

Bold Ideas



for Secondary School Reform

■ *Thelma Meléndez de Santa Ana*

Every day, principals across the country are taking courageous action to reform struggling schools and make a difference in students' lives. As the assistant secretary of education for elementary and secondary education, I have been fortunate to meet with school and district leaders and see some of those transformations firsthand. My experiences have affirmed what I learned to be true during the time I spent in school and district leadership positions: the most innovative, successful, and bold ideas for school reform come from the local level, from teachers, principals, and district leaders.

When asked to share some thoughts on secondary school reform for this magazine, I immediately thought of the wonderful schools I've visited and the exciting conversations I've had with school and district leaders. Innovative leaders are tackling tough problems and proving that low-achieving middle schools and high schools can overcome their challenges. Those leaders are creating instructional practices and support structures that meet the needs of all youth, including those who may have dropped out of school. They are organizing, shaping, and adjusting their institutions to improve practices. And as a result, they are proving that all students can learn at high levels. I want to share just a few of the many examples of promising practices in secondary school reform that are happening right now.

Second Chances

When Danny King became superintendent of the Pharr–San Juan–Alamo (TX) Independent School District in 2007, he identified the district's drop-out crisis as one of his top priorities. His goal was to decrease the high drop-out rate, increase the graduation rate, and raise overall achievement in the high schools.

Under the leadership of Principal Leonore Tyler, the College, Career, and Technology Academy—or CC&T Academy—opened in September 2007 with two classrooms and eight staff members. The academy is part of the district's comprehensive approach to addressing the drop-out problem. Created to meet the needs

The most-effective school reforms come from local school leaders who know the needs of their students and can adjust practices and amass resources accordingly.

Discussion guide available at www.nassp.org/pldiscuss0311.



of older students from the ages of 18 to 26, the CC&T Academy is an alternative campus that reengages students who have not graduated from high school, either because they didn't complete their course work or because they did not

pass the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS). The CC&T Academy recruited its first group of students from a list of those who failed to graduate from high school in the 2006–07 school year. The staff members conducted all types of outreach, including parent information sessions, radio advertisements, and outdoor banners posted at busy intersections.

Within four months, the CC&T Academy graduated its first group of students—49 in all. By August 2008, the number of graduates had grown to 110 students, including students from other district high schools who enrolled in the academy's summer sessions.

ELEMENTS OF SUCCESS

Small school size and a personalized, student-centered approach. “We bring students into a separate, smaller environment where we address their specific needs to graduate from high school. We start with the exit-level exam and helping students prep for the TAKS. Then we move onto the credits,” said Tyler. The CC&T Academy issues its own diplomas, which has helped build the integrity of the school and has established it as a legitimate alternative campus.

Dual enrollment. Another unique aspect of the academy is its partnership with South Texas College (STC). Through what's called a “mini-semester,” the academy offers students concurrent enrollment with STC so that they can earn 3–12 college credit hours before they graduate from high school—a big draw for many students.

Districtwide collaboration. As part of the districtwide effort to reduce the number of

dropouts and raise graduation rates, principals from all the high schools meet throughout the school year to discuss ways to increase the number of high school graduates. They work on recruitment strategies to bring students who did not graduate on time back to school at the CC&T Academy.

AN EVOLVING FOCUS

The CC&T Academy now has a staff of 18 and has graduated a total of 657 students, 116 of whom were 21–26 years old. Since its initial success, the school has increased its focus on college preparation.

Tyler's goal is to make the CC&T Academy a learning environment where all students can succeed. “We do this by engaging students, inspiring them, and helping them develop their own vision of how they see themselves at the postsecondary level,” said Tyler. To do this, the school provides lots of preparation for students, such as a required “college success” course and help with SAT or ACT preparation. Currently, about a third of its students go on to postsecondary education, and Tyler and the staff of the CC&T are working to raise that rate.

Districtwide Support

In November 2010, I visited the Miami–Dade County (FL) Public Schools to learn about the district's work reforming low-achieving schools. What I found was a unique, districtwide approach that centered on a theory of action of improving teaching and learning. Led by Superintendent Alberto Carvalho and Assistant Superintendent Nikolai Vitti, the district created the Education Transformation Office (ETO) to provide support to the district's 19 persistently lowest-achieving schools, dubbed the “Rising 19,” as identified by Florida under the U.S. Department of Education's School Improvement Grants program. The ETO offers intensive, individualized support in such areas as operations, curriculum and instruction, professional development, and family engagement.

But what do this model and this district plan

actually look like in schools? To find out, I spent some time observing classrooms, visiting common planning sessions, and talking with school leaders at Miami Edison, Miami Southridge, and Miami Jackson Senior High Schools—all schools that received the lowest grade possible from the Florida State Department of Education in 2009. Despite the fact that each high school has its own distinct personality and its own set of challenges, I saw several common themes running through their work.

A leadership and culture shift emphasize respect and high expectations for all. In 2009–10, Miami Edison hired a new principal, Pablo Ortiz, who in turn recruited a strong new administrative leadership team. The team focused on changing the culture of the school to ensure that students of Miami Edison felt respected and supported. The team created small academies within the school, each with its own crest, to develop school pride. To boost student morale, the team also decided to reinstitute some of the hallmarks of high school—some of which hadn't been in existence for almost 10 years—such as the homecoming dance and a school yearbook.

But the work of turning around the school isn't just shouldered by the principal and the leadership team. It's an effort that includes all staff members. For example, to keep the school well maintained to reflect the learning that was happening inside, Ortiz hired a new head custodian, who is now training other custodial staff members at different schools throughout the district with a special focus on the Rising 19.

A focus on building professional learning communities. Another common theme I saw in the three schools was the intense focus on professional development and support for teachers. The ETO customizes professional development for district teachers on the basis of school and student needs, and Vitti conducts classroom walk-throughs with principals on a regular basis. The leaders—and the teachers themselves—are using the teacher evaluation system to identify areas for improvement, then providing direct support to teachers. This sup-

port is constant throughout the year.

Teachers carry out lesson studies, during which they work together to plan, teach, watch others teach, and provide feedback to one another. This way, each teacher continues to learn. At Miami Southridge, Principal David K. Moore and his leadership team are deeply involved in the sessions, and at least one senior leadership team member attends every lesson study. Professional collaboration time is also built into the school day. All of this work underscores the philosophy that teaching is a craft and that excellence requires hard work and constant learning.

Intensive support to ensure students graduate from high school. All three schools offer extensive programs to ensure that every student is on track to graduate from high school. Incoming freshmen are required to take a “freshman experience” course in which they are matched with adults, or “trust counselors,” who support their transition into high school and develop comprehensive plans to ensure that they will have enough credits to graduate.

Schools also offer Saturday programs and credit recovery programs to help students catch up. For example, Ortiz at Miami Edison had a simple fix to increase the number of students taking credit recovery courses. When he realized that students had trouble finding transportation to the district's adult education school, he moved the school's instructors to Miami Edison's campus—a simple solution that benefits students greatly.

The schools described here are in the early stages of their transformation efforts, but I was encouraged to see the progress they are making and was impressed with their initial improvements. They schools have a long way to go and face many challenges, but as demonstrated by the movement in their leading indicators, the schools—and the district—are on the right track.

Adopting Best Practices

After accompanying Secretary of Education Arne Duncan on a back-to-school bus tour in

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the southeast, I conducted a back-to-school tour of my own in late August 2010, visiting schools and meeting with superintendents, principals, and teachers in Oregon and Washington. During my trip, I was especially impressed by some outstanding work being done by school and district leaders at Lincoln High School in Tacoma, WA.

In 2007, Lincoln looked at test scores for its incoming class of ninth graders and found that only 17% of students met state standards in math and 33% met state standards in reading. More than half of those students required remedial programs. Lincoln's leaders responded by creating a new program, the Lincoln Center, within the high school to provide intensive academic and social development support for its students, with the goal of graduating them on time and preparing them for college and career. The student population at Lincoln continues to struggle with poverty, and student mobility is high. In fact, it has the highest percentage of low-income students among Tacoma's five comprehensive high schools. But the Lincoln Center program is now in its third year and is showing remarkable progress.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE LINCOLN CENTER

The Lincoln Center enrolls about 400 students every year, and the program's population mirrors the overall population of the high school. Any Lincoln student may enroll in the center. The school's model is drawn from the best practices used by high-performing charter schools. In particular, the center's leaders patterned their work after the key features of the KIPP schools, Harlem Children's Zone, and Green Dot Public Schools.

Extended learning time. One of those features is extended learning time, during which the Lincoln Center successfully immerses its students in academics and support. Students in the center attend school from 7:35 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Monday through Thursday and are dismissed with the rest of the high school at 2:00 p.m. on Fridays. (The center recruits vol-

unteer tutors and mentors to support students after the regular school day ends.) The students attend Saturday school twice a month, as well as summer school. This extra time in school adds up to 540 more hours of academic time for each student enrolled in Lincoln Center. That practically doubles the amount of time that the center's students spend in school over the course of an academic year.

But all of this extra time isn't spent in the classroom. The Saturday activities that students participate in are engaging, enriching, and fun. Students have attended a lecture by Newark (NJ) Mayor Cory Booker; visited the Museum of Glass; and even participated in a team-building "Iron Art" competition, where they created works of art about academic themes they had studied throughout the year.

Family engagement. Another highlight of the Lincoln Center is its emphasis on family engagement. Not only must students and staff members make a commitment to longer school days and more academics, but parents also must make the commitment to support more study time and more homework for their children. This clarifies the philosophy that student achievement is a team effort, shared by students, parents and families, teachers, and school leaders.

College readiness. Finally, the Lincoln Center has a college-preparatory focus for all of its students. Every student is required to take honors English. High school graduation is an expected outcome, as is going on to college. When I asked the students in an English class to raise their hands if they planned on going to college, all of them raised their hands! It was a moment I'll never forget and a testament to the wonderful work being done at this school.

Since the Lincoln Center's inception, students' GPAs and test scores have risen and the number of absences and student attrition rates have fallen. Coprincipals Pat Erwin and Greg Eisnaugle say they are not surprised by the school's success. They've simply have taken successful, proven practices from great schools and applied them at the Lincoln Center.

They believe that there's no reason that other schools can't do the same. And I agree.

Bright Futures

These examples of secondary school reform demonstrate—with clarity and inspiration—that bold ideas are changing teaching and learning in secondary schools. The schools are committed to the idea that all children can learn if they are taught well and if schools are adjusted to meet their needs. But most of all, these schools reveal the importance of leadership. The principals lead change, and if strong principal leadership and teacher practice receive the support of the school community, remarkable progress in student outcomes will follow.

My hope is that school leaders across the country find ways to share successes and strat-

egies like these with one another on a regular basis and through multiple channels. It is through this type of collaboration and continuous learning that innovative practices and sustainable improvement in teaching and learning are promoted in the nation's classrooms. This work is difficult, especially in tough economic times. But if you're like me, the end goal—preparing students for the brightest, most competitive future possible—provides all the inspiration needed to keep going. There truly is no more worthwhile job than one that allows you to forever change someone's life for the better. That is the privilege, and the calling, of an educator. **PL**

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