Monarch Academy: An Urban School Where All Students Achieve

Here’s a school that defies the odds by creating a culture of belief around the rallying cry of “Yes, we can!”

Tatiana Epanchin

Creating a successful school environment where all students can achieve and thrive is the most crucial part of our work in urban schools. While it is essential to ensure that important nonacademic issues, such as safety, staffing, and student behavior, are in good standing, three additional components are essential to creating an environment of academic achievement: observation, effective use of data, and cultivating a relentless culture of belief in our students.

Monarch Academy is a charter school located in East Oakland, California, that was named California Distinguished Title I School in 2007. Approximately 93 percent of the students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, 100 percent are children of color (90 percent Latino, 10 percent black), and approximately 78 percent are English-language learners. In 2008, 75 percent scored at proficient or advanced levels in math and 36 percent scored at proficient or advanced levels in English language arts on the California Standards Tests.

Classroom Observation Is Critical

As principal, I spend approximately three hours per day in classrooms observing teachers and instruction. An observation might include talking with students when appropriate, helping and circulating during guided practice times, giving written feedback, and having a post-conference with the teacher—either face to face or via e-mail—within 24 hours of the observation. I use the teachers’ professional learning plans, the degree of rigor, and direct quotes from teachers and students in my feedback, along with concrete data, such as the number of students engaged in a lesson, the number of students on task during the visit, or the pattern the teacher follows when asking questions. Ideally, every teacher is observed and has a conversation with me at least twice a month. Lead teachers also observe the teachers on their teams at least once a month.

This school year, we instituted a video observation protocol, in which two teachers will be observed by the entire teaching staff. The protocol we use requires that the observed teacher pose a question to the group before viewing the video. The other teachers hear the question, watch the video, ask clarifying and probing questions, and then discuss the question.

Focusing on Data

Douglas Reeves (2005), in his study concerning 90/90/90 schools (schools where more than 90 percent of the students are eligible for free or reduced-cost lunch, are ethnic minorities, and have met or achieved high academic standards), found that the highest-performing schools had a “laser-like” focus on data. He extolled the importance of schools displaying their data publicly in a variety of ways.

At Monarch Academy, teachers post a new piece of classroom data once each month. I place this data on our data board in the school foyer, along with an explanation of each graph and outlines of our school’s goals.

Two years ago, I started weekly “data meetings” where teachers of the same grade have 50 minutes to look at a common assessment or piece of work, and to plan re-teaching strategies and small-group work accordingly. During the meetings, teachers speak to the strengths and weaknesses of the students, talk about what worked and what didn’t in specific rooms, and divide out work that can be done to share with everyone. These meetings are facilitated by the lead teacher for that grade level, whose role is to provide questions and prompts for the group to consider. I attend as a participant-observer and, after the meeting, I coach the lead teacher on questions to ask to push the team’s thinking on teacher accountability or on other issues that may arise.

Another component of our work with data involves students in
grades 3 through 5, who keep their best pieces of work in data binders, where they can track their progress in math and English language arts. Teachers select much of the content.

Creating a Culture of Belief
To truly build a culture of belief in our students, I had to ensure that discipline would not get in the way of academic achievement. To that end, the lead team and I decided to take on three components of the Responsive Classroom approach (www.responsiveclassroom.org) — Cooperation, Assertiveness, Responsibility, Empathy, and Self-Control (CARES), Hopes and Dreams, and the Morning Meeting.

Once everyone in our school community—students, families, and staff—was using CARES, we had a shared lexicon and no need for additional rules. Each classroom has CARES placards posted, and each teacher spends time teaching and modeling its elements. Using the lens of CARES, we also created a schoolwide plan for behavioral expectations outside of the classroom, so that classified staff could use the same approach on the playground, in our lunch area, and in other common spaces. As a result of these efforts, very few discipline cases are referred to the office.

Morning Meeting occurs in most classrooms on most days. This is the time when students are greeted by name, when someone shares something about himself or herself, or the whole group shares something, such as their favorite character in a book or their favorite Olympic athlete. After sharing, there is an activity in which the students play a game to release their energy.

At the beginning of the year, each student at Monarch writes a Hope and Dream piece, in which he or she describes what it is that they would like to accomplish that year. Examples vary, depending on age, and encompass anything from a sentence or two at the kindergarten level to a full-page essay for the fourth and fifth grades. Each class then develops its own guidelines to ensure that every student can realize his or her hope and dream during the school year.

Yes, We Can!
I began my efforts to ensure that “all can and will achieve” by studying the work of Reeves (2005) and Howard (1991). As a staff, we have all agreed with their belief that people are not born with intelligence, and that intelligence must be learned. We set goals for ourselves each year, and everything that we do is driven by those goals.

Every day begins with a call-and-response chant of “Think you can! Work hard! Get smart!” The same words are posted in all of our rooms and common spaces. They are inscribed on our pencils, on our shirts, and on the bottom of all of our correspondence. We believe it and we live it.

Adults frame most conversations with students around the idea that all students will succeed, no matter what. Students know that the adults in the room will not give up on ensuring their success. Teachers often will be heard asking, “Can you do it?” with the students replying, “Yes, we can!”

Every decision I make starts with the same question: How will this impact student achievement? That has become a guiding focus for all of us at Monarch Academy.

References


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