

Forces and Factors that Impact School Improvement and Reform

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Over the years, the pendulum constantly swings when looking at the forces and factors that have impacted school improvement and school reform over the years. Schools constantly are trying to come up with new models and programs that will effect student achievement. This is further complicated by the influence school budgets have on these various initiatives. About the time an initiative gets in place, new officials are elected with a different plan, or the economy falters.

Two interviews were conducted on November 9, 2011 discussing new initiatives being implemented at Dade County High School (DCHS). One of these interviews was with Jennifer Reese, Academic Coach, and the other with Syd Morrison, science teacher. Both of these educators mirrored many of the same opinions and their answers to questions were similar pertaining to problems, involvement of stakeholders, strategies, challenges, and program success to date related to school improvement at DCHS.

DCHS obtained a School Improvement Grant (SIG) two years ago that drives our professional learning. Professional learning revolves around a standards-based instructional model. This year, DCHS expanded the school initiative by adding in differentiation and literacy strategies. The biggest problem, according to Mrs. Reese, is making sure teachers move in the same direction. Math and literacy get looked at closely because of AYP, but student-driven projects are also important. The overall curriculum will be something that continues to progress in time. DCHS is also a Race to the Top school which has its own committee to try to ease the stress for teachers through communication about objectives and changes being implemented from the state.

Mrs. Morrison brought up the fact in her interview that Class Keys Evaluation System is a tool that is driving reform, because teachers are expected to use both formative and summative

evaluation in instruction. In addition, several teachers of academic classes took one week of summer and came together to formulate pacing guides, uniform tests, and to be sure that all types of assessments, groupings of students, and other critical activities were in place. Teachers also meet collaboratively on a regular basis through the school year. Even though DCHS is not a low-achieving school by state standards, it does have some issues that needed to be addressed, such as a low graduation rate. By using focus groups that target specific problems, improvement has been made in several deficit areas and has been documented.

Several stakeholders have involvement and drive the priority in the implementation process, but as Mrs. Reese points out in her interview, AYP and the grant control a lot of mandatory implementation elements. Many different stakeholders were involved with writing the SIG grant, such as community members, teachers, and the administration. DCHS also has a very active leadership team that meets regularly, along with a new school superintendent and two assistant superintendents that have brought a plethora of new procedures, such as an unpopular failure-monitoring system. The leadership team tries to come up with a plan for the most efficient process for making all of these new changes happen. In addition to these stakeholders, teachers have been divided up into focus groups and one of those groups is dedicated to making sure there is a strong connection to parents and the community. New technology, such as Parent Connect and School Cast (phone calling system), have been a huge help with communication issues.

DCHS has engaged certain strategies to help make a difference in student achievement. Tied specifically to the SIG grant, DCHS has an academic coach, graduation coach, and part-time instructional technologist that have been invaluable with helping keep all the staff members

working toward the same goals concerning improvement in many different areas. Another big strategy is implementing and using Response to Intervention (RTI) guidelines.

With implementation of any program, there can be barriers. Mrs. Reese pointed out that in her job, paperwork and documentation takes up so much of her time, she can't be in the classroom as much as she needs to be. The failure monitoring initiative that is to be handed in every two weeks, and the clerical paperwork associated with that initiative is her greatest barrier at this time. Another barrier she has encountered is that teachers are feeling so overwhelmed and overloaded with so many new school improvement initiatives and professional learning, they can't fully embrace the help Mrs. Reese is giving with enthusiasm and the interest that she desires. She understands fully, because the teachers do respect her knowledge, help, and her non-threatening delivery of information and regular communication is open and frequent. Mrs. Morrison distinctly emphasized this point when she talked about the stress of implementing too many pieces of reform at once. Teachers begin to shut down and start picking and choosing what they feel is most important when everything cannot be implemented at once. Money is also a huge barrier because most reform models do require funds to implement. Money was delegated right from the beginning with grant implementation, which can add to frustration if the general feeling is that the money could be better spent.

Overall impressions brought up discussions of No Child Left Behind and the tendency to concentrate on bringing lower achieving students' scores up to benchmark standards. However, there is a feeling among staff members and even students, that there is a segment of higher-average students whose education is being sacrificed by this process and priorities put in place. There doesn't seem to be as much of a concentration on seeing how far we can push and educate "all" students. Standardized test scores seem to drive the type of instruction and how it is

delivered, in some ways squelching teacher creativity. With the SIG grant, the type of reform path that DCHS is on seems to be set in place. No new inventive reform will be reviewed or implemented until the grant runs out. We do have AP courses in place and one college class, but these types of progressive reform to help students move toward a career path seem to take a back seat to benchmark testing, End of Course Tests and the Georgia High School Graduation Test. Mrs. Reese did state that she has seen massive improvement with the measures put in place from the staff over the last two years.

Reese, J. (2011, November 9). Personal interview.

Morrison, S. (2011, November 9). Personal interview.