

Fieldale-Collinsville Middle School



Banishing Anonymity

It is no accident that the staff at Fieldale-Collinsville Middle School adopted a central tenet of *Breaking Ranks in the Middle*—to banish anonymity by creating a personalized learning environment for all of its students. The school was created six years ago when the four middle schools in Henry County, VA, were consolidated into two middle schools.

The consolidation left the students, the staff members, and the community angry and disjointed. No one felt any joy in coming to a middle school that was housed in a former high school. The hallways and classrooms were out of proportion with the students, and the 900-student school was an extreme change for the rural area.

The closing of many of the area's manufacturing plants and subsequent rising unemployment rates compounded the difficulties—unemployment in the

area is the highest in the Commonwealth of Virginia at 20%, with almost 50% of the students eligible for meal subsidies. The board of education, supported by the community, recognized that an effort had to be made to provide a quality education for every student.

After a challenging first year of consolidation, the staff, led by principal Moriah Dollarhite, embraced the idea of grade-level teams, breaking the school into small groups to create camaraderie and school spirit. Content teams were also created to monitor instruction and ensure that all lessons were tied to the state learning standards.

And finally, a lead teacher team, representing all content areas and including a differentiated learning coach, was formed to work with the administrators to guide the transformation. That group meets almost daily and has its finger on the pulse of

every facet of the school.

The respect and trust that the staff members have in one another and their students serves as a model for everyone else in the school. To strengthen that trust, Dollarhite continually asked staff members what they needed to make the teams and the school more effective.

First came a request for usable data so that instruction could be appropriate for every student. The data provided by the state was good but it came too late to use to plan instruction for the school year, so Dollarhite created a data warehouse for Fieldale-Collinsville. The data warehouse allows teams to look at instructional weaknesses by content strands as well as by individual students and classes.

Next came a request for flexible scheduling that allows each grade to have its own schedule; for example, eighth graders operate on



Consolidating middle schools meant more students and a need to build relationships.

a block schedule, and sixth graders have a schedule that more closely resembles an elementary schedule. Grade-level teams have the flexibility to adjust times with their teammates.

That approach makes it possible for each grade level to be in the halls and cafeteria by themselves, minimizing congestion and confusion. Another benefit of this scheduling model is daily common planning time for the teams.

The next request from the staff was to create an active learning environment for the students. This led to a commitment to differentiated instruction that permeates every classroom, every period. Students are grouped heterogeneously on each team with special

education students fully included. The school system supported extensive professional development for the teachers, and Dollarhite created a school climate that encouraged risk-taking.

The staff adopted the attitude that “this school is our community, these are our students—if they don’t succeed, then we don’t succeed.” Using their common time, staff members analyze student achievement data, study student work, plan together, share lessons, and observe one another’s teaching. They recognize that planning for differentiated instruction takes time and a detailed knowledge of each student’s strengths and weaknesses. The operative question has become, How can we enhance what we’re doing?

The key to success is establishing trust with students. Students are given a choice of activities by interest, by learning style, or by readiness. Teachers have taught students how to work in groups and work on projects. Students can also choose from multiple types of assessment to demonstrate content mastery.

Teachers continually check for understanding and reteach as necessary. As one student said, “No one ever gets left behind.” A favorite strategy used throughout the building is to have students answer a prompt that is related to recent instruction. Using an “entry” or “exit” card, they use symbols to indicate how comfortable they are with their level of mastery.

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Abundant technology—made possible by foundation grants—seamlessly supports differentiated instruction and assessment. It is not unusual to see a group of students using an interactive whiteboard to create a game that will serve as a review for an upcoming test, see students doing online research at their desks to support a project, or have a teacher use the Classroom Performance System (CPS) clickers to do a quick check for understanding. Computers are everywhere, as is engaging software that provides enrichment and remediation.

Today, the anonymity that was initially present at the school's inception has been banished. The school stands as a shining example of the power of a personalized learning environment for all students. The results—continuously improving student achievement and reduced gaps between groups of students—demonstrate that when adults trust one another, work together strategically, and focus on student outcomes, all obstacles can be overcome.

An Instructional Community

Moriah Dollarhite, principal, explains how the staff comes together to share instructional leadership.

The staff at Fieldale-Collinsville is well-trained and involved in all aspects of instructional leadership, including department chairs and differentiated instruction coaches. As department chairs, the five lead teachers have monthly meetings so that there is cohesion among the grade levels and a sense of community. In addition, each grade level has a coordinator by discipline who aggregates data, sets goals, and helps develop effective pacing and lesson plans that are based on students' developmental needs. Instructional strategies are discussed and each quarter, a differentiated lesson for each subject at each grade level is submitted to the media center as a resource.

On workdays, the lead team facilitates book studies of such books as *Fulfilling the Promise of the Differentiated Classroom* [C. A. Tomlinson, 2003, ASCD]. In addition, the lead team promotes and conducts staff development so that all teachers on site will have a working knowledge of best practices. As an integral part of the school improvement plan, each new or provisionally licensed teacher is paired with a lead teacher to create, revise, and improve differentiated lesson plans.

All teachers in the core subjects are required to observe colleagues in their particular subject areas; teachers of exploratory classes observe core teachers. These peer observa-

tions promote collegiality in the building and allow educators to gather more tools for their classrooms. Fieldale-Collinsville has an extraordinary mentor program that gives all first-year teachers a contact person for instructional guidance as well as all other questions he or she may have during the year. Lead teachers and mentor teachers are separate so that the new teachers have a wealth of knowledge from which to gather information.

Finally, each year, all faculty members have the opportunity to participate in staff development, such as the Summer Institute of Academic Diversity at the University of Virginia and workshops for model schools, PLCs, and cooperative learning. Further, each teacher has



access to a grant for an interactive whiteboard in his or her classroom.

The teachers at Fieldale-Collinsville embrace best practices with a passion and use ongoing assessments, during- and after-school remediation, tutoring groups, and community building as deliberate steps to overcome mediocrity. Active learning and differentiation of instruction are widely used and we see growth each year in student achievement and overall health. We are never satisfied with our data unless all of the students are successful and they continue to be—a goal in individual classrooms throughout the building.

The teachers consistently meet in small and large teams to disaggregate data and to

develop strategies to reach all learners. The faculty in its entirety has a common vision that Fieldale-Collinsville will create lifelong learners, competent citizens, and global advocates who will strive to enhance their local, national, and international communities.

The most important thing others can learn from our school is to genuinely care about the health of the entire school, including students, faculty members, administrators, cafeteria workers, custodians, and bus drivers. Everyone plays an integral role in our school community and shares in the welfare of the school. Through years of trial and error, we have grown as a family and believe we are an excellent example of a Breakthrough School.

A Great Place to Learn

Students at Fieldale-Collinsville stress that it is a great place to learn. One eighth-grade student wrote, “FCMS just has an awesome learning environment. It is very easy to learn and achieve anything that you set your mind to at our school.” Another eighth grader wrote, “One thing that I really love about FCMS is that you can express yourself in the way that you want here, and people will like you for you. I love coming to school because though I am learning, I am having so much fun too! The teachers make so many things exciting.”

A look at some of the curricula from the teachers’ points of view explains why the students are so excited.

Mary Stegall, grade-level subject coordinator, sixth-grade social studies:

The goals and objectives of sixth-grade social studies include teaching U.S. history up to 1877 to give the students a basic understanding of major events in the creation of the United States. I hoped that those events would take on meaning to the students and not just be facts to be memorized. An appreciation of the events and the people who made them possible is a major goal in teaching U.S. history.

A variety of strategies were implemented during the 2008–09 school year. Some of the strategies are that the standards of learning are related to the real world, that hands-on activities are used, and that students can choose to work alone or collaborate when appropriate. Interdisciplinary activities help students realize that history is more than just memorizing names and dates. Social studies, math, science, and art and music are all incorporated into history.

Amy Ferguson, grade-level and subject coordinator, sixth grade:

The math teachers increased their planning time to ensure that everyone’s lessons were aligned to what the Standards of Learning were asking for and to share ideas, strategies, and activities for teaching. In addition, the implementation of formative assessments with Interactive Achievement, a benchmarking software that is aligned to the standards, allowed administrators and teachers to study data and identify weaknesses. Using this data, strategies were implemented to address areas of improvement. For example, “problem” questions were displayed on the whiteboard

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COLLINSVILLE, VA

Principal

Moriah L. Dollarhite



Grades

6–8

Enrollment

947

Community

Rural

Demographics

75% White, 18% Black, 7% Hispanic; 47% free or reduced-price meals





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and analyzed with the students. Also, teachers started using more technology, such as interactive whiteboards and laptops in the classrooms.

Benjamin Boone, grade-level and subject coordinator, administrative intern:

Building personal relationships (rapport) with students is one of our top priorities, and differentiated instruction is essential for our student success. Some of the differentiated strategies that we use are tiered activities, cooperative learning activities; the RAFTS writing model (role, audience, format, topic, and strong verb); rubrics; graphic organizers; and flashcards. Fieldale-Collinsville operates under full inclusion, which along with coteaching allows for more one-on-one instruction for all the students in the classroom. Within the inclusion classes, strong classroom management techniques help keep the instructional material organized in a way that allows all students to have a firm understanding of the curriculum.

Having several ways to disaggregate data is vital to the success of our students. We use many programs to review and analyze as much data on student performance as possible: some examples are daily bell ringers and ongoing assessment throughout the class period; the CPS, by which students respond using handheld response remotes or clickers; and Interactive Achievement, which provides formative

assessments, such as pre- and posttest and benchmark testing; and analyzing previous scores on state standardized tests.

Student success is also attributed to parental and community support. Each of our teachers send out weekly e-mails informing parents about what is being covered each week and when assessments are scheduled. Teachers also update their Web sites weekly. The eighth-grade social studies department schedules visits from people in the community, such as members of the Virginia Bar Association and the Henry County Sheriff's Department, to allow for real-world experiences and provide the opportunity for our curriculum to come alive.

Charles Byrd, grade-level subject coordinator, eighth-grade science:

Our school is fortunate to have access to student performance data from prior years' state standardized testing that assist us in this journey. We have what is called a "golden package," which is an accumulation of specific data that tells us how students perform. It is disaggregated by each demographic of the school population and as detailed as how students performed on specific questions on the test. It allows teachers to modify instruction to focus on deficiencies or trends where we may not be meeting the curriculum goals set by the state. The eighth-grade test is cumulative from grades 6–8, so I present the data to the science teachers in all grade levels at the beginning of the year and encourage them to modify as necessary.

Once the team has a map of where we are going, I attempt to provide collaborative learning opportunities for teachers through peer observations.

Janet Lewis, grade-level subject coordinator, eighth-grade English:

When we learned that our school did not make annual yearly progress in 2007–08, the English department was devastated to learn that we were deficient in two subgroups: Hispanic and Black males. We were determined that it would not happen again. We began the year by disaggregating the data from the most

recent test and identified areas of weakness by grade level to inform us of problems in our teaching as well as holes in student knowledge, and we used the information to plan instruction for the year.

Students who were not on grade level participated in a literature class instead of an exploratory option for one quarter. They read and discussed a novel and examined elements of plot and literary themes. Each grade level reexamined their student data at the end of the second quarter and remediation groups were formed, again in lieu of an exploratory period. Throughout the year, teachers con-

ducted novel studies designed to meet students' needs with regard to academic readiness and interest. Those criteria, along with learning profiles, were considered when designing authentic assessments. Given our improved scores for 2008–09, the department is continuing the use of these instructional strategies. We are committed to the success of all students and focused on further improvement of student achievement. Monthly department meetings include a shared differentiated lesson from each grade level on a specified concept. These lessons are then placed in a binder in the library as a resource for all teachers. **PL**

- Teaming as a core structure
- Common planning time
- Instructional consistency
- Grade-level team meetings to monitor student achievement
- Flexible schedule
- Developmental emphasis
- Block schedule
- Differentiated instruction
- Standards-based instruction
- Active learning (student engagement)
- Student choice
- Full inclusion
- Personal learning plans for each student
- State and principal-designed data program
- Technology

Destination Success

Kenya Gravely, seventh-grade English teacher

Last year, the seventh-grade teachers faced a dilemma: not all students were passing the Virginia Standards of Learning reading test. Analysis revealed that certain subgroups were not passing at a satisfactory rate. The teachers met and developed a course of action called “Destination Success.”

Program. Teachers used various instructional methods and best practices. Students who meet the requirements participate in Study Island, an online instructional and diagnostic tool. Students master the state and national standards as they prepare for the standardized test. Each topic consists of a detailed lesson and practice in the form of games that provide assistance and build mastery of the standards.

Objective. All seventh-grade teachers provide each of their students with the knowledge and skills they need to pass the Virginia Standards of Learning test for seventh-grade reading.

Goals. Seventh-grade English students will engage in an academic competition between teams. The teachers use Study Island to motivate and encourage students while remediating and reviewing their work in an informal but highly structured manner.

Plan. Every Friday, students review and are tested on academic material that relates to the standards. The results are recorded and displayed to encourage each student to do his or best. The class that receives the highest percentage passing rate earns the rights to have a weekly champion trophy in its classroom for a week. At the conclusion of this competition, the team with the highest points receives a reward designated by the collaborative efforts of teachers, principals, parents, and the PTO.

The bulletin board in the seventh-grade hall is a daily reminder to all seventh-grade students to stay focused and to give their teachers their best effort. The data also help teachers see where additional areas of remediation are needed.