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STRATEGIES FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

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STORIES FROM THE 2015 SCORE PRIZE
WINNERS AND FINALISTS

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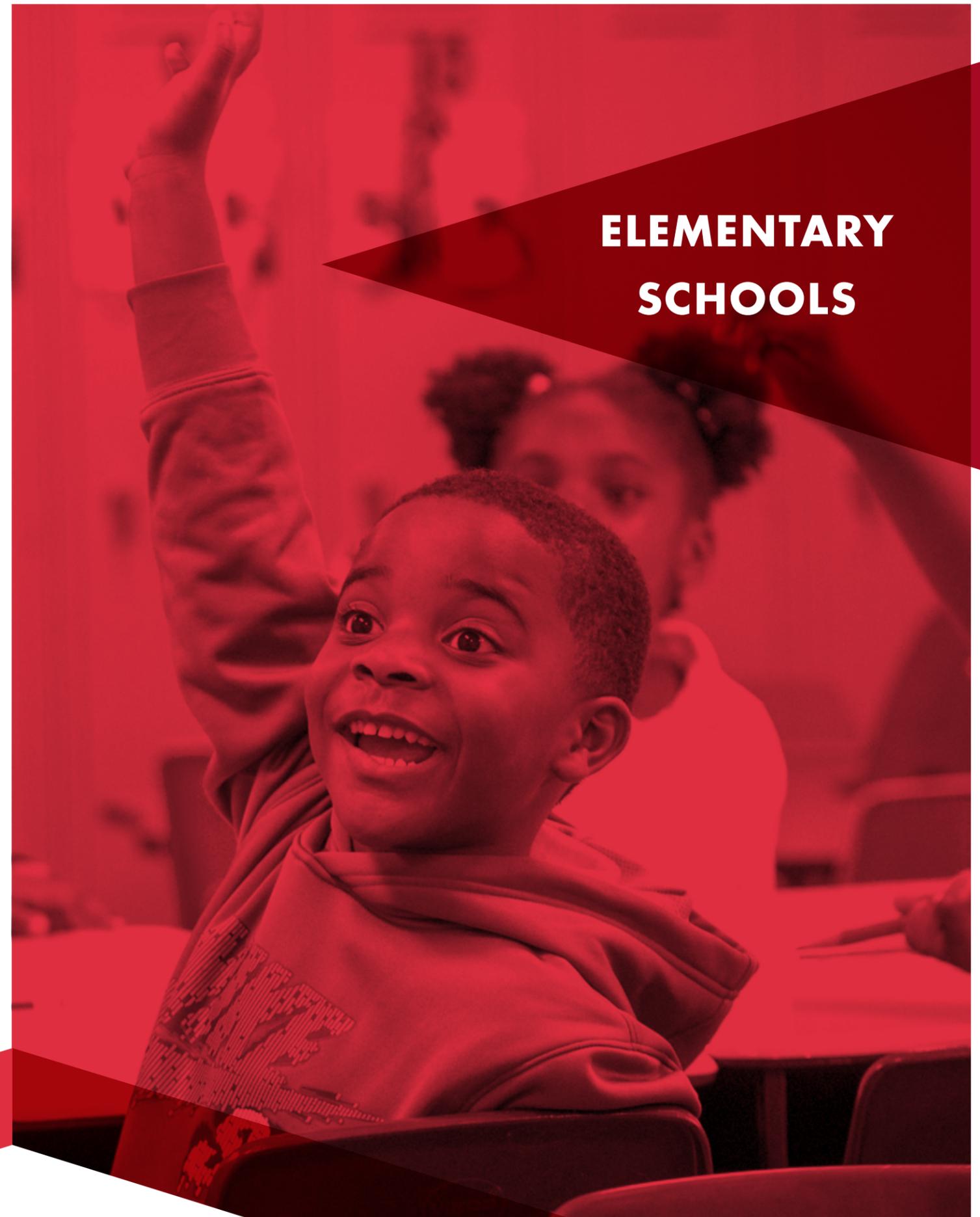
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ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS



ANDERSONVILLE TEACHERS TAKE THE LEAD, DELIVERING BIG GAINS FOR LEARNERS

Breakfast is a social time at Andersonville Elementary, a 2015 SCORE Prize finalist school. Volunteers from a nearby church – many of whom are retirees – stop by first thing each morning to eat breakfast with the kids, open cartons of milk, and chat about the day ahead.

“It’s the easiest thing to do. It costs no money. And it’s made a big impact – not just on academics, but the whole child,” said Hope Holdaway, a third-grade Andersonville teacher who helps lead the initiative.

The program, called Breakfast Buddies, is one of many efforts at Andersonville led by teachers. In fact, Principal Beth Roeder’s expectation is that every teacher takes on some form of a leadership role. Depending on individual teachers’ interests and experience, this can mean taking charge of aspects of curriculum or data, rethinking playground safety, planning the school Christmas program, or helping out in the central office. And

all this is in addition to a school structure that gives teachers a key role in decision-making and development of fresh interventions.

Ms. Roeder said it’s taken a few years for the current workflow to evolve – this is not something to introduce quickly or to attempt without knowing staff well. The result is a faculty culture of shared buy-in and high expectations, and a school rich in innovation.

“The expectations are so high that we almost have peer pressure. It’s not me. It’s the staff,” said Ms. Roeder. “The more confidence you give your teachers, the more confident they feel that they can do something. No one can do it all by yourself, and you can’t do a great job if you’re trying to do it all by yourself.”

Teachers have created and implemented a school-wide disciplinary plan that is consistent in every classroom. All teachers mentor one another, spending time observing one another’s



classrooms to provide feedback and learn from what works. Teacher-designed creative scheduling facilitates more interventions for students. For example, the music teacher figured out a way to take on the entire fourth grade during one class session, allowing teachers to have an extra common planning period. This, in turn, has allowed for more enrichment activities for the school’s highest performers.

Another teacher-initiated effort that made a big difference was the departmentalization of fourth and fifth grades. With permission from the district, teachers in these grades specialized based on subject matter, and kids rotate between classes during the day.

“That has made a huge difference for us here,” Ms. Roeder said. “Teachers are no longer making six lesson plans each day and differentiating within that.” A new program at the school this year ap-

plies Carol Dweck’s “growth mindset” research in a personal development effort for students. Finding great inspiration in the idea that traits like motivation and perseverance drive academic growth, teachers have identified a key personal trait to focus on each month and built reinforcement of those characteristics into school life. A monthly assembly focuses on each trait. Plastic wristbands with different values are worn by teachers all day, and when students demonstrate these traits, they get a wristband to wear.

The idea came from sessions attended at the 2015 Model Schools Conference, an initiative of the International Center for Leadership in Education. Rather than send just a few to the well-regarded event, Ms. Roeder and the Andersonville community worked hard to enable almost all of the faculty to attend for the past two years. Registration fees alone were nearly \$500 for each participant, making this no small investment. With the help of





the PTA, the money was raised through sales of doughnuts, trash bags, and anything else they could come up with. Teachers used their own time for the event and covered their own travel and lodging expenses.

"It's expensive, but worth it," said Ms. Roeder.

Many of the school's recent innovations started with Model Schools sessions and ideas. The conference also has provided an opportunity for Andersonville to learn from other schools, a practice that the school continues throughout the year. Teachers participate in weekly planned learning communities (PLCs) during a weekly early dismissal time for students, and those PLCs regularly meet to cross-plan and share ideas with teachers at other nearby elementary schools, including 2011 SCORE Prize winner Fairview Elementary.

An upcoming session has Andersonville and Fairview teachers working together to discuss classroom preparations for TNReady assessments. Rather than working with a strict agenda set by administrators, teachers play a large role in determining material to cover.

"Those PLCs have definitely correlated to a lot of our success," said Ms. Holdaway. "We love to find out about what works in other schools, which we don't often get to do as teachers. Teaching can be very isolating at times. Even though you're in a whole school of educators, the time you actually spend with them is very limited."

The positive environment at Andersonville extends beyond the staff. Fourth-grade student Eberle Mayes says her teachers make Andersonville Elementary is a great place to learn.

"If I've struggled, they've just gone right back and helped me understand it," Eberle said. "You need teachers that understand your problems if you have any problems, and our teachers are really like that. If you don't feel good, people will know, because they just know all their kids."

And according to Ms. Holdaway, her school really shines when the empowering confidence felt by teachers is directed toward families.

“**WHEN PEOPLE WALK
IN THIS BUILDING,
THEY IMMEDIATELY
FEEL WELCOME**”

-Hope Holdaway

"When people walk in this building, they immediately feel welcome. Once you get your parents feeling safe and welcome, something very magical happens," Ms. Holdaway said. "We find our parents and exploit their talents, so to speak, because everyone has something to give."



ANDERSONVILLE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

PRINCIPAL BETH ROEDER

350 Students in Grades PK-5 | Anderson County Schools

- ✓ All teachers take on leadership roles based on their talents and interests, generating buy-in across the staff
- ✓ Model Schools training for the entire faculty encourages innovation among a broad group
- ✓ Creative, collaborative scheduling facilitates fast and effective responses to intervention

RESULTS:

Andersonville students score well above the state average on reading, math, and science assessments. The school has reduced achievement gaps, and students have shown strong gains across the subjects over three years.

TEACHERS COLLABORATE TO DELIVER CORE CONCEPTS ALL DAY AT DELANO

Fourth-grader J'Tyler Jones has a lot of information at his fingertips.

He can list at length the programs he loves at Delano Optional School in Memphis, the elementary school winner of the 2015 SCORE Prize. And he can rattle off facts he picked up during his school's lunch hour, like state capitals.

"I learned that Montana has a capital named Helena," said J'Tyler. "Our teachers have high expectations of us – learning and having good behavior."

"That's one thing that I love about Delano – the way that we collaborate with each other. There's not a separation between the support teachers and the classroom teachers," said Ms. Williams. "We have a very close-knit family here. We support each other 100 percent."

This sort of cross-curricular academic collaboration is the standard at Delano. Core academic material is integrated throughout the school day, including enrichment classes like art, music, and technology. Delano's music teacher helps fourth- and fifth-grade students with fractions by talking



Delano's lunch periods include a PowerPoint presentation running for students, featuring grade-level and school-wide memorization questions with facts and skills kids need to master for effective processing of classroom information. The presentations are put together by the school's technology coordinator Sharren Williams. Ms. Williams works with classroom teachers to determine the content

with students about half and quarter notes, challenging kids to add and subtract them. Students participating in advanced strings and chorus have academic concepts further reinforced, improving reading skills like rhyming words, poetry, and vocabulary. Elementary and intermediate students working on basic and geometric shapes see these concepts reinforced during their art blocks. Dela-

no's art teacher has also helped students create graphic organizers for science class.

To accomplish all this, teachers work together constantly. Every adult in the building is accountable for student achievement, according to Principal Patrice Shipp, and faculty members work as a team regardless of the subjects they teach. Enrichment teachers receive the same professional development as other teachers, learning skills like building lesson plans around standards, and all faculty participate in the same professional learning communities (PLCs). All teachers observe one another in class at least twice each year.

Delano's strong data-driven culture includes full staff participation so the school can use the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP) results to help students learn and grow. The entire faculty has helped with the school's TCAP Saturday camps to help kids prepare for tests, as well as TCAP camps for parents explaining how to read data and help students accordingly.

Every teacher's day includes time to build relationships and help address kids' social, academic, and behavior needs. All teachers routinely tutor kids in reading and math, engaging actively in each child's academic status and goals for improvement. Every Delano instructor sponsors an individual after-school student club, which is why Delano is able to offer programming for kids interested in everything from etiquette and poetry to drama and world music.

"Our parents, our teachers, students, administrators – all of us have a strong commitment to making sure students excel academically," said Ms. Shipp. "We are just very proud of our students' academic success."

Delano is a technology-focused optional school for kids in Shelby County Schools, so one enrichment subject that is continually assimilated with classroom work is technology. In addition to regular use of educational electronics in everyday instruction, kids attend weekly computer classes to gain technical skills while reinforcing core subject concepts. This time has also been useful for TNReady assessment preparation.

By the time kids leave Delano, they are highly proficient and confident with technology. Ms. Williams remembers one child who arrived at the school in kindergarten with no computer exposure, but who could type 70 words per minute by the end of fifth grade.



"Our students love technology. They catch on very quickly. They're being raised in a technology world, and we have to take advantage of that," said Ms. Williams. "It's one thing to sit in a classroom and do your classwork. But when they come out of the classroom, they can see that this is actually something they might want to do one day with their career."

Ms. Williams teaches the students' weekly computer classes and helps teachers unify curriculum goals with instructional technology and student skill-building opportunities. Like every Delano instructor, she has many roles beyond that. She helps with Delano's annual end-of-year technology fair showcasing everything kids have produced, including work for career-related themes like banking and weather prediction. She puts together the lunchtime PowerPoint presentations, and tutors kids in reading and math.

For Ms. Williams, integration of technology across the curriculum is closely tied to Delano's mission of helping students take responsibility for their own learning. Recently, in a tutoring session, Ms. Williams introduced a student to a program called Quizlet, which lets kids practice vocabulary by playing games and creating their own lessons. Building exercises independently helped this student make significant connections to the material.

"The technology we use is just one way that we keep students engaged and interested in learning," said Ms. Williams. "When kids are playing games, you can focus on what you want them to learn – multiplication, fractions, reading skills – and all the things they're doing, they're practicing skills. It keeps them engaged. It makes learning interactive."

Fifth-grade student Chance Fowler agrees that computers help drive academic work home. He'd rather complete online lessons with a program called CoolMath, for example, than with traditional exercises.

"I like CoolMath more because I'm a computer geek," said Chance.

Chance is proud of many aspects of school life at Delano. He loves the school's CLUE academic enrichment program, as well as the diversity of student programming. Kids at Delano may be in elementary school, but faculty extracurricular offerings allow access to activities ranging from the basketball club – Chance's favorite – to daily student broadcasts on "DTV."

"Our teachers care about us," said Chance. "They make us do our work, because they know it's going to pay off."



DELANO OPTIONAL SCHOOL PRINCIPAL PATRICE SHIPP

350 Students in Grades K-5 | Shelby County Schools

- ✓ Core academic material is integrated throughout the school day, including lunchtime and enrichment classes like art, music, and technology
- ✓ Teachers collaborate constantly. As a result, kids learn about fractions in music class, geometry in art, and poetry in chorus
- ✓ All teachers, regardless of subject area, participate in the same professional development and engage fully in Delano's data-driven culture

RESULTS:

Delano students score well above the state average in both math and science and have made strong gains in these subjects over the last three years.



STRONG STUDENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS FORM FOUNDATION FOR SUCCESS AT DRESDEN

They're called parent-teacher conferences. But for Dresden Elementary fourth-graders, a more accurate term might be student-parent-teacher conferences.

When teachers at 2015 SCORE Prize finalist school Dresden Elementary meet with parents twice each year, the student involved is always present and at the center of the conversation, said fourth-grade teacher Honey Cantrell.

"It's more of a student-led conference," said Ms. Cantrell. "They know where they are. They can articulate their goals."

At Dresden, students thoroughly understand what is expected of them. Kids are taught to articulate the details of academic goals and performance. Students can see for themselves the sources of educator concerns, allowing kids and teachers to forge close relationships and work together as a team.

The results are remarkable. Dresden, which won the 2014 SCORE Prize, has made strong gains across reading, math, and science over the past three years and narrowed achievement gaps in reading, math, and science. Instruction is highly differentiated across the school, and a Response to Instruction and Intervention (RTI2) process involving all students ensures that each child receives exactly what they need. Each child is treated as an individual, personally and academically.

"Dresden Elementary's success has been primarily caused by the relationships we have with our students," said Principal Mike Laughrey. "They just feel like they're welcome."

Dresden is a Title I school, where 80 percent of students receive free and reduced meals. Student body demographics have no bearing on the school's expectations for achievement, though resources are planned and student needs are met accordingly.

"For the majority of the children who come to Dresden Elementary, this is the best part of their day," said Mr. Laughrey. "The faculty takes that very seriously."

Students are treated with love, care, and respect. And the relationship is mutual – students have many opportunities to contribute to the school, benefiting everyone involved. Dresden has a Citizen of the Month program, as well as a Citizen of the Year program incorporating volunteer hours for fourth-graders. Third-graders help work the school's car line, opening doors and welcoming kids to school each morning.

"We recognize children for good behavior and effort," said Mr. Laughrey. "It's key to academic performance. They have bought into it."

A critical component of student-teacher relationships at Dresden is clear communication of objectives and individualized instruction. The



comprehensive RTI2 process ensures instructors don't get so caught up in the struggles of some students that others are neglected, and it also provides additional challenges for kids who would benefit.

Third- and fourth-grade students use personal data binders to track academic goals and progress. RTI2 assessments, benchmarks, weekly progress, graphs, and reports are all included. So are student goals, which pupils are taught to articulate and document themselves. Younger students participate on a smaller scale with data folders.

Students meet one-on-one with their teachers every six weeks to check in on progress and clarify objectives. Teachers have the opportunity to make sure that goals – and planned steps forward – are clear and reasonable.

"The student conferences with my teacher have really helped me this year," said fourth-grade

student Gillian Melton. "I know what she expects me to do and we make a plan to reach the goal."

For Ms. Cantrell, the conferences and binders hold students accountable for their own progress, taking some pressure off the student-teacher relationship and allowing kids and educators to work as a team. The binders make it clear to students that progress is being made, showing growth and demonstrating capabilities. Close tracking of individual progress also informs Ms. Cantrell's instruction and ensures that she recognizes each student as an individual.

"I know the student, and the student knows that I know them," said Ms. Cantrell. "I know the areas that they need to improve. I know their strengths. I know their weaknesses. It helps me know them at such an individual level that I'm better equipped to help them with their weak areas." When report cards are sent home, they're sent home in the binder – all stakeholders see the



same information and results. Twice each year, before report cards are out, parent-teacher conferences are held with the binders as a centerpiece. Students lead the discussion, writing down goals and what they can do to fulfill them. Parents bring home a list of actions they can take to help. Fourth-grade student Tanner Thomas appreciates being able to show his parents the full scope of his work.

“I love the student data binder,” said Tanner. “I get to see how I am really doing, and I love showing my parents all of my growth and progress.”

“I know my strengths and weaknesses. I can make new goals for myself that I know I can achieve,” added fourth-grader Kaci Finney.

At Dresden, close relationships with students and high expectations go hand in hand. There’s a sense of camaraderie in classrooms, Ms. Cantrell says. Kids are happy and excited about learning, unafraid to ask questions.

“There’s no doubt that we care about them. Everyone knows that their teacher loves them. It’s a family. It’s a community,” Ms. Cantrell said. “If we seem to be hard on them at times, they know that it’s out of love. We won’t let them not succeed.”

Sometimes that means taking a pie in the face a few times each year. Mr. Laughrey says that’s part of the job description for elementary principals.

“They have to see me not only as their principal, but also someone who’s willing to do those kinds of things,” said Mr. Laughrey. “Elementary kids want to have fun. A sterile environment doesn’t produce much. A child will do more for a teacher they like.”

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**THERE’S NO DOUBT
THAT WE CARE
ABOUT THEM.
EVERYONE KNOWS
THAT THEIR
TEACHER LOVES
THEM. IT’S A FAMILY.
IT’S A COMMUNITY.**

-Honey Cantrell

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DRESDEN ELEMENTARY PRINCIPAL MICHAEL LAUGHREY

500 Students in Grades PK-4 | Weakley County Schools

- ✓ Students are taught to track and understand their own progress, taking pressure off the student-teacher relationship
- ✓ Dresden students meet individually with their teachers every six weeks to check in on achievement and clarify goals
- ✓ Love and respect go hand in hand with high academic objectives

RESULTS:

Dresden students have made strong gains across reading, math, and science over the past three years and narrowed achievement gaps in reading, math, and science.

MIDDLE SCHOOLS

THE DOOR IS ALWAYS OPEN AT GRASSY FORK SCHOOL

Enrolling at Grassy Fork School, a 2015 SCORE Prize finalist, will be different from the typical new student experience, according to seventh-grader Leah Murray.

“When you first come in, it might feel almost awkward. ‘Who are you? Where did you come from?’ They actually care,” Leah said. “They just kind of welcomed me with open arms. The teachers and the staff make everyone feel special as a person.”

Leah had just moved to the area from Florida. Her new school changed the way she thought about herself.

“I didn’t really know that I was that smart. I thought I was just kind of average,” Leah said. “I learned what it really means to care.”

A consistent, high level of community engagement defines Grassy Fork, helping students complete their best work academically and maintaining a focus on student outcomes in the surrounding community. The school is small – there are around 100 students in grades K-8, including a group of about 30 kids in grades 6-8. It’s situated on a mountain in Cocke County near the unincorporated community of Hartford, on the eastern edge of Tennessee.

At Grassy Fork, a SCORE Prize finalist in the middle school category, students have demonstrated tremendous growth over the last decade. A three-year partnership with the Niswonger Foundation starting in 2002 improved the school’s use of data and instructional differentiation. Now, with a strong academic focus, close-knit culture,

and high level of community involvement, Grassy Fork serves kids with innovation and heart. The results are noteworthy – middle school students, for example, score roughly 20 points above the state average across reading, math, and science and have shown strong growth on the three-year TVAAS measure.

Grassy Fork is the essence of a community school, with student learning intertwined with the daily life of area families and residents. Many activities and events in town revolve around the school, including food drives, celebrations, fund-raisers for families in need, and public safety events.





“The school is most definitely the centerpiece of this community,” Grassy Fork teacher Mark Tocholke said. “All activities revolve around the school itself.”

Principal Judy Webb maintains an “open-door policy,” meaning that any community member can come in anytime for a cup of coffee or a fast Internet connection. With low connectivity levels in the mountains – most Grassy Fork students don’t have computers at home – this is an important service.

“Anybody can come in here and research what kind of medicine Grandma needs to take, how to get to Myrtle Beach on MapQuest,” said Dr. Webb. “It’s a hub of communication. Parents do feel welcome here – very welcome here.”

Special events bring families to the school throughout the year, providing monthly opportunities to celebrate what kids are learning. A school picnic in August introduces parents to kids’ teachers and gets the year off to a good start with a 100-foot, soap-covered tarp for sliding. In October, at Spooky Story Night, students write and read

original stories aloud in the school’s outdoor classroom. The Family Craft Night in December, a “Bingo for Books” community supper in March, and a bluegrass festival in the spring are just a few other events on the calendar. The events are well attended by school families and community members alike, according to Grassy Fork parent Jennifer Baxter.

“You won’t be able to find a parking spot,” Ms. Baxter said.

This culture translates into valuable community support for the school and students, meeting material needs of the school and its kids while making a meaningful statement that academic work is supported.

Fundraisers including the bluegrass festival and a community Thanksgiving dinner raise thousands of dollars, used to meet needs ranging from technology to textbooks to basketball uniforms. Financial support also allows students to take annual trips to destinations like Nashville and Washington, D.C. Grassy Fork’s outdoor classroom was constructed

by a local builder, and a mechanic shop nearby throws pizza parties when kids succeed academically. A community garden at the school was made possible by a grant from the Farm Bureau – it’s watered by a nearby fire department branch, tilled by a neighbor with a tractor, and planted with seeds purchased by the community.

Regular Community Day events at school bring in a wide variety of working people to showcase what they do best. Kids might learn about chinking logs from a cabin-building company, or enjoy a tale told by a storyteller. The events expose them to a variety of walks of life and make connections to the world around them.

“What the children see is that people care about them. They know that so many people really care about them and continue to care about them, even after they graduate high school,” said Dr. Webb. “They really feel the connection to the community and want to help take care of the school and the community.”

About nine out of ten Grassy Fork students are economically disadvantaged, Mr. Tocholke said. “We have some needs here. If a child is hungry, they’re not going to learn well.”

Community members help provide support for needy students. A food bank brings truckloads of food to send home, local ministries provide coats for kids who need them, and other groups make sure students have Christmas presents.

The Grassy Fork community culture extends to each individual student. Individual learning needs are closely monitored by teachers and staff. Innovative after-school programming improves technology access and provides homework help, while



helping the school monitor potential problems that could arise between kids, or as a result of the emotional burdens of poverty or drug abuse at home.

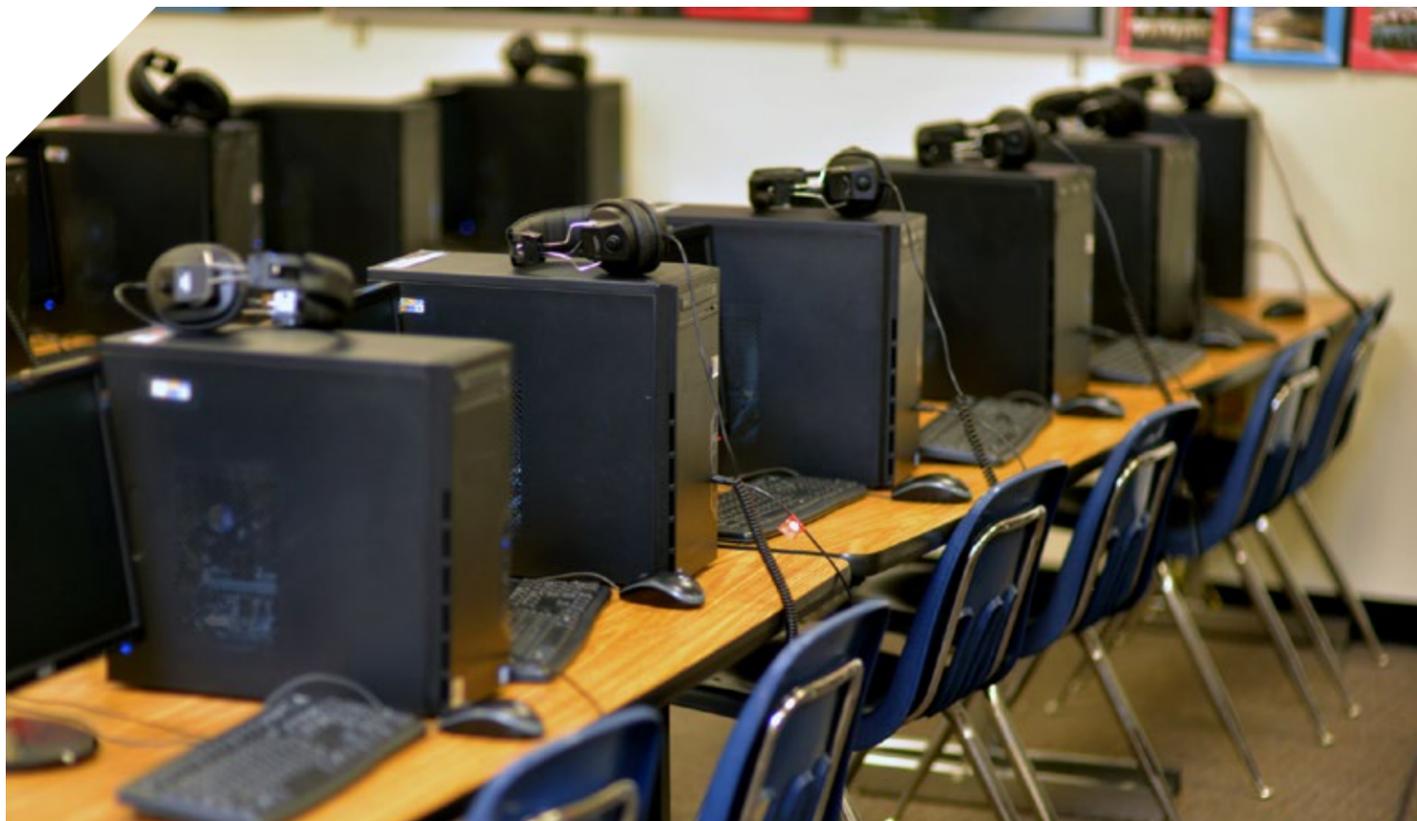
Eighth-grade student Kailey Grace says the school is like a family. In contrast to Grassy Fork, the school she used to attend left her feeling left out. She felt that she learned the basics but was poor at math and didn't do well on state tests. Thanks to one-on-one time with teachers, she's earning a B in math – and has a completely different attitude about school.

"In this community, there are a lot of children with poor home lives," said Kailey. "School is a safe environment, so it can really help them grow, because school is a safe place for them. You can tell they want to teach you, so students really want to learn."

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**SCHOOL
IS A SAFE
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SO IT CAN
REALLY HELP
THEM GROW,
BECAUSE SCHOOL
IS A SAFE PLACE
FOR THEM.**

-Kailey Grace, 8th Grade

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GRASSY FORK SCHOOL

PRINCIPAL DR. JUDY WEBB

30 Students in Grades 5-8 | Coker County Schools

- ✓ School doors are always open to the community through regular events and computer resource access, ensuring that parents feel welcome and area residents support student success
- ✓ Student learning and data receive individualized attention from teachers and school staff, resulting in significant academic growth
- ✓ Well-attended fundraisers and outstanding community relationships allow the school to pay for better technology, annual out-of-town trips, improved school facilities, and other learning enhancements

RESULTS:

Grassy Fork students are succeeding academically. In middle school grades, students score about 20 points above the state average across reading, math, and science and have shown strong growth on the three-year TVAAS measure.

KIPP ACADEMY NASHVILLE ENGAGES FAMILIES AND STUDENTS

Text messages. Emails. Fliers in the mail. Saturday meetings at coffee shops.

When it comes to keeping lines of communication open with parents, 2015 SCORE Prize finalist KIPP Academy Nashville puts every possible channel to use, according to parent Debra Payne.

“Their ability to be available is constant. The ability of them to be approachable and there for you is infinite and sincere. And that is the difference,” said Ms. Payne. “There is nothing that compares.”

At KIPP Academy, which was also a SCORE Prize middle school finalist in 2014, staff believe that strong relationships between parents, kids, and teachers lead to fundamentally transformed outcomes. Families are deeply engaged from the very beginning of kids’ work at KIPP. And college conversations happen early and often at this public charter school, which serves 350 students in

grades 5-8 within Metro Nashville Public Schools. KIPP Academy is part of a national network of charter schools. In Nashville, KIPP schools have been established that will ultimately serve students in grades kindergarten through 12.

For Ms. Payne, KIPP exemplifies “compassion and old-school educational values.” The family’s strong educational priorities brought them to KIPP after trying numerous other options, both public and private. The discipline and academic focus of KIPP, combined with the constant availability of staff members, proved to be a winning combination for Ms. Payne and her daughter, Lexi. Now Lexi is a KIPP Academy alum attending a Metro Nashville high school, but relationships with KIPP staff remain significant.

“There are so many people there that I just love. They are literally part of my family now,” said Ms. Payne. “I just cannot ever thank them enough.”

At KIPP Academy, relationships between school staff and families begin with home visits. After students are accepted to the school but before the academic year begins, KIPP teachers travel in pairs to visit homes and work through a questionnaire about family strengths, struggles, and free time. Responses are shared with the rest of the KIPP team.

Teachers make it clear on the visits that KIPP staff care about each child as a person and will treat kids in their care the same way they’re treated at home. Discussion of parents’ hopes and dreams, as well as concerns about school, help establish collaboration and trust. Expectations about homework are communicated, so parents know they’ll need to plan for 30-60 minutes each night, as well as a space to accommodate their child’s work.

Part of KIPP’s work can be repairing previous damage, said Laura Howarth, KIPP Academy’s School Leader. Like every school, some KIPP parents didn’t graduate from high school and may not have found education to be a positive experience.

“We meet them where they’re most comfortable,” said Ms. Howarth. “I think our work is to make



sure their child has the most positive experience possible. Through that, many parents get a different mindset about what that experience can be like.”

In the first weeks of each school year, a meeting for families introduces teachers, shares the content and scope of curriculum for the year, clearly communicates school expectations, and provides information about how to support kids at home. Then, throughout the year, KIPP maintains close contact with all families through a variety of channels. Phone calls home are made as frequently as possible, regarding both struggles and successes. KIPP also builds time for more parent-teacher conferences than the district requires, meeting with parents at the end of each of the first three quarters.

“The more we can meet with families to let them know what expectations they can ask of their kids, the better chance they have of kids meeting that,” said Ms. Howarth. “Some kids are intrinsically driv-



en. But I was one of those kids who pretty much jumped as high as the bar you set for me. A lot of kids are like that.”

KIPP generates continual excitement for college through the school’s programming and culture, effectively turning kids into vehicles for communicating college enthusiasm, said Ms. Howarth. Middle school days are filled with discussion of degree programs, course offerings, and college life. It is always made clear to students exactly what options are possible with specific grade-point averages and test scores.

Concrete planning begins while students are in middle school at KIPP Academy. A Parent Involvement Committee meets monthly, providing information on topics ranging from supporting students’ coursework to saving for college and establishing 529 savings plans. The meetings include fellowship time for snacks with teachers and other families.

And once students complete their work at KIPP Academy, they still have access to incredible college preparation resources. A program called KIPP Through College (KTC) guides families through high school planning, college applications, and financial aid.

Emily Blatter, KTC director, said KIPP doesn’t think in terms of working to engage parents in college planning. In fact, it’s just the opposite.

“It’s not that we have to get parents to be a part of the process. They’re already a fundamental part,” said Ms. Blatter. “They want their kids to go to the best colleges. They want them to have life-changing opportunities. They don’t need to be convinced of that at all.”

Through KTC, KIPP Academy alumni are helped to overcome the hurdles. Workshops are hosted for students and families, and relationships started at KIPP Academy are maintained for years after. Kids get help identifying college options, including

schools that might be more selective or farther from home than students might aim for on their own. Applying for the U.S. Department of Education’s Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) program as well as other sources of financial aid is complex, requiring significant documentation.

“We want parents to get in the know as much as their students are. We don’t want students to be the only ones carrying the knowledge, because at the end of the day, the parent will make the decision,” Ms. Blatter said. “It’s really about information, direction, and demystifying.”

Ms. Payne and her daughter Lexi have taken full advantage of KTC’s resources in the years after Lexi finished her time at KIPP Academy. Lexi, a talented visual artist and honors student, has applied to schools including the Maryland Institute College of Art and the Rhode Island School of Design. Her family is currently going through the process of figuring out financing with scholarships and grants.

While the family has gone through the application process before with an older sibling, things are different now. Everything is online, for one thing, and there are many deadlines and details to be aware of. KTC utilizes the same open channels of communication in play at KIPP Academy. Program staff help families tackle barriers large and small, from making use of a KTC printer to coordinating transportation for campus tours. Between the workshops, phone calls, meetings, and mailings, Ms. Payne said KIPP families have an advantage.

“These folks are thoroughly knowledgeable about what to do, when to apply. Had we not had them, I am positive we would have missed imperative deadlines,” said Ms. Payne. “I wish this were available to all students.”



KIPP ACADEMY NASHVILLE

PRINCIPAL LAURA MIGUEZ HOWARTH

350 Students in Grades 5-8 | Public Charter in Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools

- ✓ Teachers build relationships with families through home visits, school-wide meetings, monthly educational opportunities, parent-teacher conferences, and frequent phone calls home
- ✓ School alumni and their families are supported through college application workshops
- ✓ KIPP’s culture generates excitement about college life and courses, and students bring the enthusiasm home

RESULTS:

KIPP Academy alumni have high college-going rates: For example, 71 percent of KIPP’s first class of eighth-graders went on to matriculate into college.



NEW VISION ACADEMY COUNTS ON DATA TO FUEL STAFF COLLABORATION AND STUDENT AND PARENT BUY-IN

Count eighth-grader Sydney Lee among New Vision Academy's many fans of academic growth data.

Sydney was earning C's and B's in math and English until she was introduced to her own diagnostic assessment data by educators at 2015 SCORE Prize-winning middle school New Vision Academy (NVA). After challenging herself to put in more effort on daily assignments, Sydney has closed the gap between potential and performance. She's now earning A's in math and English.

"The diagnostics represent what I can do if I put in the effort," Sydney said. "It just makes me realize that I can do way better."

A small, single-hallway school with nine instructors on staff, NVA has an exceptionally data-rich culture. Many tools for monitoring student growth are in use at this public charter school in Nashville – assessments, benchmarks, math, and reading levels – and NVA sets a new standard for using this information productively. Data improves

instruction, facilitates teacher collaboration, and aids communication with students and parents.

"Once they start to believe, then they start to own their education," said Executive Director Timothy Malone. "Everybody's not on the same level, and we recognize that. But we want to see that growth in every child. The data doesn't lie. We try to tie that data into everything we do."

Teachers use data to inform lesson plans, so instruction is differentiated and targeted. While NVA has the small-school benefit of natural collaboration, teachers say the different data open lines of communication even further. The team works together to consider interim assessment results, what needs to be retaught, and how to improve mastery.

For English language arts teacher Sarah Leach, now in her second year at NVA, this atmosphere was initially intimidating. Over time, she realized that openness to feedback and honesty about her work helped her become a better teacher faster.

"A lot of teachers fear data sometimes, because they're afraid it will be used as a tool to judge them," said Ms. Leach. "When you have a supportive environment, it's not about judgment – it's about growth."

Those who are achieving growth in their classrooms take turns leading instructional meetings, said Mr. Malone, and staff members are empowered to take on leadership roles. For example, a particularly hands-on science teacher with a strong subject matter background has been empowered to help train other science teachers and clarify standards, fueling NVA's big science gains.

"I want to preach data all day long, but I recognize that my voice gets a little stale," Mr. Malone

said. "It's about the teachers, at the end of the day. They come in every day motivated to make a difference in our students' lives. They are passionate about their content. They come in early, stay late, and make sure our kids are growing."

ELA teacher Rosalie DeMasi is able to provide very specific student reading levels to teachers of other subjects. Science and social studies require heavy reading, and NVA English teachers watch for standards in other subjects requiring high levels of comprehension. Ms. DeMasi works to make sure students have tools to make complex texts more accessible.

"We're always looking for ways that we can help students across subject areas," said Ms. DeMasi.

Many students enter NVA classrooms two or three grade levels behind. NVA helps them close gaps – sometimes very quickly. NVA's use of data helps kids understand their potential, identify goals, and demonstrate progress. Staff members talk openly and frequently with students about results, with many one-on-one meetings. Students always know exactly where they stand.

And when students achieve growth, it's celebrated.

Quarterly school-wide festivities give the students something to aim for throughout the year. For example, kids who do well on the year's first quarterly assessment – which falls right after Halloween – get free admission to NVA's fall festival. Pizza parties and other in-classroom celebrations are used to reward meeting other goals.

Student of the Week accolades recognize noteworthy effort, while students already achieving at high levels are honored with school leadership roles, helping complete peer interventions. Even small gains are celebrated in some way; high fives and encouragement in the hallways are common.



"We've seen such great growth from the students," Ms. DeMasi said. "They feel that sense of pride and confidence when they see how they're improving in every assessment."

Parents are introduced to the data as well, and educated about the differences between assessment results and course grades. The detailed information available helps the school break down for parents any specific changes that might need to happen – more attention paid in class, a need for tutoring, greater effort on homework assignments. Parents and teachers meet twice each year for conferences, but progress reports go home every two weeks while results of other assessments reach parents as soon as teachers have them.

The approach is conducive to clear communication with a diverse group of parents, including families for whom English is not the first or only language. Busy caregivers might not have time to read every word sent home from school, but the color-coded diagnostic reports are clear and concise.

"I think about data as a way to really bridge the gap in parent understanding," said Ms. Leach. "Parents know what they're looking for. It's very visual, very easy to understand. It also builds investment within parents and students. By educating them and keeping them informed, they now have questions, and they can become more involved."

While NVA has a clear focus on data and achievement, the staff balances this with continuous work on social and emotional learning. Teachers work to meet students' needs holistically, building relationships and finding moments to talk about kindness and respect. The resulting atmosphere is very meaningful for NVA students, who say they feel safe at school. Peer friendships are

nurtured, as are bonds between educators and their pupils. And teachers, who often have the same students in class for two consecutive years, say the impact of their work is concrete and visible.

"I think the kids definitely feel a sense of comfort in coming to their teachers. We like to foster that atmosphere of care and love," said Ms. DeMasi. "I love working here because I can directly see my impact. I leave here every day thinking, "Wow, it was so great to see how that student grew.""

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WE’VE SEEN SUCH A GREAT GROWTH FROM THE STUDENTS. THEY FEEL THAT SENSE OF PRIDE AND CONFIDENCE.

-Rosalie DeMasi

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NEW VISION ACADEMY EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR TIM MALONE

175 Students in Grades 5-8 | Public Charter in Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools

- ✓ Students learn about their own growth data, providing them ownership of academic progress and motivating them to close the gap between potential and performance
- ✓ Teachers use data to share information about student learning and support cross-curricular instruction
- ✓ Clear, visual indicators of academic progress help the diverse group of parents understand student needs

RESULTS:

High three-year TVAAS scores for reading, math, and science show incredible student growth.

HIGH SCHOOLS

PRIDE AND SUPPORT DRIVE OUTSTANDING ACHIEVEMENT AT COVINGTON HIGH SCHOOL

"I like what you said, but I'm not changing anything that I'm doing."

This sort of feedback should sound familiar to many educators. It's what Cory Concus, a math teacher at 2015 SCORE Prize finalist Covington High School, initially heard from a fellow faculty member last year.

At the time, Mr. Concus had just taken on an instructional coaching role at Covington, spending mornings in the classroom and afternoons working with colleagues to improve instruction. Thanks to Covington's instructional coaching and collaborative process, the attitude changed quickly.

Two weeks later, the reluctant colleague asked Mr. Concus for more information, then tried something new in his classroom – he spread a sheet of butcher paper across a corkboard and let kids plot out how they all solved math problems.

Students found multiple methods and stepped in to help one another find faster paths. It became clear to the teacher that something powerful was happening: Students were learning how to think about the skill being taught, and how to articulate their processes.

"He came and said, 'You wouldn't believe what happened in my class today,'" Mr. Concus recalls.



At Covington High, which serves nearly 750 students in grades 9-12 in West Tennessee, a collaborative, teacher-focused atmosphere ensures that instructors are respected, treated as experts in their field, and encouraged to work together closely. The resulting culture is highly conducive to innovation, instructional risk-taking, and development of leadership.

Covington students, in turn, benefit academically and personally. The school has narrowed achievement gaps while raising algebra proficiency rates. Covington's students have made strong gains in English II and tremendous gains in Algebra I and II over the past three years. Covington was the SCORE Prize high school winner in 2012, 2013, and 2014.

"We treat our faculty as the professionals they are," said Principal Mark McClain. "Once teachers enter our building, they feel that sense of family."

The school has low levels of attrition and very little turnover. When Mr. McClain became a Covington teacher in 2005, he was one of 17 new faculty members. Last year, however, there was just one. Teachers tend to stay for extended careers at Covington.

"We have more people wanting to get in the door than wanting to get out the door," said Brandi Blackley, assistant principal at Covington.

Covington offers outstanding leadership opportunities for teachers, allowing staff to grow while remaining at the school. Ms. Blackley was initially hired as an English teacher at Covington, then took on an instructional coaching role that allowed her to continue some classroom work while helping colleagues and serving as a part-time administrator. Now in her first year as a Covington assistant principal, Ms. Blackley is well

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**WE'RE
 ONLY AS
 SUCCESSFUL
 AS THE
 SUPPORT
 WE HAVE**
 -Mark McClain

positioned to join a building leadership team that meaningfully supports instruction.

"It's about trust with your faculty, understanding that they are the content experts. As administrators, you have to trust them to teach the classrooms," Ms. Blackley said. "We expect that



you know your content and that you know your kids. If you know your content and you know your kids, things typically fall into place."

Trust and respect for faculty shines through the school's instructional coaching and professional

learning communities (PLC) structure, two defining features of Covington's culture. In place for the last five to seven years, PLCs are led by teachers and instructional coaches. Meetings are every two weeks, alternating between grade-level and departmental groups.

Mr. Concus believes that a structure based on teachers leading and coaching other teachers keeps the process highly focused on instructional needs and student improvement. As an instructional coach, Mr. Concus doesn't dictate changes; he shares his own daily struggles and successes. And because he is still teaching, he remains well-connected to students, which translates to connections with other teachers.

Support for teachers also comes from outside the building. The central office of Tipton County Schools is an essential part of Covington's achievements, Mr. McClain says, as are members of the local community and nearby industries.

"We're only as successful as the support we have," Mr. McClain said.



Covington teachers face many challenges posed by the school's demographics. Poverty levels are high. In a community that has experienced dramatic economic changes in recent years, a large number of students deal with significant challenges before they enter the school building each day. The school's staff understands this, and embraces it. More than half of Covington's teachers are also alumni of the school. Many of the rest are parents of school students and alumni. Mr. Concus is part of the latter group, with a 17-year-old daughter currently attending the school.

"This is hard work, but just look at the change that's taking place in some of these kids. If one kid turns it around, that can change a whole generation of students," said Mr. Concus. "We're just kind of a blue-collar family. We really have a hard and tough task ahead of us. If you walk through the hallways, you recognize very quickly that demographics are not always conducive to learning. But it's our job to make sure every kid learns."

This gets to a hallmark of Covington life: Pride. Students and teachers are happy to be there, Ms. Blackley said. And kids who are part of the school automatically have an extended network of support in the local community.

"We do so much more than just make sure everyone has a diploma," said Ms. Blackley. "There's a lot of pride. Teachers accept zero excuses. That comes from what they expect of themselves."

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**IF ONE KID
TURNS IT
AROUND, THAT
CAN CHANGE
A WHOLE
GENERATION...**
-Cory Concus



COVINGTON HIGH SCHOOL
PRINCIPAL MARK MCCLAIN

750 Students in Grades 9-12 | Tipton County Schools

- ✓ Leadership opportunities for teachers allow staff to grow while remaining in the classroom and at the school
- ✓ Instructional coaching and faculty-led PLCs encourage sharing of best practices, innovation, and instructional risk-taking
- ✓ Support for teachers translates to powerful relationships with students, transforming outcomes and fostering pride

RESULTS:
Covington has narrowed achievement gaps while helping students make strong gains in English II and tremendous gains in Algebra I and II over the past three years.

STUDENTS TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR LEARNING AT MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. MAGNET SCHOOL

When Reverend Jay Hartley visited his oldest son at college this past school year, he heard the kind of feedback just about any parent would want.

At lunch with one of his son's engineering professors, Rev. Hartley – parent of three past and present students of 2015 SCORE Prize finalist school Martin Luther King Jr. Magnet School in Nashville (MLK) – learned that it can be hard to predict how young people will fare as college freshmen. The professor told Rev. Hartley that even the best of students can be distracted by everything available in college.

This hadn't been an issue for Rev. Hartley's son, the professor told him.

"He's able to focus and do everything," Rev. Hartley said. "I think MLK is definitely a part in that."

MLK builds high expectations and rigor into every facet of student life. Students are well supported

through demanding courses of study, while picking up values that encourage lifelong learning and independent ownership of their progress.

"We try not to let them fly under the radar or accept mediocrity. I think the majority of our students rise to that expectation," said Christopher Dowlen, an MLK teacher and chair of the school's English department. "We try to put them in situations and circumstances where they have to have autonomy, they have to have choice, they have to grapple and feel uncomfortable. I think that's key."

As a public academic magnet school within Metro Nashville Public Schools, students must meet academic requirements in order to qualify for MLK. Typically, this includes a grade average that is 85 or above, no failing grades, and TCAP scores that are "proficient" or "advanced." MLK serves students in grades 7 through 12, with 800 students in the high school grades.

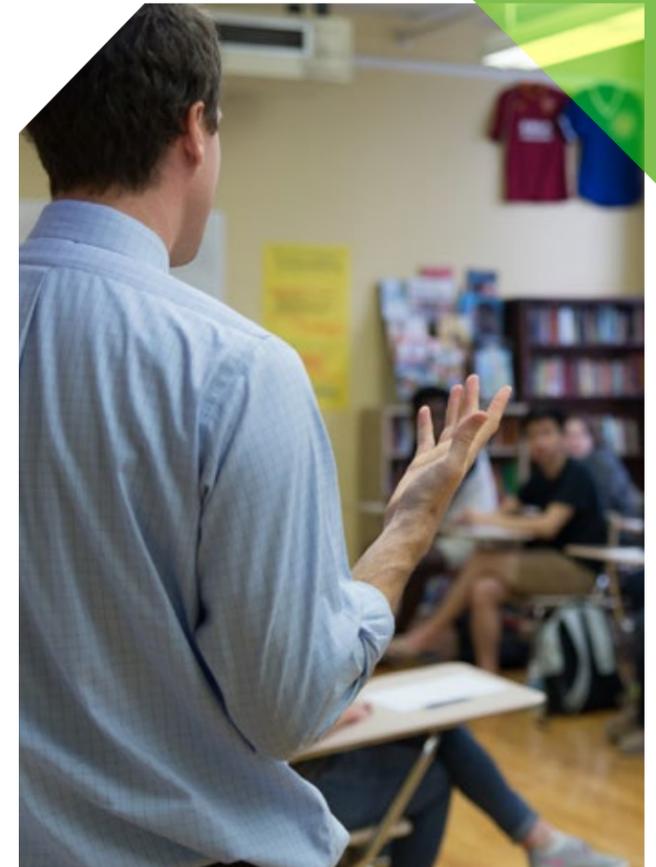
Even with these requirements, achievement levels and student needs are far from uniform, MLK Executive Principal Angela McShepard-Ray said.

"Students do score higher on state-mandated tests. However, those scores range," Dr. McShepard-Ray said. "There's the highest of the high, middle of the high, and lowest of the high. It can be challenging, especially when you have a high range in one classroom."

MLK has achieved remarkable success in fostering high-level achievement among students at the highest tiers and significant growth for middle and lower tiers. High expectations are built into the curriculum. At MLK, every class starting in ninth grade is honors-level or higher. Advanced Placement (AP) class offerings are extensive. MLK currently offers 25 AP-level courses, with another due to be added in the next school year. Students choose their own courses, but all paths available are challenging.

"When students come in, they are expected to achieve at that Advanced Placement level, or at minimum, at the honors level," said Dr. McShepard-Ray.

Transitions to high school grades are eased through the Freshman Forum, a program that keeps teachers in regular contact with ninth-grade students and their parents. Students across MLK in the "low-high" range receive support through study hall time and tutoring opportunities, plus teachers make time during lunch and after school to provide skill foundations. Assignment selection within classrooms can be differentiated according to student need. The highest achievers are monitored to ensure that higher-level work is taking place – students can opt to add AP classes, and a few elect to trade study hall for extra class time.



For all students, coursework is intended to be challenging. Dr. McShepard-Ray said the school works to keep parents and students aware of course and GPA requirements at MLK, so students aren't shocked by the workload.

"That's a message going out from seventh-graders to seniors: 'You worked hard to get into MLK. Now that you're here, the work is just beginning,'" Dr. McShepard-Ray said.

While many MLK students could be considered academically driven, Dr. McShepard-Ray said that some days are inevitably better than others – and everyone needs support at some point. The school takes motivation seriously, for students at all levels.

One issue that often arises is that students will falter in their willingness to tackle the demands of AP classes. Mr. Dowlen recalls working with a



student this year who decided in October that an AP English course wasn't right for him. The school responded with a conference that included the student, his parents, teachers, and administrators. It was Mr. Dowlen's recommendation that the student remain in the higher course – while the class was pushing students out of their comfort zones, this was beneficial.

The student ultimately opted to remain in the course. For Mr. Dowlen, this was ultimately a significant success story. Later in the year, the day after the AP test, Mr. Dowlen chatted with this student about the test and was delighted to hear him speak "in a wonderfully academic way" about the tasks he'd been asked to complete.

"It was one of those moments. He would never have talked that way in October," Mr. Dowlen said. "I'm hoping that eventually when he looks back, he'll say, 'I did that.'"

Rev. Hartley said the culture of the school is exemplified by support and achievement. In the most recent school year, one of his children took five AP classes – one more than the typical maximum of four – because a devoted instructor taught an extra AP class during lunch. The workload was "huge," Rev. Hartley said, but his child chose to take it on.

"There were several other students there doing that, but they push each other," said Rev. Hartley. "They've had some good, challenging peers to work on projects with."

Strong teacher collaboration and dedication helps MLK bring out the best in students. Though schedules can be complicated, with some teachers working in both middle and high school classrooms, MLK works to build time in the day for collaboration. Colleagues reach out to one an-

other to discuss students who might be struggling, or potential interest and aptitudes for AP courses. Instructors work together to visualize current underclassmen as juniors and seniors, thinking through how best to prepare them. The priority is always academic experience and improvement of thought processes, Mr. Dowlen said – not specific test scores.

"Teachers take the work exceptionally seriously. They embrace that level of inquiry. They embrace that level of rigor. They embrace the pace of that work," said Mr. Dowlen. "I think that's part of that college-going kind of culture that we have going here at our school."

Another exceptional feature of MLK is student body diversity. Rev. Hartley said his kids have had school friends and project collaborators from all over the city, and from countries around the world.

"The racial diversity and the ethnic diversity – it's that horizon-broadening thing that college is supposed to be," Rev. Hartley said.

For Mr. Dowlen, the diversity within each classroom provides powerful learning opportunities. Students learn to be respectful of one another, which shines through in all contexts and further prepares them to continue learning and growing long after high school.

"It's really, really powerful when you can sit down in a class like mine and students are working in a group. They are exceptionally gracious to one another. They help each other along. They don't judge each other. They know they have to work together for this common goal," Mr. Dowlen said. "That diversity existing within a context of excellence and a context of challenge is particularly special."



MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. MAGNET SCHOOL

PRINCIPAL DR. ANGELA MCSHEPARD-RAY

800 Students in Grades 9-12 | Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools

- ✓ High expectations are built into the curriculum, with all high school classes considered honors-level or higher
- ✓ Study hall, tutoring, and other supports are provided for students needing skills development
- ✓ All students – including the highest achievers – are monitored to ensure that rigorous workloads are pursued. Students with the ability to tackle Advanced Placement (AP) classes are strongly encouraged to do so

RESULTS:

High three-year TVAAS scores for reading, math, and science show incredible student growth.

SOULSVILLE CHARTER FOCUSES ON PROPELLING STUDENTS BEYOND PROJECTIONS

Beating the odds. For building confidence and identity, there's nothing better. Just ask DeVonte Collins.

Last year, DeVonte – currently a senior at 2015 SCORE Prize high school winner, The Soulsville Charter School in Memphis – had only a 4 percent chance of scoring “proficient” on his end-of-course exam (EOC) in Algebra II, according to the prediction of Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (TVAAS) scores. His score, after a year of very hard work? “Proficient.”

DeVonte says Assigned Mandatory Tutoring (AMT) at Soulsville played a part in his success. AMT gave him the chance to spend extra time with the material and get to know his teacher in a small-group setting. AMT was also a pivotal experience for him the year before, when he was a sophomore new to Soulsville and struggling to find confidence in his English class.

“In class, I was getting into material, but I couldn't raise my hand like I wanted to,” DeVonte said. AMT provided the one-on-one attention he

needed. “I got the confidence to ask questions and build relationships with teachers.”

To help students like DeVonte beat the odds, Soulsville has adopted many innovative practices, including excellent academic advising and connections to real-world experiences outside of school. Bryan Hearn, high school dean of curriculum and Instruction, said these efforts add up to a school that is always looking for new ways to set students up for success.

“We're succeeding in a lot of areas and we take pride in that, but we're not stopping,” Mr. Hearn said. “Just looking at the data points won't exactly tell you the spirit of our faculty. We're always trying to get better. We've kind of all embodied the spirit of having a growth mindset.”

The AMT program, in particular, has delivered large, measurable gains for many students. AMT was created in response to creative thinking about the master schedule, according to High School Director Ashley Shores. Four years ago, the school day ran until 5 p.m. each



day, a demanding schedule for families and staff members alike. School leaders challenged themselves to think more strategically about time spent in school. The result was an overhaul of the master schedule and creation of AMT. Now, regular classes finish at 3:30, then AMT happens until 4:30.

While the school has other tutoring programs, Ms. Shores describes AMT time as “sacred” – a mandatory part of the school day. During AMT, teachers spend time with small groups of students covering high-priority material. Some AMT groups meet continuously throughout the year, and others might convene for only a few weeks, so scheduling is fluid. One program objective is to provide remediation. Kids who are behind in reading, for example, might attend AMT blocks in that subject every day. AMT also provides time for ACT test preparation, as well as extra time for the material covered in Advanced Placement (AP) classes. Every student enrolled in an AP class is automatically placed in an AMT block for that subject as well.

Results from time spent in AMT have been dramatic. AP test scores have risen each year since the program was introduced. Last year, a significant number of AP courses recorded their highest-ever AP test scores, including Soulsville's

first “five” scores. EOC test score growth has also been significant. A vast majority – 92 percent – of AMT students exceeded their EOC projections, or scored “proficient” or “advanced.” Students enrolled in this year's Reading AMT groups have grown an average of one grade level in reading in just the first two months of the school year, from August through October.

Projections are made using TVAAS reports. The school often shares test score projections with students, then celebrates when those predictions are exceeded.

“We've found that data to be really empowering. For students to exceed these projections, it can have a huge impact on their identity,” said Ms. Shores. “We've seen things that honestly seem somewhat miraculous.”

AMT is run by Mr. Hearn, who makes sure students know where they're supposed to be each day. Families receive automated calls and emails each day that a student is scheduled for AMT, and also receive each week's after-school schedule along with a progress report every Monday. “We've had so many students see improvement that we don't really get pushback,” said Mr. Hearn.



Soulsville also works beyond the classroom to ensure kids are prepared to succeed in the real world. Every student participates in Summer Growth Experiences (SGE), an initiative that connects kids with the wide array of free summer programs offered in Memphis.

“For a lot of students, maybe you’re not inherently invested in the day-to-day academic world of school. But in the summer, you’re in a program where you might get to fly an airplane or job shadow a chef or help take care of animals at the zoo,” Ms. Shores said. “All of a sudden your world is kind of blown up and you know, ‘This is what I want to do. I need to do the best I can in school so I can do this.’”

In addition to having adventures and meeting peers from around the city, Soulsville students gain from SGE the experience of dealing with application processes. Completing essays and application forms, interviewing for programs, arriving on time and prepared for each day of the summer – the process has soft skills and professional experiences embedded throughout. For this reason, students are required to apply to at least three programs each year, even if they already know which one they’ll join.

“If you’re a first-generation college student, the whole application process can be daunting. That can feel like such an overwhelming task,” Ms. Shores said. “If you’ve been filling out applications since you were a ninth-grader to all these summer programs, then you are far less intimidated by that process.”

Once kids graduate, the school keeps open lines of communication. Soulsville’s alumni support program maintains individualized contact with students – Facebook messages, posts about how-tos and best practices in college – and helps first-generation college students navigate new and difficult terrain. Soulsville has found that help

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**WE’VE SEEN THINGS
THAT HONESTLY
SEEM SOMEWHAT
MIRACULOUS**

-Ashley Shores

navigating details of life after high school can make all the difference. This is especially true for the first year of college. If students make it through freshman year, they’re much more likely to graduate, Ms. Shores said. But many seemingly small barriers can arise during this transition.

For example, a student might work hard all through high school, then arrive on a campus and learn she can’t move into her planned student housing because she hasn’t received the right shots. In that situation, if a student doesn’t have \$150 and know that she needs to find a Walgreens, college plans can be completely derailed.

“That one little thing makes the difference between matriculating and not matriculating,” Ms. Shores said. “So many barriers arise.”

For DeVonte, who is currently applying to three colleges and plans to study physical therapy, the support he has received from Soulsville is remarkable.

“Because of the area we’re in, you wouldn’t think there would be the support and the love. It’s not like that,” he said. “The teachers love us. They care about us. They want each and every one of us to succeed.”



THE SOULSVILLE CHARTER SCHOOL

PRINCIPAL ASHLEY SHORES

600 Students in Grades 9-12 | Public Charter in Shelby County Schools

- ✓ Assigned Mandatory Tutoring program involves all students in academic enrichment or intervention
- ✓ Summer Growth Experience connects students with real-world experiences to develop professional and soft skills needed for postsecondary education and work
- ✓ Alumni support program maintains connections with graduates to provide support as they pursue higher education

RESULTS:
There has been a 100 percent college acceptance rate for four graduating classes at Soulsville. The students also have shown strong growth in Algebra I and II and Biology I on the three-year TVAAS measure.



DISTRICTS

RIGOROUS ACADEMICS AND CHARACTER EDUCATION FUEL SUCCESS AT DYERSBURG CITY SCHOOLS

Elementary school students at Dyersburg City Schools might find themselves, in the middle of the day, removing scuff marks from a hallway or helping walk a dog.

Dyersburg City Schools Director Neel Durbin says these responsibilities bring out the best in students of all ages, academically and otherwise. And apparently, the kids like it.

“We give them a lot of responsibility for things that you wouldn’t think fall on kids,” Mr. Durbin said. “When a child feels like they’re doing something important, they are.”

2015 SCORE Prize district finalist Dyersburg City Schools does an exceptional job of preparing students for college and the workforce, starting with kindergarten and continuing through graduation. A rigorous, career-focused curriculum combined with comprehensive, age-appropriate development of soft skills ensures that students graduate with the academic preparation and personal focus needed to succeed after high school.

The northwest Tennessee district has maintained a trajectory of increasing academic expectations for many years, netting strong gains in math over the last three years and ACT test scores above the state average. But it’s only been in the last five years that district leaders worked to connect this academic growth with development of other skills needed for college and career. This effort began in community conversations with various local industry leaders, the Dyersburg/Dyer County Chamber of Commerce, and downtown development associations.

“We asked them, ‘What do you need? What do our students need to be successful in your particular workforce?’ That can mean any industry, including various higher education settings,” Mr. Durbin said. “We reverse-engineered this. We started at the end and then worked toward the beginning.”

District officials learned that soft skills are a critical component of post-graduation success. Students must know how to take responsibility, function on a schedule, and communicate well and appropriately with others.



In response to these insights, the district adopted and expanded several recognized leadership development models in a multi-school character development initiative. At Dyersburg Primary School, a Positive Behavior program for K-2 students encourages kids to be respectful, responsible, and ready for learning. The Leader in Me program implemented for grades 3-5 at Dyersburg Intermediate gets kids thinking early and often about goal-setting and personal development. Further character education happens in many dimensions for older students at Dyersburg Middle and Dyersburg High schools.

Part of the process for younger kids is adoption of responsibilities ordinarily taken on by adults. Elementary kids take ownership of keeping classrooms and hallways clean. Many classrooms have a designated “greeter” – a child responsible for immediately hopping up for an introduction to any visitor to the room, taking time to explain what’s happening, get a bottle of water for the visitor, and checking to see what the visitor needs. School therapy dogs can provide a range of services to students, from spending time with high-need kids to providing a nonjudgmental ear for children practicing their reading skills, as well as another outlet for development of student responsibility – kids are charged with various dog care needs.

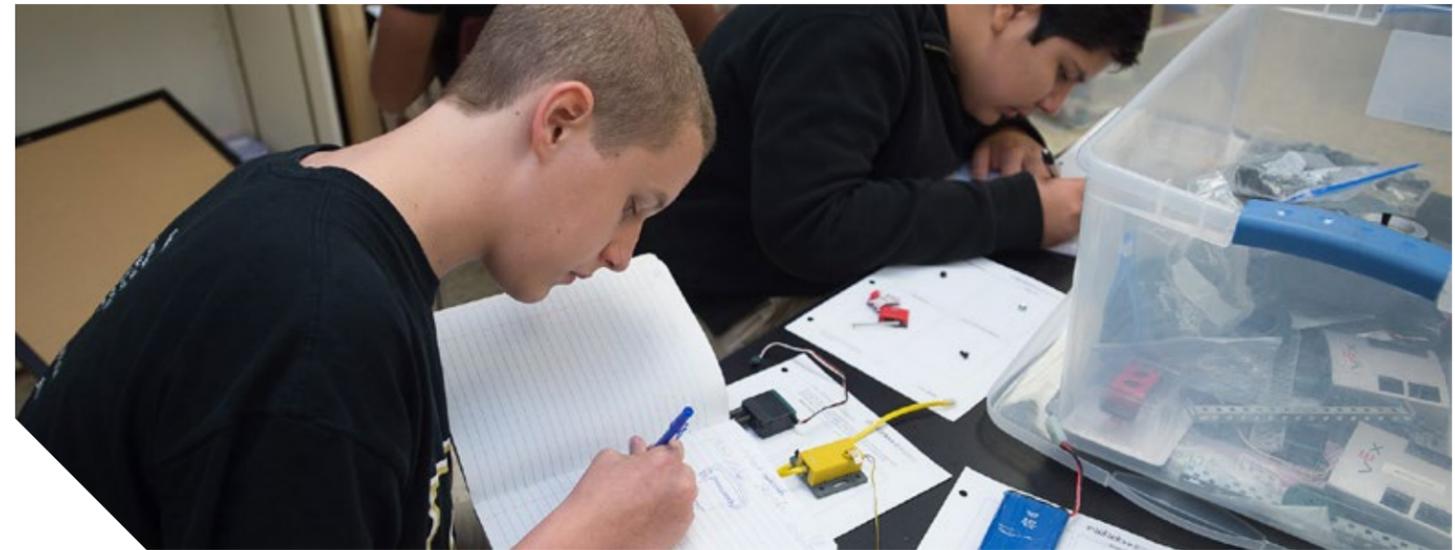
“It’s unbelievable what it does for the attitude of students and teachers when you walk in with a dog,” Mr. Durbin said. “It is the cheapest, most effective intervention that we have.”

At Dyersburg Intermediate, all fifth-graders attend a leadership class taught by school librarian Kari Bernier for a total of four weeks during the school year. Kids learn about

interpersonal communication, getting along with others, and public speaking. Presentation skills are explored for speaking to groups and individuals. Students consider what it might mean to have a professional or social persona. The underpinnings of responsibility and leadership are developed and reinforced.

“It opens doors in any number of ways, in all sorts of fields. When they get older and into those leadership roles, they’re ready,” Ms. Bernier said.

At Dyersburg Middle and Dyersburg High schools, students are responsible for aspects of school operations including management of message boards, production of presentations and ads, and district-wide technical support. Designated middle and high school ambassadors guide visitors around the schools. All older students face big consequences for being late to class. If they aren’t in their seats and ready to learn when the bell rings, they aren’t permitted to attend the class. Instead they complete the work in an alternate setting until the next period.



“Our kids understand the importance of being on time. We’re extremely successful with that,” Mr. Durbin said.

Senior seminars provide the opportunity to consider personal values and long-term goals. Many students have cited the seminars as their most important high school experience, providing direction and focus for life after high school, Mr. Durbin said.

The results that character education delivers are difficult to measure. The impact of interventions in the early grades won’t be measurable for several more years. But in the meantime, positive results are readily apparent and closely tied with academic gains. Teacher feedback to the district reports that kids now interact with one another and instructional materials at a more mature level, a result that Mr. Durbin notes is “braided together” with the state’s academic standards requiring kids to think, write, and express themselves well. Mr. Durbin is proud that his district is ranked 15th highest in the state of



Tennessee in its percentage of economically disadvantaged students, while maintaining a district-wide average ACT score in the state's top 20.

"We think that we do a pretty good job on the academic set. Our data shows that we grow kids quite well," Mr. Durbin said.

At Dyersburg City Schools, ACT preparation and thinking about post-graduation decisions start very early. At Dyersburg Intermediate, which serves all districts students in grades 3-5, college is always part of the conversation. Combining this academic focus with Leader in Me goal-setting and leadership instruction for fifth-graders helps empower kids to meet high expectations.

Principal Lenita Click estimates that 65 to 70 percent of her students' parents received no post-secondary education, so teaching kids that other options are possible requires early communication. With the Tennessee Promise program in place, Dyersburg Intermediate students are hearing now that they can attend Dyersburg State Community College for two years free of charge. Kids hear exactly how much more money such a decision can bring later and learn about the benefits of setting themselves up to make their own choices.

Two years ago, the school used one of its two annual Title I-funded Family Nights – which are well-attended, drawing hundreds of parents and kids without any kind of door prizes or "bribes," Ms. Click said – to educate families about college. Fifth-graders wrote to different colleges and set up presentations about different options. A classroom was temporarily converted to a makeshift dorm room for families to tour. A high school teacher spoke to families about preparing for the ACT, and local investment bankers provided information

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THEY'RE READY.**

-Kari Bernier

about saving for college. There was even a session on studying abroad. At the end of the night, faculty and staff donned their own regalia and offered an abridged graduation ceremony as "Pomp and Circumstance" played.

"Unless you've gone to a college or high school graduation, you haven't seen that," Ms. Click said. "We're telling kids, 'You can go to college.'"



DYERSBURG CITY SCHOOLS

DIRECTOR NEEL DURBIN

2,800 Students in Grades PK-12 | 4 Schools

- ✓ Rigorous, career-focused instruction orients students of all ages toward graduation and beyond
- ✓ Age-appropriate character development instills personal responsibility and strong academic habits in students at all grade levels
- ✓ ACT preparation begins in elementary school and builds as students approach high school

RESULTS:

Dyersburg's three-year average ACT score is 20.5, more than 1 point above the state three-year average. The district has a roughly 60 percent AP exam pass rate, and nearly two-thirds of Dyersburg's graduates have gone on to college over the past three years.

JOHNSON CITY SCHOOLS SUPPORTING ACADEMICS BY SUPPORTING STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH AND SAFETY NEEDS

Sometimes, grant-funded school programming effectively has an expiration date. When temporary funds end, so do the services they paid for.

Sometimes. But not always.

Eight years ago, SCORE Prize finalist Johnson City Schools (JCS) won a sizable federal grant: \$5 million in Safe Schools/Healthy Students funds, received over the course of four years. The grant allowed JCS to establish the HEROES program, a comprehensive set of services designed to meet a wide range of student mental health and safety needs.

“We tried to inundate our schools with support,” said JCS’s Greg Wallace, director of the HEROES program. “We essentially established local mental health clinics in all our schools.”

JCS’s use of the funds was so successful that the district received a national Voices of Prevention award from the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. It’s challenging to isolate academic benefits of the program, as many kids receiving services are also enrolled in Response to Instruction and Intervention (RTI²), but documented measurable results do include decreases in drug and alcohol use, bullying events, and student absences due to fear.

In 2012, the grant ended – but the services didn’t. JCS and community partners decided the HEROES program was too important to lose, collaborating to locate funds necessary to maintain the level of investment initially made possible through the grant. Individualized mental health

services have been provided to about 20 percent of JCS’s students.

“We’re like everybody. We don’t have a ton of money floating around. But we’ve made it a priority,” said Dr. Wallace.

The HEROES story is just one example of how JCS allocates resources to support student well-being. High academic expectations are set for all students in the district, and kids are fully supported in meeting them. From a thoughtful, comprehensive RTI² program to nutritional services designed to truly meet kids’ needs, JCS has achieved success by caring for every student.



“We plan for the whole child,” said Debra Bentley, director of instruction and communications for JCS. “When a child feels safe, when a child feels mentally and emotionally sound, then the academics will come.”

High academic expectations are the district-wide standard at JCS. Instead of thinking in terms of what 70 percent of students can achieve, Dr. Bentley said, the goal is always 100 percent. School and district culture supports this, as do community members and local funding bodies. Throughout the district, higher-order thinking and instructional differentiation are hallmarks of instruction.

Facilitating this at the district level requires outstanding administration at each school.

“The expectation of high standards, and the personal needs of all students, begins with the building principal,” said Dr. Bentley. “The district has strong leadership in all schools.”

JCS committed \$2 million to RTI² investments two years ago, funding system-level RTI² coaches and allowing JCS to build RTI² programming intentionally. This proactive approach has helped the program be successful, Dr. Bentley said.

Professional development for teachers is centered squarely on student achievement. All instructors in the system – including those who work in part-time positions, like classroom assistants and tutors – have full teaching credentials.

“When you can hire someone to work four to five hours a day to work with at-risk students or kids struggling, it’s great if they are fully credentialed as teachers,” Dr. Bentley said.

Setting the stage for academic success, JCS deploys a range of programs to ensure students are very well supported. For example, thoughtful food services ensure all students have access to nutritious meals and snacks. High-schoolers have the option of a pick-up breakfast after first period, since many kids this age tend to arrive at school just before class. Kiosk service offers healthy snacks throughout the day. Kids needing help with meals over the weekend can opt into a backpack program that sends food home Friday afternoons.

Individual schools have programs to help with everything from delivering dental care to ensuring hands are washed, said third-grade teacher Nancy Miles, an instructor at JCS’s South Side



Elementary. Such programs are in keeping with the district's culture, Ms. Miles said.

"We have a lot of professional development and emphasis on meeting kids where they are and building from there," said Ms. Miles.

Through the HEROES program, every school in the district has a master's-level therapist, as well as a case manager, in addition to school guidance counselors. With HEROES in place, guidance counselors have more time to focus on helping kids in academics and other ways. Concentration of resources is based on the needs of individual schools.

An important component of the program is the presence in schools of highly trained school resource officers (SROs). The district's ten SROs come from the local police department; all are accomplished law enforcement officers, and most have also completed mental health training to identify student needs that aren't strictly disciplinary. The officers are an integral part of each school's team. At one JCS school, an SRO was voted top staff member of the year by the entire school staff and PTA, Dr. Wallace said. While funding for these officers was originally provided by the federal SS/HS grant, the Johnson City Police Department now pays for this portion of the HEROES program.

JCS began investing in mental health support in the late 1970s, using money from the district's budget for special needs students. Offerings were expanded over the years when the district was able, eventually reaching expenditures of about \$80,000 each year in 2008. The SS/HS grant allowed JCS to build massively on existing programs, spending about \$1 million annually on HEROES.



"What allowed us to do the big piece was that we started building the small piece. If you start carving out little pieces, you'll see the benefits and the need, and you can start growing it," said Dr. Wallace. "We're just reaching the tip of the iceberg on providing services and support to schools. Look at the Maslow model. If you're not meeting basic needs first, the rest won't happen."

For parent Anne Godfrey, JCS's blend of high academic expectations and strong student support adds up to a district that has served her family well.

"They aren't afraid to expect excellence from the students and have put the tools in place to make that happen. They've also created such a warm, supportive environment," Ms. Godfrey said. "Students feel comfortable stepping out of their comfort zones and trying something new. That's where the growth occurs."



JOHNSON CITY SCHOOLS

DIRECTOR DR. RICHARD BALES

8,000 Students in Grades PK-12 | 11 Schools

- ✓ High academic expectations, higher-order thinking, and instructional differentiation are the district-wide standard
- ✓ The award-winning HEROES program has a master's-level therapist and case manager in place at each school, plus highly trained school resource officers and other support based on school needs
- ✓ District resources are planned and allocated with the whole child in mind

RESULTS:

Data show decreased drug and alcohol use, bullying events, and student absences due to fear. JCS has seen strong growth in math and science scores and an ACT composite score that is among the highest in the state.



TROUSDALE COUNTY FOSTERS SUCCESS WITH PERSONAL ATTENTION AND INNOVATIVE USE OF DATA

When students at Trousdale County High School see graduation coach Shelley Cook waiting for them after class, they usually know what brought her there.

Maybe it's a course grade starting to slip below passing, or a substantial assignment that wasn't turned in. Trousdale County High – which is the only high school in SCORE Prize-winning district Trousdale County Schools – uses the PowerSchool system to track attendance and grades, and Ms. Cook logs in first thing each morning to check for any signs of trouble.

Whatever the problem, Ms. Cook is ready to help. She tutors, communicates constantly with teachers and coaches, gets to know individual learning needs, and makes sure she understands situations or responsibilities at home that could create barriers. She works closely with juvenile courts and truancy officers and helps students find their way through credit recovery when necessary.

Ultimately, she makes sure most students don't drop out.

"It's just not an option," Ms. Cook said. "For me, it's personal."

With a district-wide graduation rate of 97 percent, it's clear that dropping out of Trousdale County Schools really is an uncommon occurrence. This small district's combination of individual attention, high academic expectations, and close monitoring of data delivers big opportunities for students. Trousdale County Director of Schools Clint Satterfield says the district's defining practices aren't "rocket science." Leaders work hard to identify the best moves for students, and then make them happen no matter what.

"We don't feel that we're smart or that we've cornered the market," Mr. Satterfield said. "We do think we've kept students at the forefront of our conversations. We want to have the courage and the will to do what's best for our students."

At Trousdale County Schools, which also won the district SCORE Prize in 2013, value-added and assessment data are closely monitored from elementary school on. Value-added data guide about 85 percent of classroom forming decisions starting with late elementary grades. The district and schools use the data to divide students into three tertiles – low, medium, and high achievers – and monitor which teachers tend to foster the most growth from students within each group. Placements are adjusted based on student performance, as often as every nine weeks at the middle school grades.

There are other factors considered when forming classes, like kids who don't need to be together or personalities that don't match. But in most cases, students are grouped in classes with similarly achieving peers and taught by the instructors most likely to help them succeed.

The district's goal is for each student to have a personalized learning path. Making this happen begins with leveled classes but doesn't end there. At Trousdale County's middle school – Jim B.



Satterfield Middle, named in honor of Mr. Satterfield's father – a unique schedule delivers some form of intervention to all students, whether kids are in need of enrichment or RTI². Kids on an RTI schedule are in 90-minute "coach" blocks of time every other day, receiving skills-based instruction in math and English language arts. All staff members – regardless of subject area – help teach these classes, keeping student groups very small.

"Every kid has the opportunity to grow," Principal James McCall said. "If every student and every



teacher has that mindset, it's going to be a positive place for learning, and you're going to see those results at the end of the year. It warms your heart."

The district also uses data to communicate transparently with parents and the local community. Parent-teacher conference time is closely focused on student growth, proficiency levels, and benchmark data. District strengths and struggles are clearly communicated to local stakeholders, news media, and funders.

"We've just built a data culture with our administrators, our parents, our teachers, and our community," Mr. Satterfield said. "If you don't know where you are, then it's hard to plan out where you want to go. We're rural and we're poor. We have to strategically leverage every resource we have."

The district's remarkable graduation rate is fostered by this culture of high expectations, as well as concrete support for career and education goals. Students in Trousdale County Schools have detailed plans for their lives after graduation before they complete middle school, setting the stage for successful use of time in high school.

All eighth-graders take a fall-semester class called EXPLORE, which combines ACT test preparation with career and academic planning. In the spring, each eighth-grader completes a cross-curricular project identifying a future career plan, necessary academic steps, and the fiscal impact of these decisions – the kinds of houses they might be able to purchase, and what a budget might look like with different numbers of kids. Students visit a range of colleges, from trade schools to state universities. Benefits of the program include solid preparation for high school as well as measurable gains in ACT scores. The district's ACT average has increased by two points in the last three years.



"We want them on a college and career path before they even set foot in high school. They can change that plan 100 times, but at least they have a goal from the first day," Mr. Satterfield said. "It's a lot about motivation and incentive, and kids seeing themselves four years down the road. That helps you prevent the dropouts, if everyone has an idea of where they're going."

Tracy Belcher, parent of two Trousdale County students, believes they have benefited academically from class work with similarly achieving peers. The district has also delivered impressive opportunities for her kids to pursue their interests in athletics and music.

For Ms. Belcher, the source of the district's strengths lies in the commitment level of its educators and leaders.

"It's not just a job for them. They really want our schools to advance, to help everybody. It's a personal thing," Ms. Belcher said. "You think of a small school system as being limited in what kids can do. It's the opposite. I'm just so proud that a small system like ours can hang in there with the big systems and the private schools."



TROUSDALE COUNTY SCHOOLS

DIRECTOR OF SCHOOLS CLINT SATTERFIELD

1,300 Students in Grades PK-12 | 3 Schools

- ✓ Value-added data guide classroom assignments. Students are grouped with similarly achieving peers and taught by instructors found most likely to deliver growth
- ✓ Math and English language arts interventions, as well as enrichment, are built into each school day
- ✓ Strong academics, staff collaboration, and comprehensive planning starting in middle school foster student persistence toward graduation

RESULTS:

Trousdale County Schools' ACT average has increased by two points in the last three years, and the district graduation rate has risen to 97 percent. Trousdale County ranks among the top ten districts in the state for five-year growth in TCAP proficiency rates for grades 3-8 math and reading.

STUDENTS RISE TO THE CHALLENGE

SCHOLARSHIP COMPETITION

Students Rise to the Challenge (SRTTC) helps lift up the voices of those most affected by academic achievement work – students. More than 400 students submitted essays, photo stories, or videos that described how one of their teachers went above and beyond to help them overcome an academic challenge.

The 2015 student winners each received scholarships worth \$1,000. The teachers who inspired or helped with the winning SRTTC entries each received a \$250 Donors Choose gift card.



HIGH SCHOOL WINNER

Weston Downing

The 12th-grade student at Covington High School in Tipton County Schools, created a video about the coaching of his teacher, Melissa Barrell, which provided to help him raise his math ACT score by 5 points.



MIDDLE SCHOOL WINNER

Yeleeya Li

The sixth-grade student at Indian Trail Intermediate School in Johnson City Schools, composed a poem about how her teacher, Becky Honeycutt, helped her better understand math.



ELEMENTARY SCHOOL WINNER

Nicholas Reynolds

The fifth-grade student at Andersonville Elementary in Anderson County Schools, wrote an essay about how his teacher, Pam McCrary, challenged him to learn more advanced math.



THE SCORE PRIZE HONORS PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND SCHOOL DISTRICTS IN TENNESSEE THAT ARE LEADERS IN LEARNING.

SCORE Prize finalists and winners set themselves apart with outstanding student achievement performance and a commitment to rise to the challenge of preparing all students for postsecondary education and the workforce. The SCORE Prize explores how these schools and districts are achieving success for students, shares their approaches across Tennessee, and rewards their accomplishments with a \$10,000 prize to the elementary, middle, and high school winners and a \$25,000 prize to the district winners.

Every step of the process of identifying SCORE Prize finalists is anchored in academic data. The initial SCORE Prize review process considers all public schools and districts with three years of relevant data. Without knowing the identities of the schools and districts, the SCORE Prize Selection Committee reviews the data to pick three finalists in each category. Then Selection Committee members and SCORE team members visit the schools and districts to observe classrooms, interview the leadership team, and listen to focus groups of teachers, students, and parents to document how the finalists are improving student achievement. The Selection Committee members use the information from the site visits and the achievement data to select the winners, who are revealed at the SCORE Prize event.

About SCORE

The State Collaborative on Reforming Education (SCORE) drives collaboration on policy and practice to ensure student success across Tennessee. We are an independent, nonprofit, and nonpartisan advocacy and research institution, founded in 2009 by Senator Bill Frist, MD, former U.S. Senate Majority Leader. SCORE works collaboratively to support K-12 education throughout Tennessee, and we measure our success by the academic growth of Tennessee's students.