

Special Report

What Makes a Great Principal?

This past November, Washington Teacher Ambassador Fellows facilitated discussions among Blue Ribbon principals and teachers around topics extremely important to school success. Many principals spoke about the need to bring in competent teachers and empowering them to make the right decisions, and then supporting the educators with ongoing professional development. As one principal said, "I surround myself with the best and the brightest and then get out of their way."

Other administrators talked about the need to take the time to get to know the real strengths and weaknesses of faculty in order to let them shine in their areas of expertise. The presiding sentiment was definitely the belief that schools are not run by one person alone, but by a dedicated team.

Organization and Teamwork at Brentwood Elementary

Ross Swearingen, principal of 2007 Blue Ribbon School winner Brentwood Elementary (CA), is said by teachers to have "and incredible ability to see the big picture" and creating an "atmosphere of cooperation and respect and supportive relationships." The school itself decides how to use its own discretionary budgets, including Title I funding. Staff members feel more committed to the school

because they all contribute to important school decisions, including how and when to spend money: A teacher advisory committee meets with the superintendent quarterly to discuss the district's strengths, weaknesses and needs. Principal Swearingen uses a survey every year to identify what teachers feel they need to get 100 percent of their students at grade level and bases the budget on the results.

Swearingen is very organized, a trait the staff appreciates. To reduce the time teachers need to spend on paperwork, he develops processes like electronic databases to replace bureaucratic inefficiencies. This use of effective technology and the willingness of office staff to take on administrative tasks let teachers focus on what's important: the students.

The principal also regularly visits grade level meetings to stay up-to-date on activities and classroom issues and receive feedback from teachers. Because of this, there's no need for lengthy discussions of issues during all-staff meetings, and many of Brentwood's teachers feel there isn't a lot of time wasted at these meetings, unlike at schools where they have taught in the past.

Brentwood's size and ethnic percentages have changed dramatically in the past few years—student population went up 72 percent over

five years—but the school's philosophy remains the same: the school staff will do whatever it takes to make the school the best learning environment for each one of our students," says Swearingen.

Clovis East High School: Core Beliefs

Steve Martinez, principal of Clovis East High School (CA), stated that "what separates us from other schools are our core beliefs." These principles guide the faculty and staff's decisions at every turn. For example, at a 2008 review of student work and results assessments showed that a number of students were taking lower division geometry at the 11th grade level. The teachers came to two conclusions:

- Students were arriving at Clovis requiring math remediation, so their taking lower-level coursework was logical.
- The remediation limited the students' access to the mathematics they would need for higher education and technical careers.

"How can you put kids in the lower division geometry class if we truly believe all kids can learn?" asked a teacher.

This led to the math department discussing long-held assumptions about how their program should be structured and eventually moving to

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Subscriber Spot: Belle-Chasse Primary Circumvents Crisis

When Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005, two-thirds of the Belle-Chasse (LA) community lost their homes. When the school reopened, it was the district's only functioning elementary school. The resulting school body included a large number of teachers and students from throughout the area's destroyed schools.

Given the crisis situation and the outrageous misfortune so many people had suffered, officials at the Louisiana Department of Education offered to waive the fourth grade LEAP21 (Louisiana Education Assessment Program) proficiency targets for the year. School leaders declined, determined to hold all their students to the same high standards they always had. When LEAP scores were released in fall 2006, BCP's fourth graders scored third highest in the state in mathematics and sixth highest in English language arts. The school had the fewest number of unsatisfactory scores (4%) of any other school in the state. How did they do it?

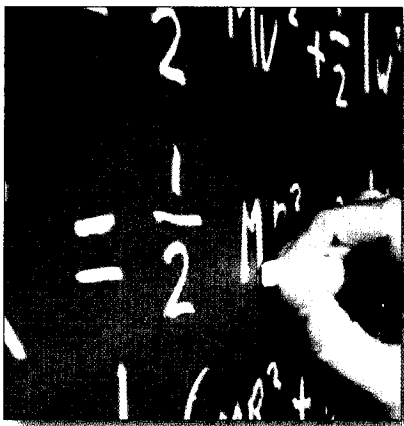
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rounding schools. Students also need to amass more elective credits than their peers at nearby districts. In exchange for the extra work, students needing academic intervention can receive the necessary intervention during the school day and still take an elective course of their choice. This enables students who are reading several years below grade level to benefit from programs such as Corrective Reading and to receive the specialized and intensive instruction required to gain the reading skills necessary to be successful in high school.

Sources: www.ed.gov/blog, 11/23/10; www2.ed.gov/programs/nclbbrs

change the way they taught their students. Students who would have been relegated to lower division geometry in the 11th grade now receive a double math period so that they can cover the ground they need to increase their career and learning options.



The real force behind Clovis East High School is that these core beliefs are the basis of decisions about instructional programming, staffing, organizational structure,

and resource allocation, even when they require difficult conversations that question strongly held assumptions or ingrained practices. There have been discussions, for example, on whether their grading system really promotes the idea that all students can learn and achieve standards. Teachers experimented with eliminating Ds and giving students additional chances to demonstrate their learning by offering after school study sessions for students who wish to re-take assessments or reviewing benchmark assessments during class.

Students notice the difference at Clovis: "Our teachers are very encouraging. We work our butts off, but it is worth it," said one. The eight-block period schedule offers a wide range of courses: this gives students a wide range of options, but teachers have a heavier course load than those at sur-

Clovis East Core Beliefs

- ▲ We believe in high standards and expectations.
- ▲ We believe in putting our students first.
- ▲ We believe in providing a quality education for all students.
- ▲ We believe education revolves around teamwork and trust.
- ▲ We believe in a fair break for every kid.
- ▲ We believe that whatever we do should be done first class.
- ▲ We believe in treating our students with respect.
- ▲ We believe all decisions must always be based on what is best for students.