

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
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I. Introduction

A. General Comments

During the 2007-08 school year, the DRS School Improvement Team met monthly to review progress on school goals and priorities. This team included staff members, parents, and members of local businesses and community agencies. This group of caring individuals focused on continuous improvement at Davidson River School in a broader sense as each gave a perspective of how school concerns, such as the dropout rate and substance abuse, relate to overall effect in the community. Composition of the team reflected community demographics and actively involved mental health agencies and local businesses that support the school. Discussions centered on strategic priorities, local option goals, the dropout rate, substance abuse issues and student ownership for learning. Data was shared with the team on a regular basis that substantiated progress in meeting goals. Discussion of Priority 1 (Globally Competitive Students), Priority 3 (Healthy Responsible Students) and Priority 4 (Leadership) were our major focus.

Most notable was progress with 10th grade writing test results. We attribute this largely to school-wide initiatives for writing integration in all subject areas and significant modifications to the master schedule for placement of students into 10th grade English classes. Test scores in other areas were unusually lower than in past years, sparking extensive dialogue with staff on necessary changes to increase test score proficiency.

Building self-esteem and increasing respectful behavior held a major focus on a daily basis at DRS with positive recognition and awards given to students who modeled respectful behavior or met personal goals. Members of a local mental health agency, grant-sponsored support groups and a local mediation center participated in school improvement initiatives and offered direct service to students. In addition, our students were involved in more community service activities through greater outreach to the community. Survey data dealing with respect issues rose significantly, with 38% more positive responses from staff on the annual survey.

In summary, the first year of this plan showed gains in several priority areas with the need for continued work in others. Priority areas 1, 3 and 4 evidenced the most significant progress. We pledge to continue our efforts in these areas while concurrently addressing additional action steps in the other priority areas.

B. Globally-Competitive Students

During 2007-08, most significant gains were made in the area of 10th grade writing where DRS increased from 27% to 80% proficiency. Staff members worked closely with English teachers to increase writing activities based on the state writing rubrics, and modifications were made that supported more writing instruction earlier in the year.

Staff members also focused on closely aligning lessons to the NC Course of Study and gauged progress throughout each semester. Monitoring procedures for Novanet courses were modified to ensure course credit for increased percentages of students. A school-wide staff development initiative focusing on research-based strategies to increase student achievement spurred more active learning activities and focus on increasing best practices in the classroom. We visited other alternative schools in search of successful techniques for student achievement and assessed our effectiveness with remediation. Despite these efforts, EOC proficiency rates declined in all

subjects when compared to previous years. Using quality tools, such as fishbone analysis, we discovered the need to modify the schedule and testing environment, to restructure math and English 9 courses to include mastery of basic skills and literacy skills, and to infuse test-taking strategies throughout the semester. Significant changes were made in these areas that are in progress to date.

Throughout the 2nd semester, data was collected during 5-minute “classroom walk through” observations and analyzed by staff. Our discussions focused on integrating high yield strategies and increasing time on task in classes. Continued work in this area will be on-going during the upcoming years with continued emphasis on increased student achievement.

Initiatives to use Mindladder were resurrected early in the year and later abandoned. This was largely due to the degree of intense and costly training to implement the program while balancing priorities to implement other initiatives. In addition, we modified our usage of predictive assessments due to lack of updated resources.

New action steps for this year include use of focus groups to plan testing schedules, integration of test-taking strategies throughout each semester, and refinement of pre/post testing techniques. We are also offering literacy skills development and emphasizing mastery of basic math skills in several courses and need to assess overall effectiveness at the end of each semester.

C. 21st Century Professionals

The School Improvement Team felt that good progress was made on all action steps in this area and elected to continue efforts with our current action steps. In February, we began a school-wide staff development initiative to integrate research-based strategies to improve student achievement, with on-going sessions during the current year. Staff members learned about “Classroom Walk Through” requirements, explored Marzano’s high yield strategies, and integrated active learning activities into instruction. Despite adding more to already demanding teaching responsibilities, several teachers commented that this professional development activity helped refocus efforts on instructional improvement.

Of our action steps, most notable was the increase in teachers attending state and local professional conferences, specifically those that focused on motivating at-risk learners. We partnered with two alternative schools, exploring their instructional program and building procedures and shared staff development initiatives. All full-time teachers attended at least one professional conference with 50% of teachers also visiting another alternative school. These initiatives gave great insight into the strengths and weaknesses of our programs with modifications made accordingly.

Despite good progress with each action step, survey data declined from 77% to 65% positive responses from staff. We feel this is largely due to increased requirements for teachers in their area of pedagogy and reduced available workdays to meet the requirement. In addition, discrepancies between the district Stakeholder Satisfaction Survey results and responses to the Governor’s Teacher Working Conditions survey indicate the need for further clarification in questions regarding 21st Century Professionals.

D. Healthy and Responsible Students

Since it is difficult to enact strategic change that impacts positively on respect, we are particularly proud of gains made in this area. Stakeholder Satisfaction Survey results increased from 46% to 84% positive responses from staff regarding students treating school personnel with respect. We attribute this to a school-wide effort focused on respect for students, to implementing character education and self-improvement groups, and to offering direct instruction to students and staff on the hidden rules of poverty. Students increased participation in community service and tutoring activities that broadened awareness of diversity and community needs. Middle school students volunteered 2-3 times weekly with elementary school children. High school students worked with Senior citizens and younger children, beautified areas in the community and volunteered at local festivals throughout the year. Other activities to increase respect among students were discussed at bi-monthly "town meetings" that showcased respect and offered recognition to students. These activities helped keep the spotlight on respect and appropriate interactions between staff and students.

Support groups and counseling groups at DRS were expanded to capitalize on services available from local mental health and mediation agencies. Sessions included programs such as Positive Choices, Safe Dating, Guided Problem Solving, Mediation and Conflict Resolution. Plans for the coming year focus on expanding these opportunities to include research based programs about drug education, violence prevention, and issues unique to women as they compete in a man's world.

While no action steps were abandoned, we are modifying our format for gauging success through development of a needs assessment and periodic surveying of both students and staff to determine progress made throughout the year. In addition, we will expand opportunities to direct teach hidden rules of poverty and involve students in community service activities.

E. Leadership

Davidson River School has experienced a steady increase in this goal area over the past 3 years with 418 community service and volunteer hours for 2007-08. In addition, over 40 community members were involved with students. Major initiatives included ongoing activities for students to be involved in the community as well as sponsoring new events. Middle School students worked with younger students at the elementary school conducting Brain Gym activities, and tutoring in writing and reading. Our students worked with youngsters after school at the Boys' and Girls' Club and performed Japanese drumming techniques for local festivals and community events. Students hosted two Red Cross Blood Drives, sponsored a booth at the town fall festival and participated in Senior Games through the Rec. Department. Other major initiatives involved implementing a Learn and Serve grant to build picnic tables for donation to the community and a greenhouse to grow plants for community beautification.

Partnerships with local organizations expanded as members of local mental health and mediation agencies worked with the School Improvement Team and provided direct service to DRS students. Businesses such as Jennings Builders Supplies and Rent-All supported our programs, both through donating materials and expertise for completing school projects. A special partnership evolved with Lowe's of Brevard where DRS was the recipient of the Lowe's Heros project. Throughout the year, Lowe's employees volunteered time and materials to beautify our campus, resulting in a major renovation of school grounds.

For the coming year, we will expand our community partnerships to include Communities in Schools, with plans to develop a mentoring project. We also seek new partnerships and opportunities for our students to be involved with community events.

F. 21st Century Systems

While we implemented most action steps in this area, survey data indicates a need for further concern and work in this priority area. Over the past 5 years, satisfaction of staff regarding adequate and appropriate resources and materials has declined steadily despite increases to funding allocations in several budget areas pertinent to instructional supplies and equipment. In addition, significant improvements have been made to the building, including a science lab, more than 30 additional computers, laptop computers for teachers, landscape renovations, and additional technology hardware. With more funds available for materials and supplies, and improved facilities, survey data continued to decline from 67% to 53% positive responses, indicating continued dissatisfaction by staff.

Throughout the year, staff members were informed of budget allocations and encouraged to order instructional supplies as needed. We obtained grants and donations from the community to support programs and participated in district technology activities to gain additional projection equipment and peripherals. Each month, budget allocations were shared with staff and ideas were solicited for spending based on program needs. Obviously, these efforts to supply classroom needs and better inform staff of spending options failed to impact progress in this priority area.

While no action steps were abandoned, plans are underway to modify existing action steps to include proactive measures. We will develop and administer a needs assessment to gain insights from students and staff. From this data, we will develop a "wish list" on a shared folder available to all staff. After initial funding of instructional supply requests first semester, we will draw from a prioritized list when money becomes available later in the school year. In addition, we will formalize communication of grant opportunities through a shared folder of grants available for classroom projects.

II. Summary of Results

A. Globally-Competitive Students

At the time of this report, official performance composite scores and Adequately Yearly Progress results have not been released. Of the 34 alternative schools statewide with grade distributions of 6-12, Davidson River School was one of 25 to make expected growth. We were not one of the four schools (grades 6-12) statewide to make high growth this year.

Writing proficiency increased from 27% to 80% and Vocats scores increased 20% while EOC proficiency rates fell unexpectedly below the district average both semesters. Proficiency rates varied with a range of 19% in Algebra to 40% in Biology. While general trends are obvious, it is difficult to predict outcomes due to varying rate of participation in these EOC courses from year to year. The number of students tested in each area is small and with subgroups of less than 20, it is difficult to make generalizations. Our action steps will include new strategies to better prepare students for success on EOCs.

B. 21st Century Professionals

Despite progress in implementing action steps in the area, Stakeholder Satisfaction Survey data indicates the opposite of the desired outcome. Comparisons over the last 3 years reflect a decline in positive responses from staff regarding adequate opportunities for professional development focused on instruction. Data from 2008 indicated 65% positive responses, down from 77% the previous year.

Ironically, more continuing education credits were offered at the school level than in prior years, and an increased number of teachers participated in conferences and workshops focusing on instruction for at-risk students. All full time teachers attended at least one professional conference and half the staff visited one or more alternative schools. One-hundred percent of certified teachers in core areas earned high quality staff development credits sponsored by the school.

C. Healthy and Responsible Students

During the 2007-08 school year, staff at DRS maintained a focus on respect for self and others demonstrated in a variety of ways. Involvement with service learning activities increased student awareness of the diversity and needs of the community. Hundreds of community service hours accrued by students contributed to this broadened awareness. In addition, students participated in interpersonal skills groups dealing with illegal substances, drug and tobacco education, Guided Problem Solving, Positive Choices, Safe Dating and Conflict Resolution. We believe sponsoring these groups helped to increase respect of students towards staff as students refined their interpersonal skills.

During 2006-07, positive staff responses regarding respect from students fell to 46%, well below the 5-year average of 80%. After implementing action steps outlined in our Plan, 84% of staff felt that students treat school personnel with respect. We are pleased with this progress and will continue to maintain a focus on respect to achieve our goal of 90%.

D. Leadership

Our goal for this priority area is to increase community service and volunteer hours to 500 hours annually, an average of 5 hours per student at Davidson River School. Over the past three years, we have steadily increased community service and volunteer hours, from 211 hours in 2006 to 418 hours for the past year. Our list of volunteers increased from 35 to over 40 community members donating time and talent to benefit our students.

Understanding that "Teaching Everyone Takes Everyone", our staff is committed to involving students in the community and inviting parents and community members to assist at DRS. Initiatives with student led conferences, Taiko performances and school based projects encouraged parent and community involvement in school functions. Lowe's of Brevard sponsored one other noteworthy project that occurred last year, where extensive time and effort was donated to landscape our school grounds. We were pleased that 12 Lowe's employees attended the Transylvania County Volunteer Appreciation banquet where we offered appreciation for over 300 hours of volunteer time from Lowe's employees.

In this priority area, we plan to continue efforts with service learning opportunities and expand our outreach to agencies such as Communities in Schools. We anticipate continued success as we build strong community supports for our programs and develop a mentoring program for our students.

E. 21st Century Systems

While budget allocations have increased in many funding categories in the past 3 years, our data continues to show a downward trend regarding positive responses of staff to the availability of resources and materials at DRS. Survey data declined from 71% positive responses in 2006 to 53% in 2008. Yet, budget allocations have increased since 2006 by almost 30% when combining state instructional supplies, local instructional funds and media. Procedures for obtaining resources and materials include periodic discussion of budget accounts, balances and spending deadlines so staff members are better apprised of budget expenditures and needs. More technology equipment has been added and updates to existing equipment occur annually.

Discussion with staff indicates a need to clarify survey questions and discuss how we can stretch our budget allocations to meet our needs through informed spending, grants and donations from the community.

III. Reflections and Lessons Learned

One of the most significant lessons regarding continuous improvement involves the need for operational definitions, common understanding of data and knowledge of how it will be used to determine progress towards meeting goals. In three priority areas, we identified one single survey question to determine outcome of meeting the goal. While actions steps were intentionally designed and implemented, survey results declined significantly in 2 of the 3 areas. Specifically, staff continues to feel concern over lack of time and funding to meet the ever-growing staff development requirements for certified teachers.

Since September, extensive dialogue has ensued to gain greater understanding of how limited funding and fewer workdays must meet our needs for staff development. More than ever before, we must be creative in our approach to professional growth. More staff will be taking on-line courses, often with low cost and high schedule flexibility, as fewer dollars are available to attend costly conferences and workshops during the school day.

Likewise in Priority Area 5, staff members now realize that decline in survey results will likely not cause an increase in funding needed for materials and resources. We must be frugal and thoughtful in our spending and creative to secure grants and donations to fill our needs.

IV. Next Steps

For the coming months, our plans are to implement additional action steps in priority areas 1, 2 and 5 as discussed in previous sections. We also plan to expand our efforts in priority areas 3 and 4, having made good progress in these two areas. In May of last year, plans were developed to improve instructional strategies and modify test-taking procedures for students in EOC courses. Extensive dialogue about predictive assessments, high yield strategies and test-taking skills has been on-going with staff since then. Focus groups of students will be meeting next month to share ideas on how we can reduce test-taking stress for increased success on EOCs.

Plans are also underway to help prioritize expenditures to stretch school funds, and to better communicate grant opportunities. With continued dialogue at staff and School Improvement Team meetings about school goals, and with our commitment to continuous improvement, we anticipate advances in meeting goals in all priority areas.