



Closing the Reading Gap

Here's how an urban elementary school succeeded in closing a huge achievement gap with an all-out effort focused on discipline and literacy.

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by Peggy Petrilli

In May 1999, only 15 percent of our students could read at grade level. Five years later, that figure was 89 percent. How did we close that huge reading gap? Read on.

Northern Elementary School in Lexington, Kentucky, is an urban, ethnically diverse, and economically disadvantaged Pre-K–5 school. When I arrived in 1997 as a staff assistant, Northern had one of the worst reputations in Fayette County. It was, as columnist Cheryl Turman of the *Lexington Herald-Leader* put it, “...the kind of place Lexington parents went out of their way to avoid.” Many of our students couldn’t read on grade level and we had the highest suspension rate and the second-highest number of suspension-related incidents in the district.

In the spring of 2000, the principal retired and I was selected to take her place. The first thing I did was to meet one-on-one with the staff. In these meetings, I asked each person the same question: “What do you think is the biggest deterrent to academic achievement for students at Northern?” Every one of them said “Discipline!”

I was in full agreement. Just as a flower needs good soil to grow, a developing mind needs a disciplined environment in which to learn. If teachers have to spend time dealing with misconduct, when will they teach? If students are removed from classrooms because of misbehavior, when will they learn? I came away from my meetings with staff convinced that we had to change our school climate. But how?

Planting the Seeds of Change

Then I remembered a behavior workshop a few years earlier that introduced us to the work of Randy Sprick on discipline. Sprick, a national authority on classroom management, advocates a positive, three-tier model of discipline—on schoolwide, classroom, and individual levels. Working with Susan Isaacs, one of Sprick’s trainers, we determined that I should spend my first year as principal laying the groundwork for a new discipline policy based on Sprick’s ideas. At the same time, we would also look for ways to improve student achievement.

During that year, we laid the groundwork for fully implementing the system. We began by developing school-wide guidelines for success, rules for effective listening in the classroom, behavioral procedures, and lessons to teach those procedures.

We also decided to implement Sprick’s CHAMP program for classroom management, which trains teachers how to handle a variety of classroom situations:

Conversation. (What is the expectation for talking during this activity?)

Help. (How are students expected to behave when they have questions?)

Activity. (What is the task? What is the end product?)

Movement. (Can students move about during this activity?)

Participation. (What does on-task behavior look and sound like?)

During the summer of 2001, all teachers received training in CHAMP. By the start of the school year, everyone was ready.

Literacy Comes First

By that time, we were also about to begin the second year of Literacy

First, a reading program based on phonics and direct, explicit instruction. To accommodate Literacy First, we expanded our language arts block. All of our children spend two hours every morning working on reading and writing.

We haven't stopped there. Relying on extensive data showing that music and foreign language study can improve cognitive ability and academic achievement, we offer strong programs for both. Children in grades K–3 learn to play the violin; grades 4 and 5 learn to play trumpet, clarinet, piano, and percussion instruments. We also have Latin for fourth- and fifth-grade students, and Spanish for all students, with the goal of having our students leave school fluent in conversational Spanish.

We have even initiated a voluntary dress code because research indicates that a dress code policy may be a factor in improving both behavior and grades.

The Proof Is In the Results

By 2003–04, four years into our combined behavioral and literacy program, 89 percent of our children were reading at grade level—a 74 percent increase. For our minority students, progress is even more astounding.

We test all of our students in reading five times each year. On these tests, for third and fourth graders, there is no significant difference in scores between black and white students. In fact, there are times when black students score higher than white students. Similar results are reflected in state tests.

In May 2004, 69 of our fourth graders took the Kentucky Core Content Test reading examination. Of those, 30 percent were white and 55 percent were black. The mean scale score for the white students was 550; for black students it was 544—a statistically insignificant difference of six points. But when you compare that gap to the one that existed in 1999—28 points—it makes quite a statement.

The same near-parity is recorded by students who participate in the free and reduced-cost lunch program and those who do not. In 1999, the mean scale score for students who participated in the lunch program was five points lower than students who did not participate. By 2004, students in the program actually outperformed students not in the program by one point—completely closing that gap.

Building on Success

Our reading achievements, while significant, are only a part of our success. During this same period, our suspension rates have steadily declined. There are two ways to measure suspension data. One is to count the number of students suspended in a given year and the other is to count the number of incidents for which these students are suspended. The number of students we suspended decreased from 16 in 2000–01 to five in 2003–04, a reduction of 69 percent. Incidents of misbehavior decreased from 32 in 2000–01 to seven in 2003–04, a reduction of 78 percent.

Our initial successes inspired us to greater heights of inventiveness and dedication. Two of our most successful disciplinary tools, our in-school suspension room and our Saturday School program, were developed with a grant from the Kentucky Department of Juvenile Justice and the Mayor's Youth Violence Prevention Program.

If students disrupt learning, they are sent to our in-school suspension room where they are expected to make up every minute of lost classroom time. If they need more time, they continue after school or attend Saturday School.

Children come to Saturday School for one of three reasons: They have been referred for misbehavior; volunteered for tutoring in a particular subject; or have enrolled in an enrichment program. By combining these three populations, we have eliminated the stigma associated with going to school on Saturday.

The grant also enabled us to form a Student Assistance Team (SAT) to work with our most at-risk students. The SAT, composed of mental health workers, social workers, the school nurse, special education facilitator, and home-school liaison, can provide comprehensive services to individual children. This implements the last tier of Sprick's three-tier discipline model.

An Ongoing Effort

Closing the achievement gap is hard work. We perform diagnostic assessments often and use those assessments to drive our instruction. I meet every week with teachers to review student achievement data. If we need to change teaching strategies for any student, we don't wait for the end of the reporting period. We do it immediately.

We send home a daily planner with each child, containing information about the child's academic progress and any incidents of misbehavior. Parents sign the planners and return them the next day. Students who don't bring a signed planner back to school with them have to eat lunch in the in-school suspension room.

We continue to build our academic program. We hope to add after-school and before-school programs, and we would like to offer more opportunity for dance, chess, and movement, especially since research tells us that those activities increase student achievement.

Our goal is to do whatever it takes to build hope and resiliency in our most disadvantaged students—hope that they can accomplish what no one dared dream they could, and resiliency to face whatever adversity comes their way.

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