



Institute *for* Public School Initiatives  
The College of EDUCATION  
THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

## *They Are Not Going to Let Them Fail*

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October 2011

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**The Institute for Public School Initiatives (IPSI)** was founded in 2004 at the University of Texas System. IPSI serves as a strategic partner in education program and product innovation as well as an idea incubator and evaluator of program effectiveness and productivity. IPSI's mission is to improve student achievement from preschool through high school via its relationships with The University of Texas intuitions, community colleges, school districts, and state agencies. Funding for IPSI is made possible through the generous contributions from private foundations and public agencies.

## **They Are Not Going to Let Them Fail**

Educators might agree that middle school presents its own unique challenges, especially with today's expectation that schools bring all students to high levels of achievement. Adolescent illiteracy is quantified each year in "The Nation's Report Card"—the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)—which reports that more than two-thirds of the nation's eighth graders read below the proficient level, with approximately a quarter unable to read at even the most basic level (NAEP 2009). What can we do to turn these dismal statistics around and help all students reach common curriculum standards? One method of improvement is to study campuses that have successfully ensured that every student learns and that every member of the learning community is held to high expectations.

### **Method**

For our study, we selected Driscoll Independent School District located in the Gulf Coast area of Texas. Driscoll made significant progress in Kindergarten through third-grade reading outcome measures over the six-year period of the Texas Reading First grant. Although many students made significant progress, not all students did. Thus, we decided to learn from students who did not meet grade-level standards at the end of fourth grade but who met or exceeded grade-level standards in eighth grade. Along with the four students that met our criteria, we interviewed their parents and the campus administrator. Specifically, we wanted to glean academic experience and perspective on the increase in these particular students' performance.

### **Themes**

Based on our analysis of the data, we identified two themes: A Culture of Winners and Personalized Instruction. A Culture of Winners describes how this campus strives to empower the students with a "can-do" attitude and an identity as a member of a winning team. Personalized Instruction includes using data to provide explicit and systematic instruction, building relationships among all stakeholders where communication is transparent, and holding everyone accountable to achieve high expectations.

### **A Culture of Winners**

Lynn Landenberger has served as a teacher, a Texas Reading First Coach, and currently holds the position of principal on the Pre-K through 8<sup>th</sup> grade campus in Driscoll ISD. When asked what she thought contributed to the academic growth of not just the four students in the study but of all the students on this Exemplary campus, she pointed out that while using all available data diagnostically to plan effective instruction is important, establishing a culture of winners and building relationships is equally important.

Lynn told us that getting and keeping an adolescent involved is paramount in the student's academic success. Unfortunately, however, many educators characterize disengagement from schooling as one of the most immediate and persistent problems exhibited by students (Finn, 1989; Finn & Voelkl, 1993). They also note that the problem of disengagement is particularly acute during the middle school and high school years (Wigfield, Eccles, Schiefele, Roeser, &

Davis-Kean, 2006). Knowing this, Lynn said that she works very hard at establishing a culture of winners. She knows that half the battle is working on the desire in each child to want to do better. Making the students aware that there is support for them from everyone on campus is crucial, but they must take an active role in doing their part. She explains to them, “You have to believe in yourself and know that you can do it. It takes hard work—not wishing.” When asked how they made progress, the students said: “Before I would try but I wouldn’t put much effort into it. I just study and get my stuff done.” “I think I worked harder. All the stuff we’re doing now I get it. The teachers explain it more.” “I concentrate more. I believe in myself and encourage myself to do more.” We learned during the interviews that students feel empowered and work hard to achieve their goals.

A top priority at Driscoll ISD is for students to feel connected to a winning team. Thus, building relationships between students and teachers, students and other students, and between home and the school is essential. These relationships establish a campus-wide attitude of encouragement and support. A positive school climate promotes cooperative learning, group cohesion, respect, and mutual trust. These particular aspects have been shown to directly improve the learning environment (Kerr, Ireland, Lopes, Craig, & Cleaver, 2004). “They have to trust the adults around them will help them,” says the principal. Lynn models for her teachers the importance of spending quality time talking with the parents and students, building trust, and fostering relationships to make both students and parents feel a part of the winning team. The principal continues, saying, “Then you’re changing how the campus works, how the child views himself, and how the parent perceives what their child can do. You have to let the parent know that you believe their child can achieve high expectations and that the school, family, and student are going to work together.” The conversations with parents include specific ways they can send the message that “school is important.” This includes going to school every day, being on time, and encouraging reading by placing books strategically around the home. Many parents feel comfortable with the teachers and give their cell phone number to a teacher to call with any concerns. All parents mentioned the communication between the school and home as being a driving force in children’s success. One parent put it this way: “All teachers communicate. It’s like a safety net. They’re not going to let a child fail.”

## **Personalized Instruction**

The principal at Driscoll mentions the importance of differentiated instruction to increase student achievement. “You have to use diagnostic testing to find out the needs of each individual child,” she explains. As a knowledgeable instructional leader, Lynn knows the importance of providing teachers with the tools, resources, and professional development they may need to differentiate instruction so that “they’re growing and getting better all the time.” School climate enhances or minimizes emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and feelings of low personal accomplishment (Grayson & Alvarez, 2008). A positive school climate is also associated with the development of teachers’ beliefs that they can positively affect student learning (Hoy & Woolfolk, 1993). Lynn reports that implementing the Reading First grant helped them establish a successful system of teacher support. The teachers received extensive professional development on how to analyze data to design personalized plans for each student. Additionally, teachers learned ways to scaffold and challenge student learning to meet grade level standards, as well as how to increase instructional rigor and relevance. Driscoll also received a technology grant two

years ago. As with the Reading First grant, they strategically planned professional development throughout the grant cycle. They wanted to maximize the use of smartboards, iPads, and other resources to meet individual student needs. One parent credited Dr. Garcia, the superintendent with keeping the school up to date with technology. The parent said, “It’s changed since I was in school, but that’s their [the students’] world.”

Because teachers say they feel supported by their instructional leader, there is little faculty turnover. With minimal turnover, teachers have the opportunity to build lasting collaborative relationships with their colleagues across grade levels, as well as with their students. They are able to connect with the families and ensure a collaborative relationship between home and school. One mother of nine said, “My kids all started in PreK here. The teachers are great. They know all nine kids. They tell me ‘all your children are great.’” This mother also related the success story of her eldest daughter as a testimony to how Driscoll does whatever it takes for each student to succeed. Due to a family illness, the mother removed her daughter from the sixth grade so the daughter could help with her younger siblings. This adolescent, who the principal told us was self-motivated and a hard worker, worked closely with the teachers to devise a personalized instructional plan coupled with a computerized program whereby this student could work at an accelerated pace. This plan allowed the student to close her achievement gap and to be placed back with her peers in middle school. She graduated from high school in 2011.

Every parent spoke of the teachers knowing each child’s strengths and weaknesses, as well as the child’s personality. This personal bond allows teachers at Driscoll to know how to motivate their students. An example was Dustin saying, “All of my middle school teachers . . . tell me pick up your grade in Science or you can’t play in sports.” Each parent mentioned the importance of students receiving small-group, instruction that was also individualized. One mother told us, “The smaller setting gives more opportunity for things to take place. In a larger setting they will catch those that they can.” At Driscoll, no child goes unseen and each child has his or her needs met on a consistent basis. One parent told of a need specific to her son: “They understand that once he finishes his work, he’s going to get rowdy so they find something else for him to do. A lot of the other schools would send him to the office.”

Research suggests that many middle school children do not seek help in the classroom. Newman (2000) stated, “Despite awareness of academic problems they may have and despite availability of assistance, many school children tend to give up prematurely, sit passively, or persist unsuccessfully on their own without ever asking for help” (p. 350). Research done by Ryan, Pintrich, and Midgley (2001) suggests that this phenomenon of not asking for help in the classroom actually increases during middle school and high school years. All participants at Driscoll talked about the consistent encouragement and accessibility of help. Student Sabrina said, “If I ask a question, they [the teachers] are going to come to me immediately and help.” Another student Christy told us that she feels comfortable asking for help from her peers and teachers. Because teachers have taken time to build relationships with students, students feel comfortable asking for assistance and are confident that they will receive the support they need. The principal gives this advice to each student: “Know that every teacher out there will help you. Ask if you don’t understand something. Write it down or print it, if you don’t understand it, and ask a teacher.” One example of how Driscoll preserves each child’s ego and increases participation is with the use of a technology response system. This response system keeps

students actively engaged throughout instruction and allows them to respond to teacher questions anonymously. The system provides teachers with immediate information necessary to individually assist the student or to form a small group to clarify and meet lesson objectives.

One student reflected on his experience at another school, where “they would teach something for a short amount of time and then it was over. We have review every morning here.” The students told us that teachers break down concepts into manageable steps, modeling and explaining multiple strategies so they can choose what works best for them. In Science, one student said the teacher might “sing a song first and make us laugh and then we’d work.” Adrianna, another student, said her Language Arts teacher “would explain it in a good way to where I could understand.”

We learned from all participants that a critical component in targeting the individual needs of all students is the extended-day tutorials. Tutorials allow teachers to work with a small group or individual students. During this time, teachers can model a different strategy, scaffold concepts into doable chunks, or pre-teach future concepts. One student compared tutorials at Driscoll with those from another school saying, “Over there we’d be on the computer the whole time. Here we do it half on the computer and half with the teacher.” Routines and schedules for tutorials are set that make attendance mandatory for some students while others have the freedom to attend when they have questions or need assistance. One parent noted, “I’ve never seen a group of teachers so worried about a child missing tutoring. They all have ‘the list’. That’s how much they care about the kids.” A student commented on accountability from the principal, saying, “Ms. Lynn will pull me into her office to go to tutoring. She’ll be on guard to make sure I don’t get on the bus.” Although Ms. Lynn might be on guard, he also spoke of the benefits of tutoring and doing well; “Last year when I passed all my TAKS, she gave me candy and a certificate.” We gleaned from participants that celebrating successes, and making instruction relevant and understandable, motivates everyone.

## Reflection

In her 2003 study, Alvermann suggests resisting the temptation to “fix” learners, to instead address the learning conditions to meet their needs. She cautioned against schools focusing on finding a “magic bullet.” The principal at Driscoll told us that building positive pride in the school is huge; that “if you don’t have that, you will never get better.” She continued by telling us that to create this culture you must (a) build a plan in which “everyone” is growing and getting better all the time; (b) work your plan; (c) monitor your plan at scheduled frequencies for effectiveness; and (d) adjust as necessary.

Through our conversations with participants, we learned that what matters most does not seem to be a question of high standards versus personalization but rather creating a supportive, learning environment where everyone is involved in rigorous and relevant learning. From our analysis, we believe Driscoll accomplished the creation of this environment by

- having a knowledgeable instructional leader who empowers all stakeholders by communicating clear expectations and a vision of building an encouraging and supportive culture of winners;

- developing strong relationships among all stakeholder groups, resulting in the establishment of a positive climate of consistency and collaboration;
- establishing transparent lines of communication, working together to develop personalized plans while maintaining a "do whatever it takes" attitude and holding everyone accountable;
- incorporating tutorials, using teacher-led and technology-based instruction, to reinforce or extend student learning.

While we realize that the findings might not be generalizable beyond Driscoll, we recognize that these students, their parents, and the administration have important stories to tell. We hope that by sharing Driscoll's perspectives, we might encourage others to take time to reflect on current practices (i.e. the learning environment) to ensure everyone succeeds.

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