

Prepared Statement

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Roundtable: “NCLB Reauthorization: Strategies that Promote School Improvement”

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I would like to express gratitude and thanks to Senator Kennedy, Senator Enzi, and the members of the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee for allowing me to share and discuss my school improvement efforts and experiences. As each of you know, sessions of this type can help in identifying practices that are successful in schools that are improving the academic achievement of poor, minority, and disenfranchised students.

It has always been my philosophy that public schools serve as a haven for all students. Furthermore, it is my strong belief that we can impact student learning regardless of what they bring or don't bring to the table. Having been a child of poverty has also influenced my school improvement efforts.

The seminal work done at Tuggle Elementary School in the Birmingham City School System actually preceded the inception of NCLB by just a few years. However, the underlying premise in NCLB is the same fundamental premise of the school improvement efforts implemented at Tuggle Elementary School: that is all children can learn, and it's our responsibility as educational caregivers to make learning happen. In order for school improvement efforts to be successful, the leader must have a vision. My vision was to build a culture that embraced student learning and teacher learning as the primary outcomes for the school. Engaging all stakeholders in this vision became my task. Additionally, I wanted to implement a school wide program that would allow all stakeholders to reach such levels of success that learning and student achievement would occur at unprecedented levels.

Several strategies and behaviors served as the catalyst for our school improvement efforts. We had a clear sense of purpose. Our only purpose for being at Tuggle was to be successful with all of our students. We focused strictly on student learning. Moreover, we focused on learning at high levels for all students. The goal of student learning became the parameter under which we operated.

We focused on developing a positive and collaborative culture at Tuggle. Culture in itself is defined as “what is in the school.” We worked toward developing a culture that was warm, inviting, and student centered. All students were embraced and made to feel special. In developing a collaborative culture, teachers and other staff members were given quality time for meetings. These meetings were designed to focus on teacher

effectiveness as well as student achievement. During the meetings, data was analyzed, students were discussed, and intervention plans were developed for students not making appropriate and adequate growth.

The staff at Tuggle became highly effective. We finally realized that if our students were going to learn at high levels, we, too, had to learn at high levels. We had to increase our content knowledge. Research is very clear, “good teachers make good schools.” We began to seek means of learning for ourselves. Participating in job embedded professional development became the norm. Staff development was based on student needs and teacher needs. We no longer attended workshops that were not related to our needs. Initially, we held our workshops at our school using in-house staff. To enhance our professional growth, the staff decided to become a part of the Alabama Reading Initiative (ARI). This research-based project is a process that uses the scientific research on reading to guide the teaching of reading.

We focused on results as part of our efforts. The staff used data to determine the effectiveness of all of our efforts. We looked at quantitative as well as qualitative data. This analysis showed us whether students were learning as well as whether our classroom instruction needed adjustments.

Having a strong principal was also instrumental to the success of our school improvement efforts. Principals are key to successful schools. Effective principals empower teachers to excel.

Tuggle developed a school-wide theme: “Don’t be caught dead without a book.” As a result of ARI, reading became our theme. Our efforts were designed to increase volume of reading by our students. To this end, we organized around the concept of using every available minute for reading

In my current position as ARI Regional Principal Coach, I coach 36 principals in the state of Alabama. The school improvement strategies that have proven to be successful are the ones discussed above. As a principal coach, it is my goal to coach principals and central office staff on connecting leadership to instruction. As part of this process, we have identified practices and behaviors that will maximize our school efforts. Some of these were mentioned in the earlier part of this response. Successful schools have leadership teams led by the principal who learn these strategies and behaviors and then replicate them in the building. Thus, successful schools go from structures to processes. These processes become a natural part of the school culture.

As a result of the school improvement efforts at Tuggle, the staff transformed. Teachers changed their instructional behaviors and developed a sense of efficacy. They adopted a “can do” attitude and started to believe that their students could learn. The teachers also began to believe that it was their responsibility to teach their students. Students also developed that “can do” attitude. The students’ confidence increased. Behavior problems decreased. Test scores increased in all three tested grades. The school also

received the following awards and recognitions: National Distinguished Title One School, ARI School (member of the sweet 16), International Reading Association Exemplary Reading Program Award, and Blue Ribbon School for Alabama.

Several issues emerged that had to be addressed during our school improvement efforts. Some teachers resisted the change. If success is to occur, you have to stay focused and committed to your goals. We kept the goals front and center in every conversation. We reminded everyone of our purpose and tried not to lose focus.

Our students were not participating in pre school programs. As a result, students entered our school with limited or little prior knowledge. We had to invite the community into our doors. We had to work with area daycares. Using Title One funds, we operated summer programs for incoming kindergarten students and reading academies for all other students during the summer.

Parent involvement was initially an issue. We needed parents on the team if growth was to be sustained. A Title One Parent Involvement Aide provided workshops and other trainings. Additionally, parents were encouraged to participate in the daily operations of the school. They were also trained on providing academic support to their children. We included parents on our School leadership team.