



Bloomfield High School

Diversity Spurs Growth

Changing the culture of a large, diverse high school from a place of teaching to a place of learning requires determination and the commitment of the entire school staff. Documented academic growth for all students and reduced achievement gaps over the last five years have demonstrated that Bloomfield (NJ) High School has made this transformation. That consistent growth in student achievement over time led to Bloomfield being named a 2010 National Title I Distinguished School.

Bloomfield is a microcosm of the United States. Its nearly 2,000 students—45% of whom are economically disadvantaged and 16% of who receive special education services—are almost equally Black, White, and Hispanic. The school proudly points to a long list of structural adjustments, curricular improvements, and professional development offerings that support student growth. Structural adjustments include changing the bell schedule, eliminating basic skills classes, and revising grading practices. Curricular improvements include developing formative assessments, using team teaching to fully include special education students in all core areas, and rewriting curricula in an Understanding by Design format. Ongoing professional development in the use of technology, differentiated instruction, and peer study groups has been provided through district initiatives and a partnership with Montclair State University. School district changes—extending content supervisors' roles to cover K-12 instruction and adding an action research component to teacher evaluation—add to the list of adjustments and improvements.

Although those strategies are impressive, the core of the transformation is the change in attitude from a top-down managerial style to a collaborative environment where everyone—students and staff and community members—is accountable. When asked what's best about Bloomfield, students say that the school's diversity creates a caring, comfortable environment that allows them to excel academically and participate fully in the life of the school. Teachers say that being able to work together to support one another and their students has helped them grow and

become reflective practitioners who are involved in students' lives beyond the classroom. Community members say that the school has recaptured its small town feel of everyone knowing everyone else and taking pride in who they are. Above all, each group talked about how at the core of the school's success is how everyone is valued and respected.

The importance of all stakeholders feeling that they have a say in how they go about the business of school cannot be underestimated. According to teachers, the climate provides the motivation to make connections with colleagues and students. One teacher said, "We are working for our students—this sets everyone up for success." It is an interwoven, dynamic process. This collaboration leads to focusing on a personalized student learning environment, which drives curricular improvements. No component stands alone. The framework for school improvement at Bloomfield is the very model of *Breaking Ranks II*.

Everyone credits Principal Christopher Jennings for setting that tone. He is, according to one community member, "the moral compass of the school." Jennings believes that there is no reason that each student cannot achieve to a high degree. His belief, coupled with not being a "gotcha guy" and being committed to using "plain common sense," has made it easy for people to work together. Trust and communication have enabled teachers to work on schoolwide committees that examine data and monitor initiatives. Their collaboration has enabled Bloomfield to create master schedule changes, the Freshman Team, whole-school professional learning communities (rather than teacher study groups), and personal learning plans for students.

*We're adults.
We're about doing
what is right for
our students—that
means we accept
responsibility for
what they learn.*

—Science teacher,
speaking for the staff



Changing Culture

Stewarding change can be daunting. Not knowing what to do first can be immobilizing. Principal Christopher Jennings shares the most important actions he took when he was appointed principal of Bloomfield.



Bloomfield High School

BLOOMFIELD, NJ

PRINCIPAL

Christopher Jennings

GRADES

9–12

ENROLLMENT

1,850

COMMUNITY

Suburban

DEMOGRAPHICS

Hispanic	35%
Black/African	
American	32%
White	31%
Asian/Pacific	
Islander	2%
Free or reduced-price meals eligible	45%
Special education	16%
English language learners	6%

Note: Demographic data was provided by school in spring 2011.

Upon my arrival at Bloomfield in January 2007, it was clear that the first issue that had to be addressed was the need to create a culture and climate that supported a professional academic setting. The public perception of Bloomfield was that it was an unruly place with a rough student population. As is often the case, the perception was not entirely the reality, but there were issues that had to be corrected. It was important to me that everyone associated with Bloomfield understand that our building was a sacred place that demanded professional behavior from our students. The key to getting this message out was having open and honest conversations with students and staff members so that everyone knew what was expected of them.

I often spoke of the “three Ps” that would lead to student success: professionalism, punctuality, and preparedness. To build a culture and climate that supported academic achievement, it was vital that students approached school as if it were their job. It was also important to the staff that there was consistency when dealing with student discipline, and it was important to me that we had more of an emphasis on the curriculum and testing. By reorganizing the roles of the assistant principals and more clearly defining their responsibilities, I was able to accomplish those goals.

By addressing student behavior first, I was then able to shift the focus to academics. Bloomfield has extremely loyal and dedicated faculty members, many of whom are alumni of the school. The teachers’ effort and dedication were clearly not the cause of poor student performance, but it was clear that many people were working in isolation. A multiyear effort that relied on teachers working with one another on curriculum and assessment was initiated and supported by the superintendent.

Although teaching to the test is never the goal, the reality is we have to be aware of

what our students will be expected to know on standardized tests to ensure that they have every opportunity for success. The implementation of Understanding by Design encouraged teachers to plan and teach with the end goal in mind. Changing the focus to helping students make connections to enduring understanding and essential questions, rather than learn facts and statistics, legitimized what many teachers knew was good teaching.

The creation of professional learning communities by motivated teachers who were interested in self-examination and peer review was a shot in the arm for those who wanted to take the ball and run. Differentiated instruction and student-centered lessons became the new normal. To support teachers in those efforts, a partnership with Montclair State University was formed to bring in professors to lead professional development groups.

A paradigm shift occurred when we reorganized the special education department into the content areas. No longer were special education teachers a separate group working in the shadows. They were now full-fledged members of their respective departments who brought with them extensive knowledge of learning styles and alternative teaching methods. In return, the content knowledge of the special education teachers increased and the expectation became that all classes were to be team taught. Lesson plans became the responsibility of both teachers and they had to clearly describe how each lesson would be modified for classified students.

Another major change occurred when we eliminated all “basic” levels of English and math by collapsing resource classes and creating heterogeneous groups at the college-prep level. The goal was to have every student working at a level that would prepare him or her for success on the state high school proficiency exams as well as college. To say

this change was a challenge is an understatement, but it was fully supported by teachers once they witnessed firsthand how lower-level students worked harder, that discipline issues occurred less frequently, and that differentiation worked for all students. The biggest validation came when test scores for all subgroups increased three years in a row.

Another major change that occurred is me. Over the past five years, I have grown into the position of high school principal and have become more comfortable relying on staff members for their input into how our school runs. At first, although my door was always open, sometimes I wondered why no one came through it. I realized that I had to make the effort to reach out and solicit input and to validate the hard work that I witnessed every day. The formation of a teacher's advisory committee and the implementation of monthly "best practice" awards (complete with a free sandwich from the local deli) are efforts on my part to let everyone know that I am aware that it is the teachers who make the school successful.

One of my favorite quotes is "Culture eats strategies for breakfast." The newest technology and backward planning are nothing without a culture that supports teachers. My recommendation to other principals starting a journey toward academic improvement would be to create a strong foundation built on respect and communication.



Respect and Communication

The foundation of respect and communication supports necessary changes. Members of the Bloomfield High School Leadership Team are clear about how their beliefs about students—which were based on those principles—drove their work in closing achievement gaps.



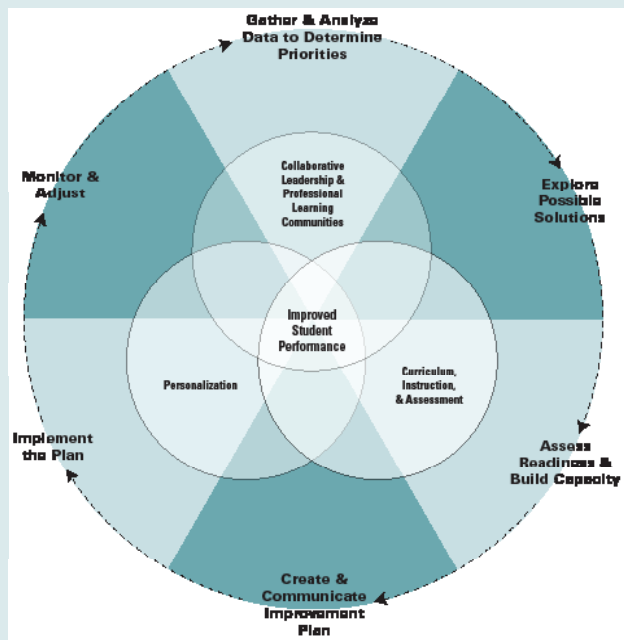
Principal
Christopher Jennings

The process of reducing the achievement gap between student groups has been multilayered, with each layer connected to the other by a belief that if students are challenged in an academic atmosphere with a rigorous, relevant, and supportive experience, they will rise to the occasion every time.

The first layer is building and maintaining an academic atmosphere that supports the idea that school is a sacred place that requires professional behavior so that each student can learn in a safe and distraction-free building. Hats, cell phones, iPods, and saggy pants are distractions that cannot be tolerated because they are deterrents to learning. Although it is a constant struggle, all teachers and administrators are committed to holding firm on this principle. Stringent policies, tempered by gentle reminders, are enforced. A core belief that has helped us build a culture of academics is that parental communication is the key to dealing with tardiness, cutting classes, and

How Do We Improve Our School?

Members of the Bloomfield High School leadership team used a logical process that was similar to the process found in *Breaking Ranks: A Field Guide for Leading Change* to implement programs that have yielded remarkable results. This process can work for any school!



Source: NASSP. (2011). *Breaking ranks: The comprehensive framework for school improvement*. Reston, VA: Author.

inappropriate behavior—as well as being a means of praising for positive behavior.

Creating a rigorous and relevant academic experience to close the achievement gap required a major paradigm shift on two levels: full inclusion for special education students and the elimination of all core courses that would not prepare students for college. Both shifts required teachers to drastically change how they had traditionally taught. Teachers needed to use techniques supported by technology that require students to be active learners who are responsible for their learning.

To accomplish full inclusion in the core academic areas, it was necessary to integrate the special education teachers into the content areas for which they were highly qualified. This reorganization allowed those teachers to focus

on one academic area and reduced the number of coteaching pairs who worked together. It also allowed the special education teachers to share their knowledge of learning styles, differentiated instruction, and modified assignments. With professional development, experimentation, and hard work, coteaching has created an atmosphere in which success is expected for all students. Cotaught classes are now the norm at Bloomfield—so much so that students are often unaware who the “regular” teacher is.

Allowing regular education students the option of taking English or math classes on a basic level is equivalent to allowing special education students to take resource classes. Being isolated from a rigorous curriculum does not prepare students for the state exit exams or college. Creating heterogeneous classes on the college-prep level as a part of the inclusion movement has allowed all students the opportunity to succeed and perform to the best of their ability.

Another layer arose as a major obstacle that cut across race, gender, and economic lines: freshman year. Year after year, the freshman class has had the largest numbers in the areas of multiple failures, absenteeism, and discipline referrals. Something had to be done to better support the freshman students in their pivotal transition year. To that end, a team of teachers and administrators collaborated to develop a plan that centers on immediate interventions to use when a student fails a test. RAFT (Re-Assessment for Transfer) is meant to be the raft that helps keep students afloat academically until they develop the skills necessary to succeed in high school.

If a freshman fails a test, the teacher notifies the family and the guidance counselor immediately. The counselor meets with the student to do an inventory of what caused the failure and shares that information with the teacher. During a specified remediation period,



the student receives targeted academic support and an opportunity to be retested. The new grade, up to 69%, replaces the failing grade. The key to the RAFT program is that the student is given the time to demonstrate that he or she has learned the concept, even if it is a few days after the rest of the class.

Another program designed for freshmen is personalized student learning plans (PSLPs) that help students become cognizant of how they learn best and of which careers they might be interested in. In 2009, Bloomfield was chosen as 1 of 16 schools in New Jersey to receive \$7,500 to participate in a pilot program that incorporated PSLPs into the students' high school experience. Through our personal finance course, a state requirement, students take learning style inventories and personality inventories using a software program that tracks student information. A concerted effort is made to help students use that information to take ownership of their high school experience, following the belief that once students become aware of how they learn and why they are learning, school will become relevant for them.

Another area that needed to be addressed

was the Alternate High School Assessment (AHSA) process. In New Jersey, students who are first-time juniors take the high school exit exams in March and then twice in their senior year if necessary. To graduate, they must prove proficiency on both the language arts and math sections either by passing the test or through specific tasks submitted to the state department of education during their senior year. It had become acceptable at Bloomfield for students to graduate through the alternate process. Although students receive a fully accredited diploma if they graduate through the alternative process, the overall passing rate reflected poorly on the school.

We changed the culture by stressing the importance of demonstrating content knowledge to the students and their families, and we assigned the AHSA classes to our best teachers. Administrators visits classes regularly to check in with the students and calls are made home if a student is absent or not giving his or her best effort. Everyone associated with the exams and the processes put in place has a stake in each student's success. Those efforts combined have improved the achievement of all our students. **PL**