

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

Effective principals set a vision
of academic success to drive
transformative change





BY JENNIFER GILL

Many children look forward to school outings to the local zoo or science museum, but at Commodore John Rodgers Elementary/Middle School in Baltimore, children prize a field trip to a college campus.

Every month, 20 students—two from each grade, from pre-K to eighth—tour the campus of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. They eat lunch in the cafeteria, take part in a science class, and learn about college life from current students. They earn the trip by being named Commodore Collegiates, a monthly program started in 2011 that recognizes students who show outstanding dedication to the school's values. Principal Marc Martin wanted the name of this student-of-the-month program to convey a potent message to kids: You are college material.

Reaching for the Stars

It wasn't a message that Commodore students were used to hearing. When Martin took over as principal in 2010, he found kids watching movies and sleeping in classrooms. Four principals had come and gone in the five prior years. "It was a culture of failure," he recalls. "The mentality was, 'I won't mess with you if you don't mess with me,' and it went both ways."

Since then, Martin has transformed that mindset by shaping, articulating, and living a vision of academic success for all students. It comes to life in the Collegiates program, the daily

handshakes Martin gives students at arrival and dismissal, and the college pennants hanging in the halls. It's the foundation of the school's catchy slogan, which adorns uniform shirts, faculty lanyards, and even stair risers: "Commodore to College—100% for 100%."

"It's our North Star," Martin says. "If every single student, teacher, staff, and family member follows through 100 percent, then 100 percent of us will achieve."

Like Martin, many principals agree that setting a high bar for students is critical to raising achievement. Through their words and actions, effective principals work tirelessly to get everyone to believe that all students can and will succeed. If they sound like a broken record, so be it.

"You have to get staff, students, and parents in the boat with you," says Pam Williams, principal of Bethesda

Elementary School in Lawrenceville, Georgia. "They won't get in if they don't know where they're going and that they'll be safe along the way."

Rerouting Your Course

Teachers at Bethesda thought their school was headed in the right direction when Williams became principal in 2013. Indeed, she found a hard-working staff and students who were eager to learn. The staff believed students were doing well, based on their classroom assessment results. However, the problem was that students weren't working on material aligned to grade-level standards.

Shortly after arriving, Williams convened a faculty meeting and shared the startling news: The school wasn't performing up to districtwide expectations. To drive home the point, she compared Bethesda's scores on districtwide tests with those of similar schools that were higher-achieving. The teachers sat up in their chairs. "It built a sense of urgency," she recalls. "It was like, 'Hey, our students are the same as theirs. If they can do it, we can, too.'"

That eye-opener sparked the beginning of Bethesda's transformation. Weekly staff meetings, which used to focus on building logistics and administrative paperwork, pivoted to discussions about best instructional practices. Teachers, who once operated in silos, started meeting twice a week to analyze grade-level standards and began using common lesson plans. A team of 30 staff members developed a research-based guide for teachers that dissected the standards used to evaluate them and described effective classroom practices for each one.

Bethesda's collaborative efforts transformed student achievement: For the past two years, it has been among the top 10 percent of Georgia's Title I schools, making the most progress in improving the performance of all students on statewide tests.

Resetting the Culture

Teachers at Fairview Elementary School in Denver had a more lukewarm reaction to new principal Antoinette Hudson's high expectations for student learning. The struggling school serves 220 students, all of whom qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Before Hudson arrived in 2013, teachers managed classes on their own with little oversight or collaboration. Some children spent more time in the office than in the classroom due to disciplinary issues. Student achievement and growth were so poor that the district designated Fairview a "red" school, the lowest ranking possible. If the school didn't turn around, it would be at risk of closing.

Hudson's first step was to reset the school's culture to create a positive learning environment for students. Teachers, she believed, should be role models for children and be seen as professionals. As such, they should look the part. So, she instituted a faculty dress code: no more jeans and sneakers. Some teachers chafed under the new rule and complained about other changes, such as splitting their instructional duties so some could focus on reading while others concentrated on math. At the end of Hudson's second year on the job, six of the seven teachers in second to fifth grades quit.

Becoming "College Material"

At Commodore John Rodgers Elementary/Middle School, the goal is to make 100 percent of students eligible for college. It's a big deal to be recognized as a Commodore Collegiate for consistently displaying the school's core values, or Five Promises:

1. Commitment to Quality
2. Honor and Integrity
3. Perseverance
4. Gratitude
5. Contribution

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—Pam Williams, principal,
Bethesda Elementary School,
Lawrenceville, GA

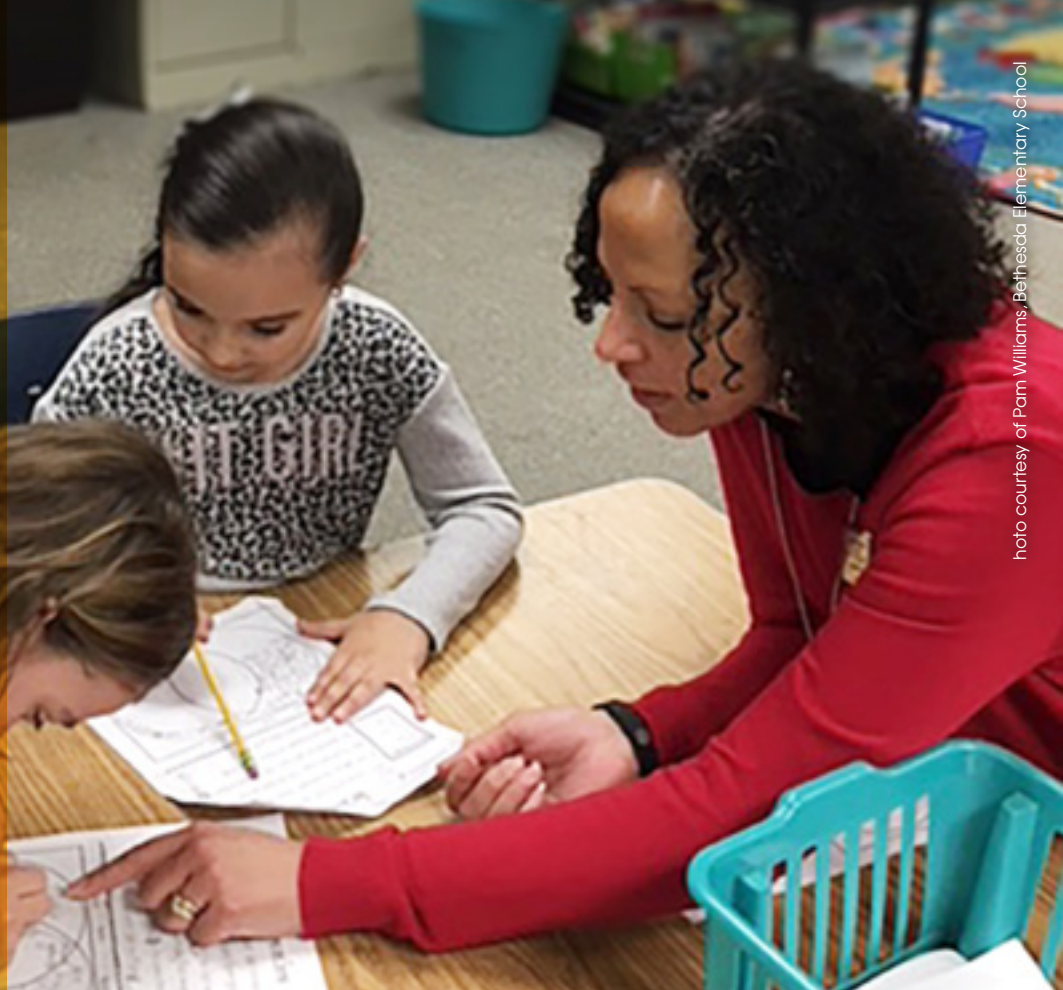


photo courtesy of Pam Williams, Bethesda Elementary School

Hudson acknowledges that she “took some hits,” but she stayed committed to her vision for Fairview. To combat the school’s chronic disciplinary problems, she and her staff launched a program to reward students for good behavior and academic progress. Recipients are recognized at schoolwide assemblies. Morning announcements now start with a student reminding classmates to uphold the school motto, SOAR: show respect, be outstanding citizens, accept responsibility, and rise to the occasion. And students are more likely to visit Hudson’s office because they’ve earned a prize for good conduct than

for misbehaving. “When you support kids and build relationships with them, then you have kids engaged in learning,” Hudson says. “That’s what changes outcomes.”

In 2016, Fairview shed its “red” label with some of the strongest gains on state tests in the district. For two years running, it’s been recognized as one of 33 high-poverty schools making the most academic progress in Colorado. Now that Fairview is a “green” school and meeting expectations for achievement and growth, Hudson and her staff already have their sights set on becoming a “blue,” or distinguished, school.

“It’s really motivated our teachers to do even better,” she says. “We can be the school that others want to be.”

Fairview has also become a place where educators want to work: Teacher retention has steadily rebounded, with no resignations the past two years.

Tapping Into Family

Additionally, principals stress the role families play in shaping and realizing a vision of academic success for all students. When Martin became principal at Commodore, one of his first moves was tearing down a tall counter in the front office that stood like a barrier to



Marc Martin
Commodore John Rodgers
Elementary/Middle School
Baltimore, MD

Pam Williams
Bethesda Elementary School
Lawrenceville, GA



Antoinette Hudson
Fairview Elementary School
Denver, CO

Tips for New Principals

What's the first step a new principal should take to shape a vision of academic success? Principals Marc Martin, Pam Williams, and Antoinette Hudson suggested more than one. Here are a few tips they have for fellow school leaders:

GET TO KNOW THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY. Ask teachers what they're most proud of at the school and what they would love to change. Use this feedback to make small immediate changes that are welcomed by staff. These early wins are key to building buy-in and creating a shared vision of student success. "They won't care about what you know until they know you care," Williams says.

CUSTOMIZE THE VISION TO YOUR SCHOOL. "It should represent a substantial change from the way the school has been operating," Martin advises. "At a turnaround school, the change must be physical as well as philosophical, since the school has been failing in so many ways."

DIG INTO THE DATA. Examine your school's data at the disaggregated levels, Hudson recommends. Then, use this information to collaboratively develop a vision of success with your teachers.

MAKE IT STICKY. Brand the vision with a catchy slogan or acronym that captures its essence. Use it everywhere, as a constant reminder to students, staff, and families of where the school is headed.

visiting parents. “It signaled that we were different [from] them and that we weren’t in this work together,” he says.

Martin regularly reminds families that their involvement is critical. In a video to parents last fall, he shared positive school news before turning his attention to tardiness. When kids arrive late, Martin explained, it eats into learning time. An hour missed daily adds up to four weeks of lost instruction a year. “Be aware of the time they’re missing and how that impacts every child, especially as we continue to push them to be eligible for college and be successful in life,” he adds.

Enrollment at Commodore has quadrupled to more than 800 children under Martin’s leadership. Chronic absenteeism and suspensions have dropped significantly, while proficiency scores in math and reading have surged.

None of these gains would have happened if students weren’t deeply invested in their education. That commitment, principals say, comes only when students know what is expected of them and take ownership of the vision themselves. No one likes to tell a seventh-grader that she’s reading at a third-grade level, but without that knowledge, she won’t be engaged to try harder with the right instructional support. “When kids know where they are, they’ll buy into learning,” Williams says.

Tracking Progress

At Bethesda Elementary, students track their progress visually. Third-graders, for instance, color in two bar graphs to show their current reading level and the level expected for their grade. The exercise helps them set goals, which are revisited throughout the school year as their



Photo courtesy of Marc Martin, CujR School

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—Antoinette Hudson, principal, Fairview Elementary School, Denver, CO

reading skills improve. Some won’t master the standard in a year’s time, Williams notes, but that’s OK. What matters is progress and celebrating that growth.

It’s also a morale boost when other schools want a copy of your playbook. This year, Baltimore City Public Schools asked Commodore to give hands-on guidance to three failing elementary schools in the district. Essentially, the schools are where Commodore was in 2010: poor test scores, declining enrollment, and persistent misbehavior. During the four-year initiative, one of the last in Maryland to be funded through an expiring federal grant program, teachers at Commodore and the three schools will share lessons, observe

each other’s classrooms, and collaborate in other ways.

Meanwhile, Martin will coach the principals on effective leadership practices. They’re calling it the 100% Project because the goal is for all four schools to work together to make 100 percent of their students eligible for college. The schools have even embraced Commodore’s 100% pennant, adding the emblem to their own uniforms. “Seeing other schools adopt our vision really validates where we’re headed,” Martin says. •

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