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Never Arrive: Teachers Reflect on A CES Elementary School

Type: Horace Feature

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Source: *Horace* Fall 2007, Vol. 23 No. 3



What is a Coalition elementary school? In the Chesapeake Coalition of Essential Schools network, each of our schools has made meaning of the ten Common Principles in very different ways. However, because our schools came to us not necessarily through the philosophically noble pursuit of principles, but through the funding opportunity of Comprehensive School Reform, CES journeys within our network have been especially warty. Our schools are all regular public schools in regular public school districts, in a state with a strong state voice in both funding and directing public schooling. Our schools are not smaller than neighboring schools, nor managed with any greater degree of autonomy, nor exempt from state testing or district curricula that prepare students for proficiency in such testing. Students enroll in our schools because they live where the school is, not because their parents are looking for something different or better. Teachers and principals, likewise, generally find their way to our schools through normal district hiring practices, some of which are less personal than others.

Despite these realities, many of our elementary schools have grown into fine examples of what CES brings to pre-kindergarten through fifth grade schooling. Principals, teachers, community members, and sometimes district administrators have come to see the value in centering education not on a checklist of purported “best practices” – implemented step-by-step and without reflection – but rather on a philosophy of schooling that requires and inspires teachers to redefine their expectations for themselves, their colleagues, their students, and their communities. This has proven the most difficult aspect of the CES journey in our elementary schools, where too many teachers have had too much experience with basal readers, mathematics pacing guides, and myriad expectations for teaching that disempowers both teachers and students. You don’t implement CES, you embrace it; there is no standard set of predefined outcomes, but rather the possibility of remarkable changes in the very heart of a school community.

One such community is Salem Avenue Elementary School in Hagerstown,, a small city in western Maryland. Salem Avenue joined CES in 2004. Its staff of fifty teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators serves 650 students. Two-thirds of these students live in poverty; one-third is African-American or Hispanic. As in many Title I schools, the staff members have been somewhat transient. The school has weathered three principals in the last four years; during the same time period, many teachers have been promoted to district leadership roles or transferred from the school for other reasons. “So much change,” bemoans Vicki Kane, a kindergarten teacher who has been at Salem Avenue for 15 years. “It’s been almost impossible to stay focused on anything.” Nevertheless, at this point in their CES journey, Salem Avenue’s teachers can speak thoughtfully about the hard work involved in becoming a principled elementary school.

What Makes a CES Elementary School Different from Other Schools?

Teachers at Salem Avenue describe the differences between a CES school and other schools in terms of student engagement, expectations, and support. Amanda Weighley, a second grade teacher who began her career last year, describes the difference between her CES experience and her training to teach: “There’s a lot more student centered learning; it’s not all about the teacher. Students get more out of their learning because they are responsible for it.”

Linda Green, a veteran teacher of 28 years on the same second grade team, believes, “You’re involved in the learning process, but the students take ownership of what they learn. They want to do it. You present them with a door, but you’re not the leader going through that door. They’re running toward it; they want to do it. Now teaching is interesting. If you could see how much second grade students can accomplish!” Craig Eicher, a first grade teacher who began his career as a high school teacher, adds, “Students are engaged – they’re hands-on, reflecting on their work, talking about their work. As their teacher, I try to go for something different, think outside the box, something to prove that students can do it. Once you try it, it’s

like, 'Wow!'"

Craig's expectations of himself and his students are central to Salem Avenue's success. Sandy Burger, a fifth grade teacher with 23 years of experience, describes it this way: "When you see the kids coming in you think they might not make it. You get rumors from lower grades. Every teacher makes predictions and develops a mindset that CES helps you get rid of. Every kid can learn. You just have to find the way that's best for them, get them involved. With CES you give every kid a chance to be engaged in learning. Every kid has an opportunity." Rebecca Bland, another highly experienced fifth grade teacher, adds, "When it comes to students exhibiting their learning, they work so much more diligently. They don't mind increasing rigor if they know that their thinking is honored and valued in the community." Capturing the kindergarten perspective, Vicki Kane offers, "How much kindergarteners are able to do shocked me. There's no room for 'You're not going to get this because you're only five.'" Dan Fowler, a second-year third grade teacher, captured the intersection between his expectations of himself and his students: "My goal this year was to personalize and differentiate, especially for my students with disabilities, and I did that by expecting more from all kids. I'm proud of what they accomplished in the classroom and on the state test."

Purposeful collaboration among teachers, and, to a lesser extent, among parents, is key to Salem Avenue's CES journey. "We share instructional ideas and ways to motivate individual students. If we think we understand how a certain student ticks, we share. We don't have to be the monarch of our room. We send students to each other's rooms if they need another touch for a while. We are very welcoming of all students," asserts Rebecca Bland. Sandy Burger, another member of the fifth grade team, adds, "We got better about planning. We had to work around county assessments and their objectives and could pull out big ideas. We started planning on Friday nights until 7 or 7:30. You have to let your guard down and share and cooperate. The team has to be willing to work together and work across grade levels as well." Dan Fowler offers, "We allow each other to come into classrooms, which is a huge step – so much feedback from other people, not how well you did, but a different spin, also cool feedback. We respect the differences in each other. We trust each other."

The Ten Common Principles at Salem Avenue

During the 2005-06 school year, as appreciation for the power of the CES Common Principles began to grow, Salem Avenue's teachers and parents reached consensus around six school-wide habits of mind which form the core of instruction at the school. Honoring these habits of mind is challenging in an elementary school, where much of the early instruction in reading and math is skill-based, but teachers work diligently to marry essential skills and content to the lives of the community and the children.

The habits of mind have helped the school community to understand the Common Principles as philosophy rather than checklist. "Both teachers and kids have to be motivated to think continuously about using minds well. And getting students to use their minds well now drives our teaching and planning," states Linda Green, second grade teacher. Sandy Burger asks students always to ask themselves, "What is it I need to be able to do to think and learn?" This question reminds her that "every student is valuable, worthwhile, special. They are the most important part of their own education." Amanda Weighley adds, "The habits of mind are in the forefront. When we do planning, we make sure that work is personalized; we have students reflect on their work." Kindergarten teacher Vicki Kane understands that positive habits of mind begin by "letting students figure out if they were right or wrong. With teacher as coach, I am not the only person talking, the only person whose opinion or experience matters." Dan Fowler adds, "The principles are interrelated. I like 'less is more' best. Once you put something out there for the students, you can extend from it, not pushing or rushing, which is where tone of decency comes from. The problem with other approaches is trying to fit too much in, in too little time."

Rebecca Bland describes her understanding of the Common Principles in this way: "I know the spirit of them and feel that this spirit is alive in my teaching. I am constantly thinking about habits of mind, expectation, motivation, and ownership of student learning. I am becoming aware of individual students and what would help them become engaged. I work to build enough of a relationship with students to understand how they learn best, and then I communicate that to the student. That's what they can take with them rest of their life. I cry for all the times I didn't know that, all the times kids have been discouraged because I didn't know to help them learn how they learn."

As a CES affiliate center, Chesapeake CES respects and celebrates the character of each of our schools. We

encourage school communities to explore and embrace the Common Principles, and, like the Salem Avenue staff that is so invigorated at discovering what students can do, we are continuously impressed at the quality of the adult work that transpires. We believe that CES is more journey than destination. We believe that a school is able to call itself a Coalition school when its people begin to speak in terms of this journey, and when the journey is grounded in ever-deepening understandings of the Common Principles.

Salem Avenue has entered the 2007-08 school year with 10 new classroom teachers as well as many remaining staff teaching in different grade levels or intervention positions. However, for the first time in three years, the administrative team will return to the school. This strength, coupled with notable gains for students in state testing for the first time in many years, has brought a sense of qualified optimism to the school community. While administrators and teachers continue to believe in the power of the Common Principles and the need to continue their CES journey, they acknowledge the added challenge of so many new staff in their plans to move forward.

School leaders are strategically retooling plans for engaging teachers and parents in continued reform. Salem Avenue's staff spent its first day together in August at a local ropes course, developing the adult relationships so essential to continued success. Each grade level team will engage in a carefully constructed action research project that supports the Common Principles. And the PTA president, a vocal but novice advocate of CES, will join the school/district team attending Fall Forum in Denver. Interestingly, the challenges inherent in so much change are actually helping school community members to revisit, clarify, and protect that which they believe is essential at Salem Avenue. Salem Avenue has learned the great secret of the power of CES: a school never arrives. It continues to revel in the ride, the bumpier the better, arriving at a place only to discover that an even better place awaits.

Comprehensive School Reform

Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSR, later modified to CSR), a federally-funded initiative, provided competitive grants to schools from 1999-2007. Schools were awarded funds based on needs assessment and willingness to partner with an "external provider" that brought research-based, focused opportunities for change in response to the school's needs. States structured CSR differently; in Maryland, schools could elect to partner with a broad range of providers and grant awards were typically \$150,000 each year for three years.

Salem Avenue in a Nutshell, 2007-2008

Rigor

- Year-long essential questions in reading K-5
- Focus questions per reading theme
- Six schoolwide habits of mind, developed in collaboration with parents

Purposeful Collaboration and Reflection

- Daily grade-level planning
- Regular opportunities for collaboration across grade levels
- Peer observation supported by administration
- Clear processes for collecting, making meaning of, and responding to data
- Disciplined action research projects at each grade level PK-5

Attention to Issues of Equity

- Strategic disaggregation of data, including student work
- Heterogeneous grouping in all classes
- Structured intervention programs, including extended school year
- Parent participation database; outreach to those underrepresented
- Frequent use of National School Reform Faculty protocols as part of classroom instruction to increase participation

Rethinking community engagement

- Schoolwide exhibitions of learning twice each year (community attendance 750+)

- Parent attendance at Fall Forum sponsored by school
 - Math forums for parents of students in grades 3-5
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Salem Avenue Elementary School Habits of Mind

OWNERSHIP

In what ways have I shown that this work is important to me?

UNDERSTANDING

How clearly have I stated what I know and what I think?

SELF-DIRECTION

In what ways have I demonstrated responsibility for my own learning?

MOTIVATION

Have I taken enough care that this work reflects my best effort?

SELF-ASSESSMENT

Have I taken time to revisit, reflect about, and assess my own work?

CONNECTIONS

Can I explain clearly how this learning connects to other learnings?

Chesapeake Coalition of Essential Schools

Chesapeake CES opened its doors in June 2002. We work with schools, clusters of schools, and school districts in Maryland, Virginia, and Pennsylvania. Our relationships with schools and districts vary, with some schools seeking "affirmation" as CES schools (schools are affirmed in our network following an intense, three-day site visit by CES educators from the national network who determine that the school is deeply embracing the Common Principles) and others using our services for professional development in support of specific goals. Regardless of the nature of this relationship, we ask our schools to assess themselves always in terms of four broad areas: rigor, purposeful collaboration and reflection, attention to issues of equity, and rethinking community engagement.

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This resource last updated: February 22, 2008

Database Information:

Source: <i>Horace</i> Fall 2007, Vol. 23 No. 3
Publication Year: 2007
Publisher: CES National
School Level: Elementary
Audience: New to CES, Teacher, Parent
Issue: 23.3
Focus Area: Classroom Practice
STRAND: Classroom Practice: assessment