School Plan Fall 2011

We have discussed at length in this class problems and solutions for high poverty, low income areas. It is up to the administration of each school to set about a well organized, research based plan for all members of their staff to follow to ensure that each and every student will succeed in their school. Staff members of schools need to be sensitive of their student’s cultures and needs but still expect and demand high achievement among their students. The following plan will try and put many of these solutions in place before students even step in foot the school at the beginning of the year. To create my following plan I have used findings from the books in class, fellow classmates insights, interviews at my school and research based best practices that have worked in other schools. The hope is that will all of these early intervention strategies we make sure that all students have the chance to succeed in a school setting.

While writing this plan I will be using many thoughts and ideas that I have learned while working at my school North Charleston Elementary School just outside Charleston, SC. We have an over 90% free and reduced lunch population and North Charleston is often in the top 10 most dangerous cities in the United States. We have a high turnover rate amongst students and often they are behind grade level. Through the work of our principal however for the first time we have reached Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) and with hopes of repeating our achievement. I know we are encouraged to think outside the box with our school improvement plan, and I will share a few outside the box ideas, but I believe to turn around a school a simple, clearly defined plan that focuses on raising teacher and student achievement through data focused instruction while providing a safe environment that reaches out to the community around them.

We discussed at length that two major problems in high poverty, low income schools is the culture towards education that these families have and the number of high quality teachers. Thernstrom states from his charter school example “Great Teaching is central to this success. The high quality of the instruction was evident in every classroom we visited. In part, the right people were hired, talent is nurtured”. As an administrator you hope that all the teachers you hirer are of high quality. “The difference in achievement between students who attended classes taught by high-quality versus those taught by low-quality teachers for three consecutive years is sizeable: approximately 50 percentile points on standardized tests (Sanders & Rivers, 1996). We know however some teachers just don’t pan out to be great teachers, or if you are an administrator taking over that many teachers you are left with are not of high quality, so you might not have your ideal staff situation. In my future school I believe there are a couple simple, yet very effective solutions that can help prepare the staff better as teachers and prepare them for their culture of students. The following couple of steps would take place in the beginning of the year preparation time when only staff is at the school and students are still enjoying their summer vacation.

All students 2nd grade through 5th grade would be subjected to year round testing to test growth. Thernstrom and Thernstrom states ““Most students will learn less than they should unless they and their teachers understand precisely what is expected, and test are integral to measuring academic progress”. Many schools and students are just measured by their end of the year test in each state. This one time, end of the year test is flawed as many low income students are already far behind their higher socioeconomic peers. These students are then measured and discriminated against for not being as or more successful than these peers at the end of the year if they do not pass that test. NWEA has a computer testing program that test the students three times a year in Reading, Math and Language Usage. This is an effective test because is measures students growth from the fall all the way to the spring with a winter score as benchmark. After a student takes the test in the fall the data will be sent and processed with all other students who took the test that year. It will give you a percentile they are in, a reading lexile level, areas of strength and weakness and then it will give you a point growth measurement that a student at that level should achieve. The students success will then be measured by their performance and not a standard baseline benchmark that all students are expected to achieve. This gives the student a fresh start each year and if they achieve their goal a confidence boost and a sense of accomplishment.

This year long test can also be a tool to measure teacher effectiveness. Teachers will no longer be considered a failing or poor teacher because they couldn’t get a student to pass a onetime end of the year test. Teachers could now be measured on how many students could get their students to reach their end of the year goal. Administrators will get a more accurate reading how effective a teacher is inside a classroom. As administration I would now be able to set a high standard for teacher achievement and reward those teachers for hitting high standards. In a classroom of 25 students I would expect a teacher to get 80% of their students to meet their yearly goal. I would reward teachers who reach this goal with a $250 dollar bonus for meeting their goal in math and $250 dollar bonus for meeting their goal in reading. There is nothing that promotes improvement in teachers than a monetary bonus. We saw in Savage Inequalities that a principal in New Jersey states ““My first priority, if we had equal funding….would be the salaries of teachers.” While I cannot change the salary of the teacher’s I could try and find other monetary changes to improve teacher quality.

Computer aided testing will not be used just to judge and motivate teacher but will also be used to help teachers with data driven instruction. Research shows that schools that have made turnarounds from failing to effective schools shift their instruction to data driven instruction to meet the needs of their students. There is no point to teaching addition, genres, or context clues if students already know and understand these ideas and concepts. Yearly computer aided testing will aid teachers to understanding exactly what their students understand and what they don’t understand. Teachers receive class reports on their students and individual reports on exactly what their students understood and what they need work on. I feel however that I cannot just tell my staff about this and expect them to use it effectively. In my school teachers would have weekly planning meetings focused on these results. In an article by Debra Viadero from Education week she states a new study that says “student achievement rises across a grade when a high-quality teacher comes on board.” If a high quality teacher can’t be hired, the school must turn their teachers into high quality teachers through training in research based teaching strategies. The teachers would be asked to analyze their data and identify their students major weaknesses and strengths and then develop a plan to address the weaknesses. Thernstrom states “Many teachers are in fact trying hard and want to succeed. But they need help – more professional training, mentoring and collegial advice”. This would go in line with that idea, giving teachers the tools and planning time to improve their teaching. I would require teachers to implement reading groups and math groups in their classrooms and they would be based on these results. Teachers would work to group students together and teach them according to these results to more effectively meet their individual needs. Along with this I would also like the teachers to identify strengths that students have and develop lessons to build on these strengths. I feel too often we focus too much on students weaknesses academically and don’t improve on what their students are already strong in. Ideas and concepts students are usually strong in are ideas and concepts they enjoy and this can make them enjoy school more. By using data driven instruction to improve my schools needs we will be able to systematically improve student achievement by identify risks and using effective teaching strategies to improve these weaknesses.

The first morning all the teachers walk in, after a short meet and greet and beginning of the school year basics all the teachers and I would board the school busses, the same the students ride, and ride all the school bus routes that pick our students up. I believe that many teachers think they know or understand poverty but really have never seen it up close. Hopefully this ride through the neighborhoods would show some of these teachers how their students live and what type of conditions they live in. The purpose of this ride isn’t to give the teachers sympathy for their students or to lower their expectations, in fact it is the opposite of that. The purpose of the ride is for the teachers to have a deeper understanding of their students and their surroundings so maybe there is more compassion and understanding for those times when students come in a little depressed or angry. This eye opening experience would allow the teacher to take a step back and maybe try to talk to their student more, build a stronger relationship so when a student does come in angry, depressed or tired there are strategies in place for that student so there is still a chance for success in the classroom. I feel there is a tendency for teachers to just kick those students out of the classroom and send them to the office and thus they end up missing a morning or days worth of education in the classroom and a poor relationship is formed between the teacher and student.

After the bus ride the teachers would come back and work with their teams to brainstorm some ideas on how to work with students from these backgrounds and some interventions that we could have in place ready to go for students who start off having rough day. The next couple of days would be devoted to working with the teachers on improving their reading block towards education. Research shows that many students in high poverty schools are usually behind their peers in normal socioeconomic ranges when it comes to reading fluency and comprehension. I believe and studies show that reading is fundamental for all students, especially in high poverty areas. The higher students go in grades they switch from learning how to read to reading to learn. Especially for students in grades 3-5 much of the curriculum students need to be able to read to understand the material. In math, more stories problems, charts and tables are used and students need the ability to read to understand these new features. Science and social studies have textbooks and experiments the students have to read to be able to understand the material. Now it is the job of the teacher to present these materials in multiple ways for the non-reader to understand the material, but still getting every student on grade level reading would be a high priority. To help fix this problem and improve teacher quality we have to breaking into upper elementary and lower elementary grades. One thing that would be for all grade levels would be a reading interventionist. This reading interventionist would be used to pull students in small groups and help with all forms of reading with examples of phonics, comprehension and fluency. Students would be chosen by a combination of their beginning reading score and teacher input.

Studies show that schools that focus on literacy can dramatically improve school achievement. In a research paper released by the Department of Education they give three examples in which schools focused on literacy and schools improved. “After being placed on probation in Chicago because only 11 percent of its students read on grade level, Amundsen High School began a turnaround effort focused on reading. Through concentrated efforts by the whole school staff to coordinate instruction across classrooms, and intense professional development aimed at instruction, in one year Amundsen High School doubled the percentage of students reading on grade level. Turning the tide set the stage for continued improvement by raising confidence among teachers and students that change was possible.” This is one example that when a whole staff buys into a high standard for education, turnaround is possible.

One major issue we have seen and discussed at length in this course is the culture of learning in and out of the school. It is the large task of the administration to change the culture of learning in areas where education and learning don’t always come as the first priority in low income families. I am not saying that low income families don’t care or understand the importance of an education. Many times these families are dealing with greater issues like job security, making rent payments or other issues that would come before focusing on education. Time and time again we discussed in this class that many parents often don’t know how to help because of low education levels themselves. I do not believe that one school can change the culture of an area towards education, I do believe a school can do some extra things to help and make parents more open and accepting of school policies, rules and expectations. The greatest impact an admistration can make it to change the culture inside the school and provide a safe learning environment where student achievement is rewarded.

Often in low income, high poverty schools where students are often deemed more at-risk for dangerous or unsafe behaviors. This lead can lead to apathy towards school work for fear of “acting white” or trying to avoid work they deem hard or don’t see the point too. This can then lead down the road to a street mentality of protecting yourself through fights and violence. Often violence from these neighborhoods follows these students into the school and lead to problems there. Kozol states “The problem of the streets in urban areas, as teachers often note, frequently spill over into public schools”. Earlier you read my plan for all teachers to take a drive through these neighborhoods to see exactly where there students come from. Now as an administrator it is my job to make sure my teachers and staff understand that our school will be a safe learning environment that promotes learning and we will not tolerate unsafe and dangerous behaviors. I believe there are two main strategies that I will expect my teacher to follow to make sure that students will not engage in unsafe behaviors. First is proximity control. I will expect my teachers to always be moving around and teaching and working with students. I will not tolerate teachers sitting at their desk not focusing on the students. When students know that teachers are up and moving they are more likely to avoid dangerous behaviors. Second I will require teachers to turn in lesson plans and make sure those students are continuously working throughout the day with effective engaging activities. From my experience as a classroom teacher many fights and arguments are often brought up during down times in the classroom when students have the chance to focus their minds on their fellow classmates and not on learning.

My school will also have a defined policy for dealing with problems in the classrooms. The University of Texas stated “discipline problems were rare. The schools used many approaches to improve student behavior, focusing on helping students assume responsibility for their behavior and on creating school environments that made it easy for students to behave appropriately.” I firmly believe that teachers need to deal with most classroom behaviors through their own classroom rules and expectations. I believe that administrators should only become involved in the classroom is if that student or students causing problems is in danger to themselves or others. The teacher needs to be the one in control and if they continue to call the principal or assistant principal to help them with a student the teacher loses control. Teachers need to be in control of their classrooms and students need to see them as the leaders of their classroom.

Implementation of Positive Behavior Intervention Support (PBIS) is a program designed to have schools focus on positive behaviors, ignore the negative behaviors and then reward students when they stop their negative behaviors and show those positive behaviors. Many times in failing schools everyone tends to become negative and the positive role models in schools are forgotten or start acting up to get attention. Too many times I hear “stop doing that” or phrases like that. Using PBIS will have teachers reward the students that are following the rules and expectations and with enough praise and rewards most students will follow the example set by the positive students. PBIS is also nice for a school because it is school wide and everyone follows the same rules and expectations. We won’t have 50 teachers working by themselves but working together within the same program to try and make our school the safest place for students. This program will help change the culture of the students and school by having staff and students reward and notice positive behaviors.

With positive behaviors being addressed next is to make learning in school “cool”. We discussed in class that many African American children want to avoid turning in homework, do well on tests, or participate in class for fear of being perceived as “white”. Goldsmith stated “He (Ogbu) concluded that there was a culture among black students to reject behaviors perceived to be ‘white’, which included making good grades, speaking Standard English, being overly involved in class, and enrolling in honors or advanced-placement courses”. I will attempt to change this view by promoting and rewarding students that are meeting their academic goals. This can be achieved through some very simple school programs. First, we will have awards ceremony each report card that parents can come in for. Students that have made honor roll or shown improvement in subject areas will receive trophies or certificates and have the whole school honor them. For some student report card times can be too far away so we will also hold monthly activities such as dances or movie days for students who are completing all their school work inside their classrooms. By rewarding students through tangible rewards students will hopefully begin to participate more in class to earn those rewards. We have seen schools and districts around the country go even farther than this. We seen schools pay students for attendance, getting good grades and graduating. While I don’t believe that we need to go that far, I will stay open to that idea. It is a much better approach than to punish students who show bad behavior.

Another solution is to reach out to the highly educated in the community and have them come in and mentor students and classrooms on a regular basis. These volunteers would be successful members of the community that can show students what an education can bring them while also providing a positive role model for the students to work with. These mentors can tutor certain at risk students and also join the classroom teacher with lessons as another support.

One requirement I will have for all teachers is to make one home visit to all their students. Teachers need to make a connection with the family, not just the student. In Unfinished Business they state “Parents who do not understand how the system works, . . . or are not familiar with the technical lingo that professional educators use, can be easily confused, dismissed or disregarded”. Often parents avoid coming to school meetings or don’t have the means to get there because they don’t want to be made to look dumb or that they don’t understand. By showing up at their house, announced of course, the teacher will be able to have a more intimate meeting with the family and really show their level of caring towards the family. We have seen in this class that many parents of low income children did not have a great experience in school and are not trusting of the school system. This will help break the ice for the teacher and parent and hopefully allow them to have a successful relationship that will benefit the student.

The last thing I would implement for my school as an administrator would be more participation from the administration. Often principals and administrators in high poverty areas get stuck in behind closed door meetings, worrying about budgets and justifying programs in their schools. I would want to get into the classroom more to make sure that my students and teachers are meeting my expectations and also being there to help my teachers. Teachers need to be aligning their teaching with the standards “one component of best practice-the alignment of instructional content student assessments, is shown to be positively associated with student achievement.” (Marcoulides, Heck, & Papanastaiou, 2005, Rowan, et al., 2002) I would make weekly visits into the classroom and try to give all my teachers positive feedback. I would also make myself available to my teachers for assistance in teaching a lesson or modeling a lesson with their students while they took notes. Just like the boss or manager of a company, the ones that take hands on approach often get the test results.

From the paper above you can see that I don’t believe that too many outside the box programs and initiatives need to be implemented in low income schools. By focusing on high student achievement, high teacher achievement, data influence instruction and changing the culture of the school any school can be successful. I would also like to see some outside the box solutions such as monetary rewards for teachers that have their students meet their academic goals. By implementing simple solutions that promote higher accountability and achievement from all members a school, teachers, administrators and students, you begin to tackle the main problems that often arise in failing schools. Hopefully at the end of the school year in 2011 we will be talking about the great strides that my school made.