

# Changing a School Environment

**W**hen I came to Albert N. Parlin Elementary School four years ago, the school was a year or two away from being taken over by the state. As a brand new principal I was nervous, but I knew I had a wonderful opportunity to make a difference. I tried many new tactics and if they didn't work, I scrapped them and tried something else.

Today, Parlin has gone from being the district's lowest scoring school to being its highest scoring school in English language arts and mathematics. We moved from being a school designated as needing "corrective action" in math to having a "no status" designation, which is the state's highest performance level. We made adequate yearly progress in math in every category for two consecutive years. In addition, 71 percent of students improved their English language arts scores in the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) test and 28 percent of students increased their English language arts achievement scores on the MCAS.

These improvements are thanks in part to our use of innovative approaches, including one that addresses the underlying causes for reading failure. To transform Parlin, I changed just about everything: I modified the master schedule; implemented monthly school improvement planning meetings; put data in the hands of students, teachers, and parents; implemented computer adaptive assessment programs; put into practice quarterly assessments; eliminated unnecessary down time; applied teacher ideas; and implemented teacher team learning walks to develop a common language about what good teaching looks like. Some of my ideas might work for you; here's what I've learned so far.

**Make every meeting matter.** I began by initiating school-improvement planning meetings, tweaking the schedule so every grade had common planning time at least once a month.

The teams—including teachers, special education staff, English-language learner (ELL) support staff, and guidance counselors—met with me to go over data and discuss student progress.

At first, teachers balked. Because they thought I'd be the next in a long line of revolving principals, they did not want to give more than they already were. Within a few months, however, they saw how seriously I valued these meetings. I encouraged teachers to share their ideas and successes and they began showing up with talking points and data. Everyone was on board by the end of the first year.

**Talk less; listen more.** Instead of always trying to assert what you want to do, solicit teachers to tell you what they need. In my early haste to prove myself, I didn't pay enough attention to others' opinions. But in my second and third years, I started to recognize the stars and let them mentor their colleagues. When you encourage everyone's involvement, they become part of the solution.

**Implement the right instructional programs.** Eighty percent of the students at our school receive free or reduced-price lunch and 55 percent of students are ELLs. We have a high transient population as well. Rather than try the same reading instruction that hadn't worked in the past, we decided to try an approach that focuses not only on building critical reading skills, but also on improving the processing efficiency of the brain. We implemented Scientific Learning's Fast ForWord program, a reading intervention that helps students develop and

strengthen memory, attention, processing rate, and sequencing—cognitive skills essential for learning and reading success. The program includes technology that stretches and emphasizes speech sounds to help students recognize word sounds, first in isolated syllables, then in groups of sounds and in words, and finally in sentences. This approach is terrific for our ELLs because it trains them to hear sounds correctly from the start.

I revamped the entire schedule to pull students out of class for intensive training with the software program, so students did not miss their core subjects. Initially, there was a great deal of negative feedback from teachers because they did not want to be replaced by a computer program, had already planned lessons around the existing master schedule, and did not want to lose valuable teaching time with their students. Within a few months, however, we started seeing positive results. Students were more focused in all their classes and test scores began rising. Some teachers were still resentful they had to give up time with their students, but they wanted to make it work. An added bonus was that the students who did not leave for the specialized instruction ended up receiving individualized instruction since their classes were smaller.

**Encourage teachers to share best practices.** To improve student performance in writing across the curriculum, I paired the teacher whose students had the highest scores on open-response questions with our reading specialist and they established a systemwide rubric for answering essay questions. Then I provided coverage so that every teacher could go into that teacher's class and watch her teach. Afterward, we discussed what they learned and how they could implement it in their own classrooms. Through this process, teachers developed relationships across grade levels and subject areas.

**Let the students be heard.** Developing relationships among all stakehold-

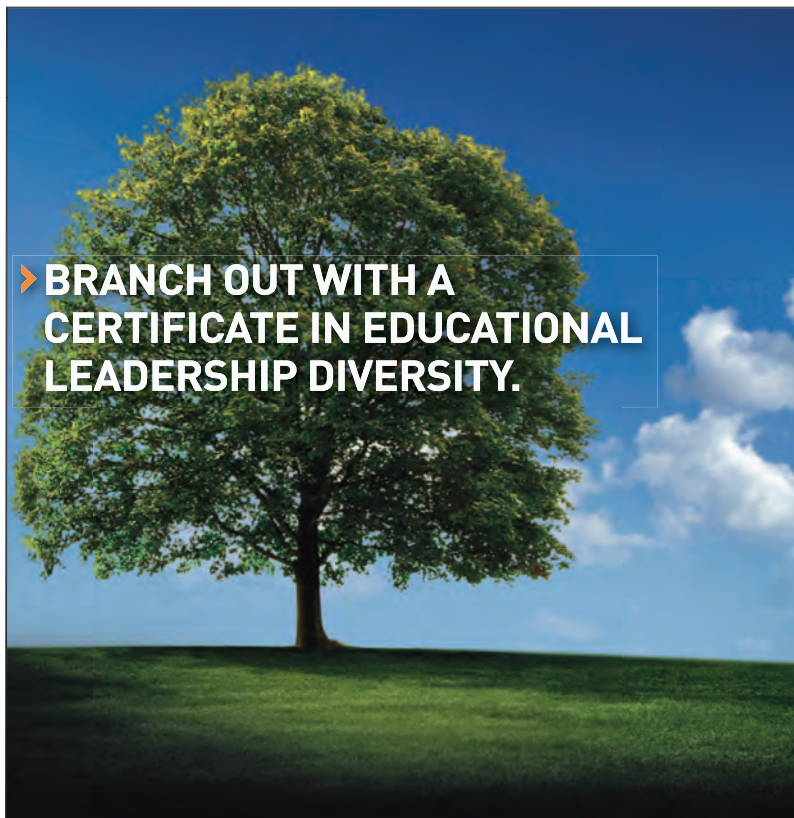
ers is vital to schoolwide success. I put students on the school council, which had previously included only parents, administrators, and teachers. We started with children of PTO parents, but I recruited other students once I got to know them better. Once a month, students on the council come in early for breakfast and we discuss ways to improve our school. You can't say you're successfully serving students if you don't know what they want.

**Ask the community to get involved.** From Target to the Texas Roadhouse restaurant, area businesses are also donating time and money, helping us raise funds, and actively participating in our school improvement efforts. It started when a parent mentioned that Target wanted to help our school but had never been contacted. From one call, we've received everything from balls to hula hoops, and Target employees read to our kids on Dr. Seuss Day. If you reach out, you'll be pleasantly surprised by the number of companies willing to become partners. Many have simply never been asked.

Our community has become heavily involved as well, and our doors are always open. I don't want parents—many of whom are low-income, migrant, or non-English-speaking—to solely view the principal as one who invokes punishment. So we invite them to our breakfast with Santa Claus and other fun, informal events.

**Capitalize on the magic of teamwork.** When I first arrived, it was hard to convince teachers to come to dances or family events; now almost all our teachers attend. I think that teachers finally started to see positive results from some of the new changes and negative attitudes started to shift. They now share ideas with their colleagues and are open and comfortable with one another. We went from an environment characterized by resistance to one cohesive unit working together and achieving our goals of student success. ■

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