Succeeding with Struggling Learners

Perhaps the greatest challenge that principals face is enabling struggling learners to succeed. Many of these struggling learners are children from low-income homes who face substantial barriers to their learning. Nearly 20 percent of American children live in poverty, and these children achieve academically at much lower levels than their more affluent peers.

What can principals do to help such children succeed? I can offer some answers based on my experience leading the Johnnie Cochran Jr. Academy, a 280-pupil, K-5 school in inner-city East Orange, New Jersey. Virtually all of our students are black, and 70 percent are economically disadvantaged. Eight years ago, we fit the national profile of a school with struggling students. In 1999, only 10 percent of our fourth-grade, general education students met state standards in reading and only 15 percent met state standards in mathematics.

In 2007, however, the picture looked quite different. Ninety-three percent of Cochran’s fourth-grade, general education students met state standards in reading and 100 percent met state standards in mathematics. We accomplished this transformation by creating a climate conducive to learning and by letting children know that, in spite of the challenges they face, they can succeed.

The climate change started with the creation of a mission statement that was developed by the staff and adopted by the school-leadership council. Parents are fully aware of the mission statement, a living document that is updated at least every other year.

As part of the mission, everyone in the building holds high expectations for each student, and holds him or herself accountable for their success. In addition to participation by teachers and administrators, this effort is supported by staff members who take pride in their role in student learning and treat students as if they were their own children. There is also a culture of respect between teachers and students.

The community—including parents, the board of education, and the superintendent—supports the mission and goals of the school. Parents are true partners who help make decisions about services and personnel, and we have an open-door policy that allows them to observe the teaching and learning process. Parents and teachers sit on committees to interview new staff members and make recommendations for hiring. The feedback from the committee provides important checks and balances for us.

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“...children, it is hard for them to turn down the support.

We also celebrate every child’s success. We take a great deal of time and effort to pore over student achievement data, which we use to evaluate our instructional programs and make needed adjustments. The data is not just for teachers and parents—students need to know how they are progressing as well; and we tell them. Moreover, we hold public events to honor their gains in front of the whole school, highlighting their successes.

Children who come from low-income homes obviously face numerous barriers in their struggle to achieve academic success. However, achieving success is possible. It takes a school environment that lets all children know that they can succeed, as well as strategies to help them.

Yes, there are challenges in our schools. But great leaders take challenges and turn them into opportunities for success. We all have had triumphant experiences that should be made public, and I encourage you to share them with your communities.

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