

Community, Culture, and School Improvement: A Rural School's Transformation

Ignite! Proposal Summary

This Ignite! talk will highlight school transformation work unfolding in a remote, rural school in Washington state. Fifteen years ago, under 20 percent of students passed standardized tests in this school. Today, students surpass a majority of targets for standardized state tests. The transformation work didn't happen overnight, and the work wasn't due to a significant infusion of funds or due to work by outside consultants. Rather, this high-poverty school engaged in transformation practices that have resulted in sustainable change and continued success.

This talk explores the principal's learning improvement agenda and provides a snapshot of the work done in this school and with the community to improve students' performance and their educational experience. Themes include: (a) leveraging external requirements (e.g. testing) for improvement efforts; (b) grounding practice in research; and (c) engaging the community by embracing students' heritage. Emphasis is placed on the third point by highlighting the ways that the school embraces the Native heritage of the majority of the student body by folding heritage education into the fabric of students' academic experiences.

Relevant Literature

This Ignite! presentation explores the successes of a high-poverty, remote, rural school, and this school is deeply situated in the context of challenges and opportunities that rurality presents. Approximately one-third (32.9 percent) of the nation's schools are located in rural districts (Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014), and much like students living in many urban areas, students in rural areas face high rates of poverty which impact educational offerings (Bouck, 2004). Indeed, across the country, the spectrum of rural industries is experiencing tremendous economic hardship leaving entire communities without an economic base (Budge, 2006; Mathis, 2003; McGranahan, 1995). Students' schooling and educational outcomes are adversely impacted where communities in poverty lead to schools in poverty (Bouck, 2004). However, very little attention in discourse regarding equity and education is given to rural schools, students, or communities (Corbett, 2007).

The small size of many rural schools and districts leaves them unable to leverage the economies of scale that larger districts can manage (Farmer, 2009). In these schools, higher per pupil costs lead to reductions in the academic offerings available to students (Lee, 2003). This leads to challenges like the rural technology gap in which students have much less access to the latest technology or the ability to properly utilize due to limited high-speed internet access (Bouck, 2004; Mathis, 2003). Perhaps most challenging, however, is the notion that smaller schools have less leeway to experiment due to their size and tight resources (City, 2008).

The work of rural administrators, in particular, is quite challenging. They must often juggle meeting state and federal mandates and embracing local traditions that inform local priorities (Alsbury & Whitaker, 2015; Howley, Pendarvis, & Woodrum, 2005). Further complicating administrative work is the notion that in many rural areas, districts and schools are the providers of local social services (Browne-Ferrigno & Allen, 2006). Yet, schools also serve as social and cultural hubs for the community and surrounding area (Lyson, 2002) supporting

administrators' ability to create links with the local community and the world beyond their remote area to bolster their improvement efforts (Masumoto & Brown-Welty, 2009). Indeed, rural schools can leverage the tight knit nature of cohesive communities to build the social capital that promotes student success in school (Bauch, 2001).

Successful administrators, including the rural administrator featured in this Ignite! presentation, leverage non-fiscal resources available to them, along with fiscal resources, to support student learning. Aligning these resources to learning improvement efforts is a multidimensional process involving specific goals and the allocation of resources to meet them (Pan, Rudo, Schneider, & Smith-Hansen, 2003). As leaders build their learning improvement agendas, they must invest in that agenda over the long-term (Knapp, Honig, Plecki, Portin, & Copland, 2014). In this role, administrators must articulate their vision, build trust, mobilize energy and build capacity for these learning improvement agendas (Knapp et al., 2014). In doing so, it is important for leaders to engage with resource at multiple levels within the school system and in the context of each unique community.

Findings

Three key themes related to the development and implementation of the learning improvement agenda for this particular school emerged:

Leveraging external requirements (e.g. testing) for improvement efforts

The principal, teachers, and students embrace academic achievement as a part of the fabric of their school community and leverage learning achievements as a community building mechanism. Each day, the school day starts with teachers bringing all students to the gym for an all-school assembly. The typical morning announcements are made during this time, but it also a time during which the principal, who leads this assembly every day, recognizes academic growth of individual students and groups of students. Students see academic success as a community pursuit and not only as a personal achievement. Students talk about individual learning targets and how meeting those targets snowballs into meeting larger, long term learning goals.

Grounding practice in research

Immediately after sitting down for an interview, this principal produced a spreadsheet referencing the various learning improvement initiatives that have launched over the last decade. Not only does this spreadsheet indicate when an effort was initiated, it also includes success indicators and any modifications that were made. Each effort was explained with a grounding in research-based best-practices and with a clear theory of action linking the reforms to the overarching learning improvement work underway at the school. In addition, this school is also engaged in non-academic practices that support student learning. For example, water features, such as running fountains and tabletop liquid motion simulators are spread throughout classrooms and hallways because the staff embraced research indicating that running water promotes a calming, comforting environment and because it connects students with their heritage and the community (where fishing is a vibrant part of the cultural and economic tapestry).

Engaging the community by embracing students' heritage

This school acknowledges that it is a hub for community involvement and a point of pride for the community. As such, the school works to involve the community in the life of the school and, as a result, to foster community-wide investment in student success. One example of this is the annual Halloween Festival where students, families, and the community come together at the school. This event raises funds for the school but, more importantly, it fosters relationships between the community-at-large and the school. The majority of the students in this school share a Native American heritage, and to honor that heritage and to build stronger ties with the community, all students in this elementary school take Native language courses taught by local tribal leaders who have been alternatively certified as language instructors. This is just one example of the school's partnership with tribal leaders.

Significance

This year's UCEA theme challenges us to consider how *Revitalizing Education in Complex Contexts* can impact educators, students, and entire communities. To that end, this Ignite! presentation explores how one principal has forged deeper connections with a community and highlights how those connections support student learning.

EXAMPLE. DO NOT DISSEMINATE.

Works Cited

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