

FEBRUARY 2024

FOUNDATIONS TODAY

e-Newsletter



Message From The Board

Make an Impact on Education!

I am sure you have seen the numerous broadcasts and social media posts about [ImpactED'24](#), our national conference, to be held in sunny Tampa, Florida. If you have, then you read how **ImpactED'24** is where leaders convene, fundraisers sharpen their skills, and where everyone has unparalleled networking opportunities for a vibrant exchange of ideas. If you are one of the current 185 registered attendees, great! You're in for dynamic presentations from industry experts and colleagues from across the nation.

If you have not yet made the commitment, look at some demographics from attendees at the 2023 conference:

- 80% from public school foundations
- 34 states and the District of Columbia
- 91 public schools
- 23 states with 3 or more attendees.

The educational content includes presentations across seven domains - Resource Development, Programming, Collaboration, Marketing, Legal & Finance, Board Development, and Organizational Leadership & Planning. And, that's not all!

- 11 hours of educational content, *plus*
- 2 hours of TED Talk presentations, *plus*
- 12 hours of networking and social gatherings, *plus*

Upcoming Events

[Motivations, Challenges, and Rewards of Becoming a CEFL](#)

February 21

12:00 - 1:00 PM | Zoom

[How to Promote Your Foundation to the Community](#)

March 21

4:00 - 5:00 PM | Zoom

[ImpactED '24](#)

April 10-12, 2024 |

**Grand Hyatt Tampa Bay
- 2900 Bayport Drive,
Tampa FL**

[Sponsor ImpactED '24](#)

April 10-12, 2024 |

**Grand Hyatt Tampa Bay
- 2900 Bayport Drive,
Tampa FL**

[Reflections on ImpactED '24](#)

April 17

12:00 - 1:00 PM | Zoom

- Recognition of the 2023 CEFL cohort.

If your budget does not allow for your participation in Tampa, remember to register for our upcoming [monthly programs](#). Peers and colleagues from across the nation share their knowledge and experience so you and your foundation can prosper. Be sure to register for:

- February 21 > [What you didn't know about the CEFL Program](#)
- March 21 > [How to promote your foundation to the community](#)
- April 17 > [Reflections on ImpactED '24](#)
- May 21 > [Unlocking Success: Strategies of the Top Fundraising Education Foundation in DC Metro](#)
- June 20 > [Timely Topics](#)

[Unlocking Success: Strategies from the Top Fundraising Education Foundation in the DC Metro](#)

May 21

12:00 - 1:00 PM | Zoom

[View Events](#)

I look forward to seeing you at one – or all – of our programs!

Peter



Peter Constantinou
Executive Director

Upcoming Event Spotlight



ImpactED '24 is fast approaching! We can't wait to welcome many of you in sunny Tampa, FL this April 10th - 12th. Attendees will experience 3 days of insightful and engaging keynote sessions, breakout sessions, TED talks, and roundtable discussions. Networking opportunities are incorporated throughout the conference, as we know how invaluable **the power of being connected** is. This is a unique experience to meet education foundation

leaders both locally and nationwide. Standard registration pricing is still going on until March 19th and members and non-members can **save up to \$100**. Don't wait, register today!

[Register for ImpactED '24](#)

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Industry News & Articles

Attracting and Retaining Mt. Vernon Community School Corporation's (MVCSC) Backbone: The Importance of Classified Employees

By: [Renee Oldham](#)



Renee Oldham serves as the Executive Director of the [Mt. Vernon Education Foundation](#), showcasing a profound commitment to education and community development. Over the past six years, her visionary leadership has propelled transformative initiatives, including Parent University and The HS Career Biz Roundtables. Through her efforts, over 1M has been raised to support classroom needs.

With a rich career spanning 27 years, Renee is recognized for her expertise in strategic planning, public-private partnerships, and elevating educational outcomes. Beyond education, she demonstrates proficiency in areas like affordable housing, downtown development, entrepreneurial ventures, business incubation, and enterprise zones.

Renee has garnered national recognition for her commendable efforts, with her accolades prominently featuring the Sagamore of the Wabash Award, a testament to her unparalleled contributions to the community.

In the bustling hallways of MVCSC, Jenny, an instructional assistant, helps a student understand a complex math problem. Meanwhile, a dedicated maintenance team ensures the school's facilities run seamlessly. This scene underlines a fundamental truth: it's not just teachers who are pivotal to a school's operations.

A substantial portion of the operational efficiency of any educational institution lies in the hands of its classified employees. MVCSC, in collaboration with the Mt. Vernon Education Foundation (MVEF), established a task force to further bolster the attraction and retention of these indispensable members.

Who Are the Classified Employees?

Boasting 278 members, classified employees make up a significant 47% of the MVCSC staff. Their roles, spanning from instructional assistants and administrative support to bus drivers and maintenance crews, might be diverse, but their collective importance is unequivocally vital.

Understanding the MVCSC Culture

The bedrock of employee longevity is undeniably culture. A nurturing environment, abundant in support and acknowledgment, can drastically mitigate turnover rates. For MVCSC, the goal isn't mere retention but also to attract budding talent. To delve deeper, the task force poses salient questions like, "How do we encapsulate our present work culture?" and "What visions do we hold for MVCSC's future ambiance?"

Addressing Bias and Championing Inclusion

"Every individual, regardless of their role or qualification, is a cornerstone in the foundation of a school's success. Biases mustn't obscure our recognition of every contributor's worth," asserts Renee Oldham, Executive Director of MVEF and Task Force Co-Chair.

Classified staff's insights are indispensable. Directly embedded in the operational fabric, they perceive the intricacies and demands of their departments better than anyone.

Valuing Classified Employees

"Central to retention is genuine appreciation. As Chris Smedley, Assistant Superintendent and Task Force Co-chair, once said, 'By hiring locally, MVCSC integrates individuals with community spirit - many of whom have an intrinsic bond with the district.' While competitive remuneration is vital, simple gestures, like handwritten thank you cards or recognizing their profound influence on students publicly, can profoundly boost morale."

Strategies for the Future

In developing our campaign with the joint endeavors of the MVCSC/MVEF task force, our vision takes form in tangible ways. Maria Bond, Director of Community Relations, crafted the strategic marketing plan from the task force that outlined forward-looking strategies for the present and future. Initiatives include providing enriched onboarding experiences filled

with school promotional items, marketing our community culture, and providing employee-focused plans, as well as celebrating our staff's unwavering commitment.

MVEF proudly sponsored a Staff Appreciation Event at the Jet Access Indy Airport Hangar where our nearly 600-member staff were treated to food, live music, and a staggering \$4,000 in prize giveaways. "From offering a welcoming onboarding experience adorned with school pride, to crafting employee-focused plans, our clarion call is clear: value and invest wholeheartedly in our workforce," Bond stated.

Immediate strategies encompass perks such as events, wellness center partnerships, financial planning services, designated parking, and other tailored incentives. Additionally, innovative concepts like job-sharing aim to offer the classified workforce the work-life balance they covet. To further their growth, opportunities like assisting an instructional assistant's transition to becoming a certified teacher are on the horizon.

In Conclusion

MVCSC's collaboration with MVEF illuminates their holistic approach to education. Beyond just academic instruction, it's about nurturing a community where each member, regardless of their designation, has a role, a voice, and a profound impact. This integrated vision promises a luminous future for MVCSC and sets a commendable precedent for institutions everywhere.



What I Learned About Recognizing, Celebrating, and Communicating Wins

By: [Brandon Sak](#)

Brandon serves as principal consultant at [Hallett Philanthropy](#), proudly serving the people and missions of non-profit organizations. He brings more than a decade of hands-on experience in fundraising, leadership and team building. He is driven by helping clients meet goals, forge relationships, and fuel the good work of non-profits and their missions.



Prior to joining Hallett Philanthropy, Brandon worked with nonprofit clients across the United States at Blackbaud, an industry leader in non-profit fundraising software. His specialization in feasibility studies and capital campaign fundraising were honed while serving as senior campaign manager at a national fundraising and development firm. There, he raised more than \$60 million through campaigns under his management.

In Brandon's own community, he is a proud volunteer as a court appointed special advocate for children at CASA for Douglas County.

I hate professional growth self-assessments. Always have. The mere thought invokes eye rolling disdain. *Please rank the following areas you feel your performance excelled most in Q3. Hard pass. What are the three areas you feel you've grown the most in the last quarter?* I'd rather chew gym socks, thank you.

But I also want to keep and attract the best talent. I need to feel good about my professional existence. I want to help clients find more and larger donors. And I want the people I work with (paid or volunteer) to feel great about their engagement with the foundation, not to mention me.

The reality is, regardless of contempt, promoting and celebrating accomplishments is a smart long-term play with high payoff results used to create positive work cultures, promote donor cultivation, and present recruitment opportunities. If you are not already, begin the practice of recognizing, celebrating, and sharing your wins with others.

It's not easy.

In a world chock full of media alerts, bad news, crushing deadlines, and endless meetings, one is often tempted to pass by and overlook the good. In fact, humans are predisposed to negativity. It is in our DNA to remain alert to danger, but focusing on risk without balance carries health risks as well. Which lends reason to adopt the habit of promoting your good. Because as much as we tend to overprocess negative information, who doesn't love hearing about a success story? Do collegiate sports teams recruit young players by talking about their losses? No way. They talk about a winning record and what it means to be a part of their team and school culture.

The fix: Start by taking a close look at your foundation's positive outputs. This does not necessarily mean the hulking accomplishments of securing a colossal gift or launching a multi-year capital campaign. Rather, pay attention to the day-to-day. If you start to look

closely, you will start to see truly impactful wins. These are valuable stories worthy of being told.

What did you find?

Did an employee or volunteer go above and beyond to forward the mission? Is it time to showcase the art and creativity stemming from students you work to educate? Was there a remarkable alumni story worthy of sharing? Who took those cookies to the teacher's lounge on National Teacher Appreciation Day? Did any new community partnerships develop? Should the diversity and makeup of the board be celebrated? What local business leaders are making an impact in the community who are district alumni? Now that you have picked out those positive wins, it's time to celebrate.

Feathers will fly.

Now it is time to peacock your organization's wins. To fan the plume of accomplishments and shamelessly unveil to the world what was hiding. However, instead of walking around aimlessly, hoping to catch someone's eye, work to direct your efforts to four specific groups – your community, board, donors, and internal teams.

Community – Sharing your foundation's wins with the community at large creates several benefits. Using your good news is a powerful cultivation tool. Co-presented with any existing efforts including appeals, events or other marketing serves to supplement and amplify the foundations positive outputs. A direct promotion of accomplishments to the community will invite new levels of engagement to your mission as it creates a sense of ownership and pride. Pride in students, businesses, schools, and togetherness in a common goal.

Board – Providing a board with highlights and stories of success be it regularly at board meetings or informally through emails and updates enables them to become stronger ambassadors. Sharing wins provides boots on the ground information to this critical group of individuals. It informs directors of new, existing, and potential community partnerships. This behind-the-scenes information offers members of the board better tools to quickly and clearly orate and share the foundation's accomplishments in their own social circles. It also provides valuable resources to aid them in recruiting new board or committee prospects.

Donors – Have you ever needed an excuse to reach out to a past donor? A quick story provides a great reason to make a thinking-of-you call or send a quick note to reach out for no other reason than to tell them about a residual benefit of past giving. It will make them feel good about their investment and encourage them to share your wins with their circles. This outreach provides an excellent touch point for a donor as they progress through their stewardship cycle by keeping them connected. It keeps the foundation top of mind and tells them they are a valued part of a winning team.

Internal teams – One of the most important groups to keep in the fold is often one of the most overlooked, your internal team. Providing a highlight reel of successes to your volunteers and employees provides a springboard for activities and ideas to take flight. This empowers team members to share recent successes with alumni they engage with,

provide insight to volunteers and community influencers, and promote a sense of pride and belonging in the community. Most importantly, the sharing of good works and impact fosters a positive working culture and provides motivation on the hard days. This all lends aid to greater employee satisfaction and retention to the organization.

At the end of the day, you put in a lot of hard work. So has your team, your board, teachers, principals, and superintendent of your district. And if you did it right, you may have even had a little fun. So go ahead, let everyone know you're out there and showcase your awesomeness. Be the peacock for your foundation, raise your plume and show 'em what you're working with.

"Men of integrity, by their very existence, rekindle the belief that as a people we can live above the level of moral squalor. We need that belief; a cynical community is a corrupt community." —John W. Gardner, author and politician

Engage Local Leaders

Reprinted From [SchoolCEO](#)

Finding and connecting with influential members of your local community is a great way to build advocacy, especially if they're already supporters of your schools. But how can you make sure this group is actively involved in sharing your best stories? Well, leaders want to lead, so it's about empowering them to tap into their own influence. You do this by keeping them engaged and informed about the inner workings of your schools and the role they can play in helping your district thrive.

For a great example of this, let's visit Wisconsin's [Howard-Suamico School District \(HSSD\)](#). A couple of years ago, they created Leadership HSSD, an annual program that invites 40 leaders from the community to monthly information sessions related to public schools and the district's work.

The program is co-sponsored by the [Howard-Suamico Education Foundation \(HSEF\)](#), whose president, Brian Stuelpner, serves as co-chair. Stuelpner, a local business leader and parent of four kids in the district, was a part of HSSD's referendum task force in 2021. "That really opened my eyes to the different complexities that the district deals with. It opened a lot of eyes in the community," he tells us. "We wanted to learn more so we could become more engaged and involved." Now, Stuelpner helps lead Leadership HSSD's monthly sessions.

"We are incredibly lucky to live in a community that wants to help," says Nicole Smith, executive director of HSEF. "And often the question is, *What does that help look like?* This has served as a vehicle to help people better understand the answer to that question. Leadership HSSD brings together community members who are already engaged and empowers them to serve as advocates while also creating relationships with one another."

Each monthly session includes coffee, breakfast, and a book study on [Jamie Vollmer's *Schools Cannot Do It Alone*](#). Then, leaders hear from mostly internal HSSD experts on a variety of topics related to the district's work, like governance and finance; teaching and learning; communications and engagement; and special education. "These educational presentations are designed to provide Leadership HSSD members with the information they need to engage in conversations with neighbors, friends, and community members," Smith says.

Throughout the nine-month program, HSSD keeps advocacy top of mind. At the end of each meeting, cohorts are given a call to action. The group is asked to informally meet with another Leadership HSSD member over coffee or to share a positive story with someone in the community. "We want people to go out and continue to foster relationships within the cohort group, and also use the education they've gained to inform conversations and share positive stories in the community," explains Kimberly Uelmen, HSSD's director of school and community relations. When they graduate, each group also nominates other leaders in the community to serve in the next cohort.

And so the cycle of advocacy and influence continues. Inviting local leaders to learn, make connections, and have conversations is an impactful strategy for sharing your district's story while earning more and more advocates along the way.

◆ *If you are interested in this program and want to learn more, or see about the possibility of your district starting one, contact [Nicole Smith](#) at nicosmit@hssdschools.org*

Eating Bugs and Sleeping on the Roof: How Some Schools are Reinventing Fundraisers

Reprinted From [K-12 Dive](#)

From bake sales to talent shows, educators and students across the nation spend many hours each year developing and executing fundraisers to pay for much-needed programs, enriching activities and support for local charities.

Yes, the tried-and-true car wash and wrapping paper sales can bring in extra money. But what if a school could create a hugely successful fundraiser that also resulted in schoolwide engagement and learning experiences for students?

That's what these three schools did recently to boost school spirit and bring innovation to traditional school fundraising approaches.

Sleeping on the school roof

The roof of the one-story Central Academy in Middletown, Ohio, can be lonely and cold in the middle of the night, but that's where Principal Stephen Sippel had volunteered to sleep

under a tent on Oct. 17, when temperatures hovered around 40 degrees and he had “the worst night’s sleep ever.”

Yet as students arrived at the K-6 school the next morning and he waved from the roof, seeing excitement on the faces of students and teachers made the campout worth it.

The principal’s sleepover on the roof was part of a school fundraiser that also included an all-school walk-a-thon. The school wanted to raise \$10,000 so it could adopt a “facility” dog, trained to specifically work in schools as a therapy companion.

Sippel said a dog could bring joy to the school’s 360 students, half of whom qualify for free and reduced- price meals and some of whom had experienced trauma or anxiety. Sippel had promised that if they met the \$10,000 goal, he would sleep on the roof.

But the walk-a-thon only brought in \$9,300. As Sippel announced the disappointing result to a roomful of students, Middleton City School District Superintendent Deborah Houser, who attended the announcement, said the district would contribute the remaining \$700 so the school could adopt the dog.

Since the school had now met its goal, Sippel would indeed be sleeping on the roof.

Tucker, the dog assigned to the school, should arrive in January. There will be a five-month trial period to see if the dog and school are a good fit. If they are, the school will pay the \$10,000 fee and officially adopt the dog. A teacher will care for Tucker on nights and weekends but during the school day, his crate will be in Sippel’s office.

The fundraiser was successful, Sippel said, because students, staff and families supported the goal of adopting a dog for the campus. Most importantly, he said, the walk-a-thon generated a lot of school spirit and a great deal of joy in working toward the fundraising goal.

“There is a lot of power in your community that many times, especially in poorer communities, we dismiss and we lower our expectations for what we can possibly raise, or we can do,” Sippel said. “I think my tiny school is evidence that you can do great things when the community comes together.”

Eating a scorpion and other critters

A cooked scorpion tastes like a salty, crunchy potato chip, according to Whitehaven Elementary STEM Principal Tommy Elliott, who, until he ate the insect in front of students and staff on Oct. 23 at the Memphis, Tennessee school, had never tried a scorpion before.

But he has previously eaten other bugs like grasshoppers during an annual schoolwide event to celebrate World Edible Insect Day. The gathering is held to mark the end of the K-5 school’s first-quarter study of entomology.

It's also a fundraising event where students pay \$2 to watch their principal eat a bug that they've chosen through a schoolwide survey. Staff members new to the school also are invited to eat bugs — but students do not partake.

This year's buzz-worthy event raised about \$680, which the 480-student school donated to Clean Memphis, a partner organization of the school that provides hands-on environmental experiences for youth.

There's another benefit to the bug buffet: Attendance rose that day, and students and staff felt a fun energy leading up to the event, said Elliott, who is in his 13th year as principal of Whitehaven Elementary STEM.

School should be a place where kids like to be, Elliott said. "So when they like being somewhere, you're going to get their best."

And the study of bugs is a big draw for his students. This year, the students pondered the question, How can eating bugs benefit human society? They conducted research and talked about nutrition, protein and hunger. One student suggested that if humans ate more crickets, there would be more water left for humans to drink because crickets need less water to survive than other animals like cows.

"STEM is about them being able to critically think, use their creativity and then be able to communicate with each other and collaborate with each other," Elliott said.

Converting a school into a haunted house

Some people think their schools are haunted, while others go to great lengths to make them appear haunted.

That's exactly what Idaho's Kellogg High School's student council members, drama students and Adam Ream — the student council advisor and drama teacher — did by converting a former middle school into a walk-through, immersive haunted house.

The students developed the fundraising idea because they wanted a fun, safe Halloween activity for teenagers and adults, but they also wanted to raise enough funds to support activities like homecoming and other school spirit events throughout the year.

Operating for the second year, the KHS Haunted House, was held on Oct. 28 and featured student actors playing zombies, clowns at a haunted carnival and porcelain dolls with Victorian clothes. There was also a sacrificial area with screaming people in cages. A white strobe light disoriented guests, as did frequent high-pitch screaming.

The last room of the haunted house was completely dark and had hanging fishing lines to make people feel like they were walking through cobwebs, said Ream. "It's very scary."

Many people were eager to be frightened. Although the school only has 280 students in grades 9-12, this year's haunted house drew more than 500 guests, Ream said.

By charging \$5 each, the school raised \$3,000. A local dental office covered the upfront costs with a \$1,000 sponsorship, so the student council could keep 100% of the profits, Ream said.

In total about 40-50 students participated as organizers and actors, giving them experience planning a major event. Additionally, the city of Kellogg coordinated its Halloween festival with the KHS Haunted House and provided shuttles taking people between both events, Ream said.

“Everyone who came out, loved it. We had more people this year than last year so I think it's just going to keep getting bigger and better,” Ream said.

Achieving Balance as a Time-Starved School Leader

Reprinted From [Edutopia](#)

School leaders are time starved. That's the nature of the job. We can give everything to our work, and the job will still ask for more. Researchers have found that years of experience [correlate with better success](#) for principals; however, at the same time, they found that principals are leaving the profession at higher rates than before. I believe that time starvation is a large contributor to this retention problem. To combat this crisis, I offer two time management ideas for moving from surviving to thriving as a school leader: considering the return on your time and actively centering balance in your life. These two topics play off of each other, forming a cycle that supports leaders' success.

1. Return on Your Time

[Taj Jensen](#) has said, “There is no endpoint as a school leader.” To increase the return on the time that you invest in your daily job, center your attention on three areas of focus: your priorities, locus of control, and use of delegation.

The more you harness these ideas during the workday, the more these practices will increase the amount of work that can be done in a day—and ensure that you have space to leave work and recharge.

Get clear on priorities. The leaders who get the most done in a day truly understand what the most important tasks are, and why. Where should a principal's focus be? [The Wallace Foundation](#) has found that four areas of school leaders' focus have the highest impact on students: engaging in instructionally focused interactions with teachers; building a productive school climate; facilitating collaboration between teachers and professional learning communities; and managing personnel and resources strategically.

Once you have your priorities, you need to be efficient in realizing them. My favorite productivity resources are Ben Meer's [75 Smart Productivity Hacks](#) and Michael Hyatt's book [Free to Focus](#).

Control what you can. Not working on the weekend is a great way to recharge. That said, spending 15 weekend minutes reviewing your calendar for the week ahead can be greatly beneficial. What are your nonnegotiables for the week, outside of school? What are your work meetings, observations, etc.? Plan the rest of your week around sleep, social commitments, exercise, etc. Lastly, decide what you are going to say no to (this may be the hardest part!).

When a principal puts something on their calendar, there is always the prospect that something unexpected will come up—a parent meeting, an administrative task—that derails the entire day. Think, in this quiet weekend moment, about how you will deal with those situations in a way that keeps your priorities centered.

Empower others and delegate. One way to plan for the unexpected is to create intentional systems that empower other people so that you, as principal, can focus on the high-impact areas of your work. One such example is the “first responder system.” A first responder system helps community members determine the primary person who should address a given issue; it ensures that the principal isn’t always the first person people go to.

To keep everyone on the same page, teachers and administrators should discuss this system at an all-staff meeting and then post it wherever the school keeps resources, such as on a digital hub, in the staff room, etc.

2. Achieving Work-Life Balance

The idea of balance is crucial to getting more done in your day. When you take care of yourself and your family, you’re in a better place to take care of your teachers and students. But too often, “take care of yourself” is an abstract edict—it feels cliché and doesn’t mean much.

Leaders need to demonstrate what this phrase means and be the example not only for their own longevity but for the people who work for them. Here are three ways to do so:

Get in alignment. Leaders who understand their core values have an easier time getting into alignment—meaning finding congruity between their [values, goals, and passions](#). For example, if you actively articulate that one of your core values is family, it will be easier to leave work at a certain time each day to ensure that you are living up to one of your values. Being the example, as stated above, is another way to demonstrate your alignment. Leaders who are aligned set the tone for the entire building.

Be present. When you are at work, be at work. Be extremely focused on the task at hand. Then, when you are home, be fully home. Do not try to be in multiple places at once, because when you do so, no one gets your full attention. Some leaders may feel a sense of guilt if they are at home watching a movie with their children while an event goes on at school. However, this is an example of a moment when delegation can provide support—by trusting that selected teachers will do a good job in your absence, you spread responsibility and allow time for rest.

Exercise, nutrition, and sleep. When you are stretched too thin and are doing too much at work and at home, both areas are going to suffer. We are professionals, and to be at our best, we need sleep, exercise, and good nutrition and hydration. All of these things help improve our ability to perform professionally. Researchers give [three suggestions](#) for principals to improve their quality of sleep: sleep hygiene (healthy diet, exercise, and eliminating nighttime snacking and alcohol); phone hygiene (limiting time on screens at night due to the impacts of blue light exposure); and practicing positive thinking before drifting off to sleep. These habits will lead to better health and more productivity in your workday.

I am in the middle of my own journey shifting from being a time-starved school leader who survives to a more balanced leader who thrives. This job is important and meaningful, and we need to find ways to make it more sustainable. Enacting the individual interventions above can inspire others to do the same, creating cascading change.

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2. Enter username and password *[if you are logging in for the first time, click forgot password]*.
3. Click the profile icon in the upper right corner, view profile, and edit.

Go Slow to Go Fast: Change Through Focus

Reprinted From [Getting Smart Blog](#)

These are hard times for educators. Students are striving to make gains after the biggest disruption to student learning in the history of American education. Students and adults have significant [social-emotional needs](#), staffing shortages are real, and districts are confronting everything from budget shortfalls to political battles. From my own experience as principal of Burroughs Elementary, it is possible to [make significant gains in student outcomes](#) and create a joyful, sustaining school culture – by narrowing your focus.

Our school serves a wonderfully diverse community a stone's throw from the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. When I first became principal, I had these grand ideas of eight or nine initiatives that we were going to focus on throughout the year. But what I noticed as the year went

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on was that we were not getting great at any one specific thing. It just felt like we were maintaining the status quo.

Around that time our school and area superintendent started working with a coach from [Relay Graduate School of Education](#). She encouraged us to pick one or two areas of focus and stick with them for the year. And she gave us a tool to help with that: A leader's [Playbook](#), which is both a document and a process that helps school leaders identify their highest-leverage priorities and build their teachers' skills in those areas.

We started by looking more closely at student work and classroom practice to identify one or two areas of focus that were likely to make a meaningful difference in student learning. Then we spelled out exactly how we would use our time to build the team's skills — whether through professional development sessions, weekly team meetings, student work analysis, coaching cycles, and more. Creating a Playbook kept me centered on my priorities and plans to address them – day by day, and week by week.

The first year we tried this we landed on the priority of strengthening small-group instruction in order to provide more targeted instruction. That year we saw meaningful improvements in student learning – something we hadn't seen the year before. I saw that when you don't focus on too many things, the team really takes ownership. When the instructional team coaches their peers on just one or two things at a time, both the coaches *and* the teachers get really good at it. We utilized coaching cycles and planning meetings with teachers that allowed them to grow and thrive. And we had a monthly focus on small-group instruction during staff meetings. And that builds confidence.

Once teachers became experts in teaching in small groups we shifted focus to more personalized small group instruction. We set up groups based on need and flexibility, ensuring they were meeting students where they were, instead of having them remain in the same groups throughout the year. Later we shifted again to dig deep into [student discourse](#), helping students learn to clearly articulate their ideas, listen to others, and test their thinking – in both ELA *and* math. Teacher feedback was also crucial here. We worked individually with educators

[Member Spotlights](#)

[Guiding Principles](#)

[Career Center](#)

*Guiding Principles &
Career Center resources
are available to both
members &
non-members*

who requested help in this area to provide personalized coaching, to build on top of other priority areas. Student discourse is now one of the cornerstones of our culture at Burroughs, as it not only deepens student understanding of the material but contributes to a collaborative, warm culture. With student discourse now established across grades, we've recently prioritized challenging but quick writing tasks, so teachers can monitor and respond to student work more frequently.

Vicki Bullock, a K-5 Math Instructional Coach at Burroughs Elementary School has seen the value of having students articulate what they are doing, ask questions, and listen to each other – especially in the math classroom. She likes to remind her teachers, “If the students can't talk about it, they can't write about it.” Through professional development and feedback sessions, she coaches teachers to ask students, “What do you see? What do you notice?” before they simply dive into solving a problem. Students then learn not just to focus on their own ideas, but to listen to others, which helps expand their thinking and teaches real-world soft skills.

In October 2023, the nonprofit EmpowerK12 named Burroughs Elementary School a “[Bold Performance School](#).” This was the second year in a row we received the honor, which goes to schools that have made academic strides and serve predominantly “priority students — students designated as at-risk, students with disabilities, and students of color.” We're really proud of our results – in 2022-23 our ELA proficiency grew by 11%, and math by 17%.

While not perfect, things are feeling good at Burroughs Elementary. Teachers are in good spirits. The kids are in good spirits. Of course, there are a lot of factors that contribute to school success – from establishing a positive, safe, and structured school culture, to high-quality curriculum, to teacher content expertise, to working closely with our instructional superintendent, Tenia Pritchard, and our Cluster 3 peer schools (two others of which have also been named Bold Performance Schools). We know that prioritization and focus has created a sense of unity and purpose at our school. We give educators the time they need to internalize and refine key skills – a practice we also want to model for our

students. We will keep narrowing our focus to the few things at each moment where we know we can improve. We're in it for the long haul.

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