, best practices in World Language Education, the Art and Science of Writing, and cultural proficiency to recognize the individuality of our learners.

We juggle many challenges as educators. With meaningful exploration and planning we have been able to incorporate a system of change to interconnect each of our systems into a cohesive focus on student voice, student achievement, and ultimately No Child Left Invisible.

References

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About the Authors



Dr. Kwame R. Morton is the principal of Cherry Hill High School West in South Jersey. As the first African-American appointed as a principal in a Cherry Hill high school he has focused his efforts on providing students with access, opportunity and equitable outcomes while promoting 21st Century teaching and learning strategies. He has held a variety of administrative roles and positions. Prior to serving as the principal of Cherry Hill High School West he served as the principal of Joyce Kilmer Elementary of School (Cherry Hill, NJ). He obtained a National Turnaround Specialist Credential while serving as the principal of Frederick Douglass Elementary School (Philadelphia, Pa). He has served as an assistant principal in Thomas Fitzsimmons HS (Philadelphia, Pa) and Public School 188 (Brooklyn, NY). Dr. Morton began his career as a teacher in the New York City Department of Education working at Public School 288 and Public School 188.



Allison Staffin has been part of the Cherry Hill Public Schools since 1991. She began her career as a social studies teacher spending 12 amazing years in the classroom at Cherry Hill High School West. Now in her 15th year in administration, Allison is an Assistant Principal at High School West, and was honored to be named the 2016-2017 NJ Visionary Assistant Principal of the Year.