

“It’s Being Done.” Academic Success in Unexpected Schools (Chenoweth, 2007)

“Make no mistake – every school described in this book has accomplished something admirable. They are taking in children who are considered ‘hard to teach’ by many in the education world, and with thoughtful hard work they are producing academic success. They could have saved themselves a lot of trouble by falling back on the tired old excuses that many other schools use –that ‘these kids’ can’t be expected to do much academically because they are poor, because their parents don’t support their education, because their home lives are chaotic, because they don’t speak English at home, because they didn’t get the proper foundation at earlier ages, because they don’t eat breakfast, because they don’t have a culture of academic achievement, or any of a number of other excuses. At none of the schools included in this book did I hear any of that kind of language. The teachers and administrators know that the children in their schools can learn, and they know that it is up to them to figure out how to teach their students.”

“My general theory is that improvement is never an accident.”

WHAT ‘IT’S BEING DONE’ SCHOOLS DO THAT IS DIFFERENT

“THERE IS NO MAGIC BULLET.”

#1 THEY TEACH THEIR STUDENTS.

- Educators think deeply about what their students need to learn and how to make sure they learn it --- not ‘for the test’ but ‘to be productive members of society.
- Teachers don’t stop teaching just because the state tests have been given.
- The verb ‘to teach’ is used properly --- if teachers say that they taught something, that means their students have learned it.

THEY EMBRACE ACCOUNTABILITY.

- “They know they have an obligation not only to their students but to their communities to demonstrate that they are doing the job entrusted to them – to educate future citizens.”
- ‘I’m a coach. That’s what coaches do – they scout out other teams and find out what they’re doing and steal any good ideas they find.’
- “Most are quite open about sharing the data with the students themselves, explicitly teaching students that poor performance on an assessment simply means that the students and teachers need to work harder and more effectively, not that the students are in some way deficient and incapable of learning.

THEY MAKE DECISIONS ON WHAT IS GOOD FOR KIDS, NOT WHAT IS GOOD FOR ADULTS.

#2 THEY DON'T TEACH TO THE STATE TESTS.

- Teachers teach a rich, coherent curriculum tied to state standards. They don't teach the test.

#3 THEY HAVE HIGH EXPECTATIONS FOR THEIR STUDENTS.

- 'It's our job to get you all to the station.' Liz Mullins, Oakland Heights Elementary
- 'It's not about feeling sorry for kids. It's about making sure that they understand what it is they're expected to do.' Principal Adderley, Stanton Elementary

THEY KNOW WHAT THE STAKES ARE.

- "They know that if their students don't get a good education, they face the probability of a lifetime of poverty and dependence."
- 'We have got to expand <our students'> horizons or we are signing their death warrants.' Principal Coach Martha Barber, Alabama
- 'This is your one chance.' Principal Esparza, Granger High School

THEY LIKE KIDS.

- Students are brought into conversations, student work is highlighted and proudly displayed, older students are role models, and teachers tell affectionate stories about students and boast about their work.
- "The struggles that students have outside school only increase the regard teachers and principals have for what they are able to achieve in school....Such respect never translates into expecting less from students, just into appreciating the effort that they must put in to achieve."

#4 THEY EMBRACE AND USE ALL THE DATA THEY CAN GET THEIR HANDS ON.

- "They want to know how their students are doing."
- They come up with ways of charting and displaying data.
- 'That data represent a kid's face or a group of kids' faces. That's a life. That's a future.' Susan Swanson, Director of Urban Education, Hamilton County, TN

THEY USE DATA TO FOCUS ON INDIVIDUAL STUDENTS, NOT JUST GROUPS OF STUDENTS.

THEY CONSTANTLY REEXAMINE WHAT THEY DO.

- 'Change is hard, change is feeling uncomfortable.' Principal Sheri Shirley, Oakland Heights Elementary
- 'It can be very difficult for teachers to change long-established patterns or to diverge from what they learned in their university teaching programs (or to not use tradition as the only reason why something is done), but that is the logical consequence of putting student achievement ahead of everything else.'
- 'The kids have to be the first priority. You have to be open enough to see that it's not about the teacher but about the learning of the kids.' Teacher Jenna Broems, Port Chester Middle School, NY.

#5 THEY USE TIME WISELY.

- They establish classroom and school routines.
- “School time is for instruction, and instruction is treated as something almost sacred. Most of the schools establish uninterrupted blocks of time for instruction...Students are engaged in productive activity just about all the time.”

THEY LEVERAGE AS MANY RESOURCES FROM THE COMMUNITY AS POSSIBLE.

THEY EXPAND THE TIME STUDENTS – PARTICULARLY STRUGGLING STUDENTS – HAVE IN SCHOOL.

THEY MAKE SURE THAT THE KIDS WHO STRUGGLE THE MOST HAVE THE BEST INSTRUCTION.

#6 THEY DO NOT SPEND A LOT OF TIME DISCIPLINING STUDENTS, IN THE SENSE OF PUNISHING THEM.

- They teach students how to act.
- They often have formal programs so the whole school shares a common vocabulary. These schools have systems in place so that they are not caught without a plan.
- “The main method of discipline is to aim for high-quality instruction every moment, on the theory that busy and actively engaged students do not have time to misbehave and get into trouble.”

THEY ESTABLISH AN ATMOSPHERE OF RESPECT.

#7 PRINCIPALS ARE A CONSTANT PRESENCE.

- The expectation is that for the most part, the principals are in the building and walking the halls, conferring with the teachers, looking at student work, and interacting with students, teachers, and parents.
- Depending on how big the school is, some principals stop in on every class at the beginning of the day. It is the principals’ version of ‘doing rounds’. They are gauging the pulse of their buildings.

ALTHOUGH THE PRINCIPALS ARE IMPORTANT LEADERS, THEY ARE NOT THE ONLY LEADERS.

- Distributed leadership is part of an explicit practice to institutionalize improvement so that it is not reliant on a single individual. These principals are trying to build the kinds of enduring structures that will outlast them.

#8. THEY PAY CAREFUL ATTENTION TO THE QUALITY OF THE TEACHING STAFF.

- Teachers do not just drift into tenure protections.

THEY PROVIDE TEACHERS WITH THE TIME TO MEET TO PLAN AND WORK COLLABORATIVELY.

- A schedule that have coherent instructional days and time for teachers to work together
- Teacher meetings are carefully structured – review data, go over student work, develop lesson plans, and map curriculum...eventually lighten the workload of teachers by allowing them to share responsibility for instruction.

THEY PROVIDE TEACHERS TIME TO OBSERVE EACH OTHER. THEY THINK SERIOUSLY ABOUT PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT.

- To deepen teachers' content knowledge, understanding, or pedagogical skill.

THEY ASSUME THAT THEY WILL HAVE TO TRAIN TEACHERS MORE OR LESS FROM SCRATCH AND CAREFULLY ACCULTURATE ALL NEWLY HIRED TEACHERS.

#9. THEY HAVE HIGH-QUALITY, DEDICATED, AND COMPETENT OFFICE AND BUILDING STAFF WHO FEEL THEMSELVES PART OF THE EDUCATIONAL MISSION OF THE SCHOOL.

- It means that the principal and assistant principals are able to focus on the core of their job – academics – and don't have to spend huge amounts of time on the logistics of running a building.

THEY ARE NICE PLACES TO WORK.

- “The schools are not easy places to work. ‘We work really hard,’ is the most common thing teachers in these schools say.”
- “But because their work is organized in a way that allows teachers to be successful and take leadership roles, and because the atmosphere in these schools is one of respect, they are nice places to work.”
- “These schools have the kind of camaraderie that comes from teams of people facing difficult challenges together.”

TO SUM UP: THE ADULTS IN ‘IT’S BEING DONE’ SCHOOLS EXPECT THEIR STUDENTS TO LEARN, AND THEY WORK HARD TO MASTER SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE NECESSARY TO TEACH THOSE STUDENTS.

- “When you overcome poverty and discrimination with enough thoughtful instruction, careful organization, and what can only be recognized as the kind of pigheaded optimism displayed by the Wright brothers, you get learning.”
- ‘We know what works in education. The research is prolific. Amazingly, then, the question today is not about what works, but about why we do not implement what we know works in all schools for all kids.’ James McDermott, University Park School