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Reward Schools Case Study Project
Blackshear Elementary School
Austin ISD

May 2015

A SNAPSHOT OF BLACKSHEAR ELEMENTARY

2013-2014 demographics:

- 220 students
- Grade span – Pre-Kindergarten-5th
- 97% of the students Economically Disadvantaged (i.e. eligible to receive free or reduced price lunch)
- 41% English language learners
- 11% Special Education
- 19% student mobility rate
- 74% Hispanic
- 25% African American
- 1% Other ethnicity

In 2013-2014, the state accountability ratings were:

- Met Standard on all 3 Indices (Student Achievement, Student Progress, and Closing Performance Gaps)
- Distinction Designations in Reading, Math, Science, Top 25% Student Progress, and Top 25% Closing Performance Gaps

Introduction and Context

As one walks toward Blackshear Elementary School, it is apparent that the staff cares deeply about the school. The well-maintained grounds outside the building include gardens in front and behind the school, and inside, the hallways, cafeteria, and classrooms are colorful, welcoming, and clean. Student art decorates the walls in the hallways along with posters depicting famous minority leaders, writers, and artists. Additional reminders, including attendance touchdown and anti-bullying posters, clearly communicate positive expectations for students. Teachers and staff speak kindly and warmly to Blackshear students who seem happy with the order and harmony throughout the building.

Because the Texas Education Agency's Critical Success Factors (CSFs) are the underlying theory of action guiding the Reward Schools case studies, the findings below are presented in terms of the CSFs. For this case study, Blackshear principal, Betty Jenkins, teachers, and staff participated in interviews and focus groups to describe the instructional strategies they implemented at the school. During the principal interview and focus group with teachers and staff, the CSFs that had the strongest evidence of implementation were:

- **Critical Success Factor 1 - Academic Performance**
- **Critical Success Factor 2 - Quality Data to Drive Instruction**
- **Critical Success Factor 3 - Leadership Effectiveness**

Critical Success Factor 1 - Academic Performance

The principal, teachers, and staff were asked to describe the instructional strategies they implemented at Blackshear elementary. All of the case study participants discussed the following schoolwide strategies:

- Alignment to the school motto: *"Together we Educate, Enrich, and Exercise to Excel"*
- High expectations for students and teachers
- Consistent routines and strategies across grade-levels

Alignment to the school motto. The principal and staff described their approach to instruction as aligned to the Blackshear motto that applies to all students: *"Together we Educate, Enrich, and Exercise to Excel"*. Principal Jenkins described this strategy as a way to evaluate ideas and programs. She said,

So, I always tell individuals, if they want to try something new on campus then, which of those areas does it fall into? Is it an educational program? Is it exercise or is it enrichment? So that we stay focused and we know where to put our resources.

The staff and principal also discussed using creative learning strategies to enrich the educational experiences of Blackshear students. They mentioned how teachers at all grade levels read stories to students and then ask the students to act out the story. Another strategy the staff discussed was enrichment Fridays where parent volunteers or professionals who are a part of Blackshear's Fine Arts Academy present various types of creative activities, such as dance and art, for students to participate in. One teacher described it as

Another way for kids to express themselves, not just the academic part is really high but also even in enrichment. They come in orderly, they go to their classes, they enjoy what their classes are...everything is pretty systematic what everybody does but it's a variety of things and interest so that's a nice balance for them.

High expectations for students and teachers. All of the participants described how the principal and staff have high expectations for students and staff. The principal described her expectations by saying,

As far as the expectations for students...I want them to come to school ready to be a great little learners when they come in the building, respectful of the rules that they are familiar with, with the expectations, everything from how to come in to the cafeteria in the morning when you're going to have breakfast, moving through the hallways, getting in to the gym every morning, and [doing] their reading. So, student expectations...ready to learn and ready to participate by the following the rules. With teachers, I want professionalism and I want to be able to rely on them. I don't want to feel like I have to be checking up on them.

The staff agreed with the principal by discussing how they feel they hold themselves and each other to high expectations so that all students succeed. Several teachers indicated that students did not belong to any particular classroom; that students were "everyone's kids." Staff discussed how they were able to meet Principal Jenkins' high expectations because teachers were duty-free (i.e., they do not have lunchtime or other similar types of duties). Teachers focused on their classrooms and did not have to contend with interruptions of their time or attention. Staff indicated that the principal respects them, views them as professionals, and does not "police them." All staff take ownership of the school because of the collaborative way the principal and staff work. One teacher stated, "Everyone has responsibility to improve the campus."

Consistent in routines and strategies across grade-levels. Another schoolwide instructional strategy the participants discussed was consistency in school routines and curriculum. They mentioned that the content is vertically aligned, and pointed to reading in grades 3 through 5 where, as the reading specialist noted, "Components and anchors are the same across grades." The principal added that the schoolwide fluency program is another example of a consistent routine (see callout box).

The School Leadership team and other teacher- and

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

"I think with some components of our day, one of the strategies would be consistency in routine. For example, we have a Fluency Program. Fluency like fluent at words or reading fluency. We also call it the non-negotiable word list. One strategy is routine, exposing the students to the Fluency Program on a daily basis. What we have done with this program is that we are focusing on the first 1,000 words in English which are high frequency, which are supposed to be...70% of the words in any written document that you pick up."

– Principal Jenkins

staff-led committees developed instructional plans, resources, the master schedule, and materials in the summer before school began. This reduces disruption and wasted time because, as Principal Jenkins observed, “The teacher isn’t wasting any time; the students know what is coming up next.” The intervention specialist also noted that, “Everybody’s schedules are set up at the beginning of the year so that we can consistently see our kids on a daily basis without interruption. That’s key to kids I think. I feel that that runs very smoothly here.”

Critical Success Factor 2 - Quality Data to Drive Instruction

The principal, teachers, and staff were asked to describe how they collect, analyze, and use data to drive instruction. They mentioned the following strategies:

- Regular assessments
- Continuous monitoring of all students’ progress
- Frequent and regular data meetings

Regular assessments. The principal and staff discussed how students are assessed on a regular basis. They mentioned benchmark assessments, teacher observations and tests, and standardized assessments, such as the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR®). Although the types of assessments vary by grade level, the staff discussed how all students (even those in Pre-Kindergarten) are assessed regularly. For example, students in the earlier grades (i.e., Kindergarten through second grade), have benchmark tests, and fluency and numeracy checks. Students in third

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

“Another instructional strategy that’s very important in academics is immediate feedback to students or immediate corrective feedback. We have a math program, our Math Warm-up program. We’re very specific about how we have the students complete their warm-ups, how they show their work, but the most important thing about that math warm-up is what the teacher is doing during the time of the warm-up. The teacher needs to be monitoring the students and giving them corrective feedback at that time so that they don’t continue to practice erroneously. There’s physical monitoring. [The teacher] is either stamping or checking to give the students that immediate feedback.”

-Principal Jenkins

through fifth grade are assessed with benchmark tests, the STAAR exam, and weekly assessments. Principal Jenkins described the weekly tests as a “quick assessment teachers give on Fridays” to collect, analyze, and monitor student performance. Students who are struggling are identified and provided additional supports such as interventions and tutoring.

Continuous monitoring of all students’ progress.

Another strategy Blackshear staff have implemented involves continuous monitoring of student data. The principal, teachers, and staff monitor **all** students’ progress on a weekly basis. Every week, teachers submit a “verification of mastery” spreadsheet that reflects student scores on assessments or teacher observations of student skills. The principal asks every teacher how she or he is using this data to modify instruction. Based on this data and process, students and teachers get immediate feedback on their performance. The assistant principal and other staff review the verification of mastery spreadsheets every week to track student progress and identify and target additional supports for students who are struggling.

Frequent and regular data meetings. Teachers, special education specialists, reading specialists, the assistant

principal, and principal review the regular assessment described earlier in frequent data meetings. During the data meetings, the principal or assistant principal will ask teachers to be reflective. As Principal Jenkins described,

Are you [the teacher] just turning in this chart to progress, or are you thinking as you are turning in this chart to me because sometimes you'll notice the same student week after week is still struggling? So then, our questions to [teachers] during primary team meetings are, 'What are you doing for this child, and where are we seeing progress?'

The staff interviewed for this study agreed the frequent data meetings were valuable and beneficial to the staff and students. As one teacher said,

We're always looking at it [verification of mastery spreadsheet]. I have a binder and it just doesn't go in the binder. Every time we meet weekly, we would go over the students with [the reading specialist]...making sure that that's how we're monitoring weekly."

Critical Success Factor 3 - Leadership Effectiveness

Of all the Critical Success Factors the principal, teachers, and staff mentioned, the one that emerged as the most discussed was leadership effectiveness. All of the study participants indicated very high levels of trust, admiration, and respect for Principal Jenkins. The strategies the principal and staff discussed as being indicators of effective principal leadership were:

- Clear communication of expectations
- Delegation of tasks
- Being respectful and supportive of staff, students, and parents

Clear communication of expectations. The teachers, staff, and principal discussed how Principal Jenkins communicates in a frequent, clear, and effective way with everyone in the school. She uses a weekly newsletter, a large calendar outside her office that staff can update, and her presence and voice to communicate schoolwide expectations for teachers, staff, and students. Both Principal Jenkins and teachers mentioned how she prepares and emails a weekly newsletter to all teachers every Sunday night. Principal Jenkins described it as,

[A way to remind teachers] of those expectations through our weekly communication. Teachers will get "a week at a glance", a weekly communication from me. On there, I like to use a lot of the pro-active components...I use *Teach Like a Champion* a lot to remind them. I put up to three on there per week as the year progresses to remind them that those expectations and routines are super important.

The staff agreed the weekly newsletter was an effective tool that reminded them of upcoming events and the principal's expectations for teachers and students. The newsletter also served as way for Principal Jenkins to acknowledge and publically appreciate the staff. As one teacher said,

Every Sunday we get a newsletter about what our expectations are for high academic and behavioral performance so she [Principal Jenkins] gives us ideas from books. *Teach Like a Champion* is what she's been using. She'll give us some input from those books—'Make sure you're doing this'—[and] she'll give us reminders. She also does appreciations to the staff and they're specific about why she appreciates everyone.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

“I think that’s great because a lot of schools that are in our situation, you have a principal that’s just the dictator and there’s constant eyes on you type of thing. We just didn’t feel like we’re being watched by the police. It’s more of a team, ‘we’re going to do this together’ type of thing.”

- Blackshear Elementary teacher

Delegation of tasks. Another strategy the staff and Principal Jenkins described as indicative of her effective leadership was her method of delegating tasks. The participants discussed how teachers and staff were assigned to the School Leadership Team, Campus Advisory Council, or other committees in the school where they had specific roles and duties. Principal Jenkins holds them accountable to these roles and duties. However, staff does not feel “policed” or micromanaged by her. When discussing the committees and teams on campus, one teacher said, “It’s a democratic process. We vote and that’s where a lot of the decisions on the campus are made too.” Principal Jenkins discussed how she interviewed and gathered information from teachers and staff to identify

those who would serve on the teams and committees. She described it as a deliberate process,

One of the first things that I did coming in was to interview all of the teachers and staff individually that were going to be continuing at Blackshear Elementary. I identified them as the School Leadership Team because once I selected the individuals, I wanted to learn as much as I possibly could from them.

Being respectful and supportive of staff, students, and parents. The study participants discussed how Principal Jenkins treats staff, students, and parents with respect and models professionalism and positive behaviors. One teacher said, “Her presence is amazing. She models what she wants. She’s always calm, she’s always professional, she dresses professionally because that’s an expectation she has. You always see her speak calmly to children. She models it all the time.” Other teachers mentioned how she supports them. As one said,

I’ve noticed with Ms. Jenkins...[that] she’s not constantly in the classroom looking at the teachers where the teacher feels like, ‘Am I doing everything right?’ ...like you’re being judged. A lot of times when she comes in the classroom, it’s to help a kid or to speak to a kid.

Summary

Principal Jenkins and the case study focus group composed of teachers and staff agreed on how descriptions of expectations for students and staff were clearly communicated and accepted by everyone in the building. The staff appeared to have strong, positive relationships with each other, the principal, and their students. Although there was a clear and intentional focus on student academic achievement, Principal Jenkins and her staff strongly believed in providing enriching activities to the students. Programs, strategies and techniques were aligned across grades and to the school motto—*Together we Educate, Enrich, and Exercise to Excel.* Blackshear Elementary has a positive school climate where students and staff seem happy. This, coupled with the findings from the present case study provide strong evidence why Blackshear Elementary deserves the recognition of being a Reward School in the state of Texas.

Case study conducted by Angelica Herrera, Ph.D.