

Leadership Development Case #1

If you can't get out of it, Get into it*: Recreating a Culture of Achievement at Blue Gill Middle School



Thanks to KIPP for the photo above

Introduction:

The following case seeks to address several school leader/instructional leader competencies, including:

- Providing purpose and direction for individuals and groups; shaping school culture, values, and norms
- Problem analysis
- Gathering relevant qualitative and quantitative data
- Developing SMART goals
- Analyzing and classifying data from multiple sources for use in decision making
- Communicating relevant and timely information with multiple stakeholder groups, including
 - Students
 - Parents/families
 - Staff
 - Board members

If the case is used to provide specific practice in developing SMART goals or displaying academic data, participants should be encouraged to use data from their individual school. This generally is available on the relevant state department of education website.

*“To serve, to strive and not to yield.” TM
Outward Bound motto*

Educational Leadership Development Case

If you can't get out of it, Get into it: Recreating a Culture of Achievement at Blue Gill Middle School

Role: You are the newly hired incoming school director/principal of Blue Gill Middle School. Although you have 5 years experience as a middle school leader, you are new to this community and don't yet know any of the school staff, students, or families except those that served on the search committee that hired you. You are the 4th school director at Blue Gill since it opened 6 years ago. The committee that hired you indicated that you were their top choice mainly because your references and former employer told them that you were a data-based decision maker and that you were good at setting—and maintaining—high standards for students and staff. They also learned that you have a reputation for effectively presenting student performance data to multiple audiences.

You know the school hasn't been doing very well academically (although you did not do a thorough review of their data before accepting the job). You're pretty sure you're ready for the challenge.

Setting:

Blue Gill Middle School serves 225 students in grades 6-8 (75 students per grade). It is a six-year old charter public school located in a suburban community on the outskirts of a large metropolitan area. Like many schools in the area, it has seen a substantial demographic shift over the past six years, with an increasing percentage of low income students (currently 78% of the total student body), students of color (85%), and students whose primary language is not English (18%). Blue Gill's ELL students primarily speak Somali, Spanish, Oromo, Hmong, and Ukrainian. Eight percent of Blue Gill students qualify for special education services.

Blue Gill's stated focus has always been to provide a small learning community with high academic expectations for all students. The school states that it has a college preparatory curriculum but beyond that it has no particular "magnet" or thematic focus.

Blue Gill has a reputation among people outside the school and it isn't a very good one. Students in other schools in the area often refer to Blue Gill as the "loser" school where only low performing students go. During the 6 years it has been in operation, relationships between Blue Gill leaders and administrators from the neighboring district have not been positive. The district did not want the school to open and initially worked hard to keep the charter from being approved (the school's sponsor is an area nonprofit organization, not the school district).

Since its opening, most of the students who enroll in the school from the neighboring district are students who have a high number of suspensions and behavior referrals. Some have come to Blue Gill following expulsion hearings in the school district. Students who do not reside in the immediate area primarily come from nearby urban communities.

Despite its somewhat negative external reputation, most of Blue Gill's teachers and staff seem to love the school. Turnover has been relatively low and a staff satisfaction survey completed a year ago indicated that most staff like working at the school and love working with Blue Gill's diverse student body. Some of them said they felt they were called to work with this population of kids. The primary complaint identified on the survey was the unrealistic expectations that the state and No Child Left Behind requirements place on their students. Many staff members indicated that ensuring students felt safe and valued within the school was their primary concern. They think that high academic expectations (the school's stated focus) are important, but the reality is that not all students will attend college and their primary work is to create an inclusive and safe environment where students can learn and develop holistic skills, not just the narrow academic content that is covered on state-mandated tests.

Blue Gill's Academic Performance Data

The school's recent assessment information shows that the school's proficiency level and growth rates in reading and math are well below the state averages. The school has not made AYP for the past two years.

You ask for internally-administered assessment summaries or anything the school has used to measure student progress toward benchmarks or academic goals. You're told that the only assessment data they have is individual teacher-developed classroom assessments (which are never reviewed outside that teacher's classroom) and the annually administered state mandated tests.

Re-focusing on Achievement: Setting your priorities

It is the end of July and you are in your new office reviewing Blue Gill's assessment data for the past three years. You are very concerned about the school's performance—or lack of it—and the staff's apparent complacency. You see these results as entirely unacceptable and are truly surprised that no one else seems to be alarmed (as near as you can tell). You're asking yourself: *“Do teachers even know what these results look like? Do they really find this acceptable? Have they ever dug into the data themselves or used the information to re-think instruction? Do they think this information is useful or relevant or important? What about the Board? Have board members reviewed the data? Do parents find it acceptable?”*

You simply do not yet know the answers to those questions, but you know you have your work cut out for you. The hiring committee was impressed by your data-based decision making, your high standards, and your ability to communicate assessment information to multiple audiences. You don't want to let them—or yourself (or the students)—down.

Staff report back to school in two weeks and students start the new school year in four weeks. You know you need to use your time wisely. You start to develop a plan by using those three areas (data-based decision making, setting high academic standards, communicating data) as a starting framework.

Setting high academic standards

You've read it on the website and in all the promotional materials: *Blue Gill's focus is to provide a small learning community with high academic expectations for all students.* Still, it has become apparent to you that either the school really isn't setting high standards, or the school has simply resigned itself to the fact that those standards are consistently not being met. As you dig for more information about these "high academic standards" you come to realize that it is really more of a catch phrase for the school than any concrete set of standards or goals. You resolve to change that.

What will you do before teachers return to school to prepare for the transition from "high academic standards" as a catch phrase to "high academic standards" as a reality for the school?

What will you do during the two weeks that teachers are back before students arrive?

How will you convey a new focus on high academic standards once students return to school for the year?

Data-based decision making

Experience tells you that the more information educators have the better instructional decisions they can make, as long as the information is timely and relevant.

What is a reasonable SMART goal for your staff in this area (SMART goals are specific, measurable, achievable, results-oriented, and time-limited)?

What will you do before teachers return to school to help ensure you achieve this goal?

What will you do during the two weeks that teachers are back before students arrive?

How will you maintain focus on your SMART goal once school is underway for the year?

Communicating data to multiple audiences

The hiring committee was impressed by your ideas for sharing data with different audiences. You explained the difference in how you've shared academic performance information with students and how that compared to information you shared with your board or teachers. You decide that early in the school year you need to present relevant aspects of the school's academic data to four key audiences: school staff, students, parents and families, the school's board.

Which will come first—setting the SMART goals for academic performance or the data presentations?

How will you link the presentation of data to your SMART goals related to academic performance?

When will you present information to each of the four key audiences you've identified?

What factors will you take into consideration as you prepare to present information to each audience (e.g., level of detail, type of data display, student confidentiality)?

What do you expect each of these target audiences to do with the data you present? How will you follow-up with them?