

## *Section 6: Implementation of the Plan and Documentation of Results*

### Annual Progress Report on the Implementation of the School Improvement Plan

School Name: Davidson River School

Principal: Donna Wilde

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## I. Introduction

### A. General Comments

The 2008-09 school year boasts of high academic achievements and gains towards meeting improvement goals for Davidson River School. We served 136 students, a slight increase from the prior year, with 12 students who graduated on the 21+ alternative diploma track. The percentage of students who begin in 9<sup>th</sup> grade one year and graduate with a high school diploma four years later, called the graduation rate, rose from 7.14% in 2007-08 to 47.06% during 2008-09. Davidson River School received recognition as a school of "High Growth" based on attainment on local option goals and increased proficiency rates in state testing. Despite a shift in population demographics where 21% of our students were classified homeless and 74% economically disadvantaged, we achieved Adequate Yearly Progress by meeting three out of three target goals under No Child Left Behind standards.

Staff and School Improvement Team members maintained hard work and focused effort to improve test scores, increase proficiency rates and improve survey data throughout the year. Under Priority 1 and 2, we continued to focus on improvement in instructional design using Marzano's research strategies, and attribute this as one reason why test scores and the percentage of students who earned course credit increased. Early in the year, we reviewed available data and determined trends, areas of strengths and weaknesses. Staff members identified continuous improvement goals based on school goals, and pursued staff development to support those goals.

While the organizational structure of the team remained constant from year to year, several parents continued as members for the second year, which helped streamline procedures. Also, the inclusion of student representatives added a different dimension to the team, as they voiced opinions on several issues of concern and shared insights of other students. One discussion resulted in forming focus groups of students to develop strategies to reduce test-taking stress. Another discussion shared the student perspective on adequacy of materials and supplies for our school compared to other high schools, identifying several items for further investigation.

With continued momentum to impact student respect to self and others (Priority 3, Healthy and Responsible Students) survey data increased slightly. Likewise, improvement occurred with Priority 5. Action steps from last year were reviewed, modified when necessary, and continued to develop as we focused on refining programs. Staff members participated in staff development that expanded foundations of the previous initiatives and new opportunities were offered.

In summary, the second year of this plan showed gains in several priority areas with the need for continued work in others. Most noteworthy were the changes in academic outcomes for students which earned Davidson River School the recognition of the top performing alternative school in Western North Carolina. Continued momentum in several areas along with new initiatives in others will be the focus of the upcoming school year.

### B. Globally-Competitive Students

During 2008-09, the most significant gains were made in this priority area. Our performance composite increased from 41% to 48%; we met all three of our target goals under No Child Left Behind standards and achieved Adequate Yearly Progress. End of course test results increased in

four subject areas with most improvement in the percentage of students passing Algebra, Civics and US History.

Initiatives to increase student engagement through active learning activities were a focus throughout the year. Predictive assessments were used with minimal success and later were revised to support test taking strategies. Various forms of pre/post tests were developed and refined to help focus instruction and target interventions. Teachers methodically structured assessments to build test taking endurance with students, incorporated reading and study skills into instruction, and increased ownership for learning through data notebooks.

Throughout the year, data was collected and analyzed by staff using 5-minute “classroom walk through” observations. Frequent discussions accompanied our continued study of Marzano’s research, resulting in strategic change in classroom instruction. Teacher teams planned instructional units, observed one another, and offered support as more and more active learning took place. Staff members participated in workshops concerning grading practices, technology integration, drop out prevention and instructional design. Collectively, these initiatives contributed to an increase in proficiency rate.

One new action step proved beneficial to academic improvement. Student focus groups developed strategies to reduce test anxiety. Modifications to the classroom environment, use of self-pacing techniques, use of extended time, and other strategies set a more positive testing environment for students. Several who failed the initial test commented they felt less anxious and more positive about the retest. Continued dialog in this area is needed as we strive to support students for future success.

Surprisingly, 10<sup>th</sup> grade writing scores decreased from 80% to 48%. Efforts that contributed to our success rate previously, such as writing workshops and school-wide writing initiatives continued, yet scores declined. We have yet to determine whether last year’s data was an anomaly, related to the population tested or other condition, but will continue to gain insights to use to improve instruction.

### C. 21<sup>st</sup> Century Professionals

During the 2008-2009 year, we continued to implement High Yield Strategies based on Marzano’s research. For many months, staff members learned new strategies, modified old ones and worked with colleagues to develop lesson plans using these strategies. Each teacher was required to attend one or more workshops focused on improving instruction, participate in professional learning communities based on reading *Working on the Work* by Schlechty, and integrate nine learning strategies to increase active engagement of students. Two teachers presented at the NCAAE conference sharing active engagement strategies with other professionals. Others attended sessions such as Canady’s workshop on alternative grading strategies, Dr. Jay Smink’s Drop Out Prevention Conference, and “A Better Next Year” based on Gary Alderman’s research.

One teacher attended the state technology conference and shared with colleagues information on using technology to support drop out prevention. In late spring, we designed a flexible options technology course based on staff strengths and needs and taught six different topics in the initial part of the course. A continuation of this course has already resumed, with plans to conclude all sessions by December.

All action steps in our plan were implemented with activities that expanded on the previous year's initiatives. Staff development funds were appropriated according to priorities including required safety certifications, technology interests, continuing education credit initiatives and others. In addition, we were resourceful at seeking funding for attending professional conferences, workshops, and specialized training sessions.

With over a year of significant effort to improve classroom instruction through technology and active engagement of learners, we achieved an increase in academic outcomes for our students. Likewise, survey results indicated more staff members are satisfied with opportunities for professional development. We plan to continue these initiatives while we battle the continued reduction in funding to support professional development.

#### D. Healthy and Responsible Students

Our efforts to increase pro-social behaviors through increased respect at Davidson River School continue to have successful impact on students and staff. Survey results rose to 88% positive responses, the highest in a four-year period. Action steps were implemented in greater depth with continued school-wide emphasis on standards for behavior at Davidson River School. New interventions this year were spurred by a district requirement to sponsor activities for "Bully Free Week." Staff developed activities about respect for self and others based on anti-violence programs, character education, focus groups and integrated studies. We addressed cyber-bullying, language registers, social mores, and hidden rules of poverty. In truth, we embraced this as an opportunity to teach empathy and focused on peaceful resolution to conflict.

Services from local mental health and mediation agencies continued that offered students opportunities for self-expression and problem solving. Grants funded sessions on Positive Choices, Safe Dating, Guided Problem Solving, Mediation and Conflict Resolution. Staff members conducted "Girls' Circle" sessions focused on the unique issues women face as they compete in a man's world. Student recognition and award programs showcased students who modeled appropriate behaviors and community service with students increased.

We view this as a opportunity to develop our students into citizens who value one another and the resources of this community. A continued emphasis on this goal is needed as we further develop programs to maintain positive momentum for lasting change.

#### E. Leadership

We continued our four-year upward trend in this goal area by increasing community service hours by 20% for 2008-2009. In addition, over 60 volunteers were involved with Davidson River School students, an increase over the prior year as well. Major initiatives continued and new events were sponsored. We attribute these increases to better record keeping, targeting new mentors for Senior projects, involving additional classrooms in tutoring activities and increasing community partnerships.

Middle School Rebound students conducted several Red Cross Blood Drives that involved calling past patrons and scheduling donor appointments. Brain gym activities and tutoring at the local elementary school involved more students since we worked with additional classrooms this year. Other activities from our Learn and Serve America grant connected students with senior citizens at Ivy Hill and KOALA assisted living centers. Students built picnic tables and raised plants that were donated to KOALA, the Recreation Department and other community agencies.

Locating mentors and tutors for students continues to be problematic. People are willing to mentor students for Senior projects knowing it is a short time commitment. Yet, longer commitments are limited by family priorities and personal schedules. We recognize that volunteers who are committed to helping our students often have good intentions but generally involvement with students is short lived. Our work with Community and Schools to secure mentors was delayed as budget restrictions effected priorities for that agency.

Staff and School Improvement Team members are pleased with gains in the priority area. Some feel that we meet this goal easily and efficiently and will surpass expectations over the next year. Plans for fall and spring activities to showcase our school are underway to develop new initiatives to involve the community with DRS. As we continue to refine record keeping, expand volunteer opportunities and develop new partnerships with agencies, students will benefit in many ways.

## F. 21<sup>st</sup> Century Systems

While many action steps were implemented during the 2008-09 school year, this area is one which requires additional attention in our effort towards continuous improvement. The Staff Stakeholder Satisfaction Survey question that correlates to this priority area inquires whether there are “adequate and appropriate resources and materials available” at the school. While this year’s survey data indicates slight improvement, staff and SIT members are not satisfied in this area.

The term “adequate” has different meaning for different audiences, while “resources and materials” encompass a vast array of instructional necessities. Lacking are concrete interpretation of terms and continual assessment of the adequacy of instructional needs compared to the ever increasing demands of our at-risk students. This coupled with decreases in funding presents an even greater challenge for the coming year.

Over the past years, Davidson River School benefited from acquiring more hardware and peripherals, yet frustrations continue. Teachers received new lap-top computers, additional overhead projection systems, and additional lab computers. But, when student computers break down, often due to the age of the system, instruction is negatively impacted. Increased *quantities* do not equate to increased quality of instruction when hardware becomes outdated or technology is halted due to limitations on electric power and infrastructure in an old building. District technicians are working to assist us to provide high quality usage of technology in an old facility in a small school system with limited resources.

Funding for a small school also presents limitations. With budget freezes, budget reversions, funding cuts, and deadline changes to spend allocations, the increased challenge of somehow meeting the needs of staff with less funds and modified deadlines occurs. Communicating budget expenditures and deadlines needs to continue with some added clarity so staff feel that we are fair and equitable in our spending.

## II. Summary of Results

### A. Globally-Competitive Students

Improvement in this priority area earned Davidson River School recognition in several areas. We made “High Growth” based on attainment of local option goals, increases in End of Course and End of Grade proficiency rates and increases in the competency rate for students. Our overall proficiency rate increased from 41% to 48%. The percentage of students who begin in 9<sup>th</sup> grade one year and graduate with a high school diploma four years later, the graduation rate, rose from 7.14% in 2007-08 to 47.06% during 2008-09. We achieved Adequate Yearly Progress by meeting three out of three target goals under No Child Left Behind standards. Compared to other alternative schools with similar grade configuration (grades 6-12) that made “High Growth” and Adequate Yearly Progress, we had the 3<sup>rd</sup> highest proficiency rate in the state.

While a slight decrease occurred with EOC testing in English 1 and Biology, significant increases resulted in Biology, US History, Civics and Algebra. Algebra saw the greatest improvement with a success rate more than double the previous year, increasing from 18.8% in 2007-08 to 42.9%. The proficiency rate for Physical Science rose 6% while US History rose from 39.1% to 52.6%, an increase of 13.5%. Civics test results increased from 33.3% to 62.2% proficient, an increase of 29%.

After significant investments towards increasing active learning activities in classroom instruction, we are proud to be seeing improvement in test results. Yet, these initiatives must be continued to enable continuous improvement to occur.

### B. 21<sup>st</sup> Century Professionals

In March of 2008, we began our study of Marzano’s research strategies which continued throughout the last school year. Each certified teacher completed requirements for two high quality CEU credits through participation in professional learning communities based on Marzano’s *Classroom Instruction that Works* and Schlechty’s *Working on the Work*. Teachers were required to integrate strategies as defined by Marzano, share lesson plans and critique one another. Using data from 5-minute “classroom walk through” observations, we evaluated our progress towards integration of high yield strategies.

As part of this course, teachers were also required to attend six or more hours of workshops focused on motivating at-risk learners. Two teachers attended the NC Association for Alternative Education conference gleaning insights on best practices for alternative schools. Six teachers attended workshops on alternative grading practices and drop out prevention techniques offered at the Western Region Educational Service Alliance. Over half of the teachers attended a conference to explore classroom strategies to motivate at-risk students. Many hours of professional discussion ensued after each of these workshops as we shared new learning and brainstormed ways to incorporate them into instruction.

We also designed a technology CEU based on staff needs in this area and offered 12 hours of flexible options for classes based on individual preferences. All certified teachers completed between 5-11 content hours with additional hours towards course completion available in fall.

Not surprisingly, survey data from staff this year showed an increase of 23% satisfaction with opportunities for professional staff development. This increase to 88% positive responses is comparable to the satisfaction rate of other schools in the district.

### C. Healthy and Responsible Students

Efforts to increase respectful behavior for self and others continued throughout the school year. Community service opportunities increased, leaving students with a deeper awareness of diversity and needs of the community. Students participated in interpersonal skills groups dealing with conflict resolution, mediation, substance abuse awareness and tobacco education. Community agencies continued sessions regarding Guided Problem Solving, Positive Choices, Safe Dating, and Conflict Resolution.

Positive staff responses regarding respect issues increased on the staff survey to 88% this year. This 4% increase continues our upward trend, returning results to a normal range for Davidson River School after a significant decline two years ago.

### D. Leadership

Over the past three years, we steadily increased the number of volunteers and community service hours for Davidson River School. Volunteer hours for the year totaled 520, an increase of 20% from the previous year. The list of community members involved in DRS increased from 40 to 64. This included mentors for Senior projects, parents and local agency representatives on School Improvement Team and district level committees, and volunteers in the office and with tutoring. Thirty different businesses and local agencies enriched services for students through monetary contributions, donations of resources, time and talents. Our staff is committed to involving students in the community through service learning opportunities, and involving parents and community members in the education of our students. We embrace the philosophy that "Teaching Everyone Takes Everyone" and will continue to make continuous improvement in the area.

### E. 21<sup>st</sup> Century Systems

While positive responses on the staff survey increased from 53% to 65%, this is a continued area of concern for Davidson River School. We fall below the standard compared to schools throughout the system. Davidson River School received additional hardware and peripherals, yet staff continue to feel inadequate technology resources are available largely due to the quality of our existing computers. Also, frustrations grew throughout the year resulting from unpredictable budget cuts and reversions.

Ironically, positive survey responses from students at DRS were above other schools in the system and parent responses were comparable to parents at other schools as well. This indicates that we are using all available resources and stretching the funds to cover needs of students. Continued discussion with staff is needed to communicate how monies are spent, identify how to stretch limited resources and gain updated technology.

### III. Reflections and Lessons Learned

We are proud of the improvements in priority area 1, and will continue initiatives to integrate high yield strategies and active engagement of learners into instruction. Continued study will occur in the upcoming year to review and elaborate on past knowledge as we refine our instructional techniques. Action steps in this area show noteworthy progress yet we realize that our population changes each semester and work is still needed to continue this upward trend in academic success.

Concurrently, as test results have improved, staff satisfaction with opportunities for professional development have increased. Initiatives to gain new instructional techniques offered a wide array of opportunities for staff to increase professional knowledge regarding pedagogy and technology. We recognize that continual improvement will only occur as we continue to expand staff development opportunities yet balance the limited funding and workdays available to staff.

The reflections of School Improvement Team continue to focus on the need to providing adequate resources and technology equipment for students and staff with dwindling funds. We again see the need for operational definitions, common understanding of data and knowledge of how it will be used to determine progress towards meeting goals. Since several priority areas utilize only one indicator to measure progress, single survey questions provide little insight to the true issues, particularly regarding priority 5. Additional clarification and discussion is needed in this area.

Quantity is not equal to quality when utilizing technology in instructional practice. Acquiring laptops and projector systems for teachers is helpful but the number and quality of computers for student use must be examined. Preparing students with 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills requires more sophisticated technology and weeding out of the older, slower computers.

From 2006 to 2008, we saw a slight increase in our general budget and local donations. Likewise, staff increased knowledge of how survey data relates to our improvement plan. This, along with our action steps have not resolved the issues regarding adequate resources for instruction. During 2008-09, the reversion of state funds caused panic throughout the schools. Staff experienced a reduction in salary and required furlough time, spending cycles were changed and future allocations became vague. While staff realize that a decline in survey results will likely not cause an increase in funding, we must be more and more frugal and thoughtful in our spending and creative to secure grants and donations for our needs.



#### IV. Next Steps

For the coming months, our plans for continuation of action steps in priority areas 1, 2, 3, and 4 will refine and increase strategies to meet our goals. In priority area 1, previous action steps that increased writing proficiency produced lower performance than expected. Additional review of practice and increased understanding of our learners will continue for the upcoming year.

In priority area 2, increased communication will occur as information concerning professional development is shared district wide for all to benefit. We will work with the central office to streamline communication between schools and encourage teachers to conduct professional learning communities with staff at other schools.

Technology CEU classes are already planned and underway for staff to enable completion of the required technology credit. Topics so far focus on using the new Open Office program, United Streaming and newly acquired Smart Boards. Phase three of "Research-Based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement" will begin in late fall to further our study to engage at-risk learners.

Further dialog will occur as we drill down to identify more root causes for survey results. Additional feedback from staff is necessary to determine if existing hardware and peripherals are truly meeting our needs. Continued communication with the technology support staff will occur to identify problems and solutions to our ever increasing technology challenges.