



Burk High School

This teaching case is not intended to represent effective or ineffective administrative practice; it is intended to generate discussion.

Burk High School is a diverse school located on the western side of CT. Before the most recent state accountability model, Burk repeatedly failed to meet “Annual Yearly Progress” under state and federal performance metrics. Under the new system, the school is producing growth at rates below most of its counterpart high schools.

Principal

Jon Lopez has been principal of the school for two years. Before taking over the principalship, Jon was an ESL teacher in the local middle school. In his first year at the school, Jon took strides to make sure that teachers were teaching the “official” district curriculum, a curriculum that had been aligned with the Common Core and Smarter Balanced assessments. He did so by demanding written lesson and unit plans. In addition, in his conferences with teachers, he asked them to articulate how their lesson addressed state assessments and how specific lesson plans fit within the larger district curriculum.

Jon has also begun to implement a professional learning community’s model, providing time for small groups of teachers who share students to plan and collaborate. He is planning on sending department chairs to national training next summer.

Students

Burk High School students are diverse along a number of dimensions. Ethnically, 35% of the students are African-American, 35% are Latino, 20% are Caucasian, 8% Asian, and 2% Native American. Roughly 28% of the students are officially classified as “free/reduced lunch,” though this is estimated as a low number since in order to classify, students had to have their families complete the forms and return them to school. District administrators estimate the number to be closer to 40%. By either figure, a considerable percentage of are living on the verge of or in poverty. There is also a small percentage of students, roughly 15%, who come from the richest residential communities in the city. These students are predominantly White and Asian, and the majority of these more affluent students are enrolled in the International Baccalaureate (IB) program.

IB Program

The International Baccalaureate Program is a rigorous, internationally-benchmarked program leading to the IB diploma, considered to be the “gold standard” of high school diplomas in the United States. Seventeen percent of Burk students are enrolled in this program, which has been touted by the media and the school board as an example of how urban schools can provide rigorous learning with high expectations.

Recently, a local university study showed that in addition to the disproportionate representation of White, Asian, and students of affluence enrolled in the IB program, the IB program seemed to employ



the most veteran and most educated teachers. On average, IB teachers had three more years of education than their counterparts in the rest of the school. These teachers had all received intensive IB professional development, each being certified as an IB teacher. A controversial strand of the research also revealed that teachers in the IB program averaged 182 points higher on their SATs and were more likely to have attended a “Tier 1” (more highly reputable research-oriented) university for their undergraduate degree.

The IB program was a pet project of the superintendent and school board, who believed it essential for keeping middle class students (and the social capital they represented) living within the district and attending the schools. The superintendent’s high school-aged daughter was enrolled in the IB program.

The District Context

The Burk Township Public School District contains 10 schools — 2 high, 3 middle, and 5 elementary schools. The superintendent, who has been in the district for four years, is focused on reducing the achievement gap. In an effort to reduce the gap, the central office was spending resources to identify research-tested programs that could help fill identified gaps in the instructional program. Over the last couple of years, the central office has sponsored both onsite and offsite professional development for:

- “Capturing Kids Hearts’ (a program dedicated to help adults build strong relationships with adolescents),
- Professional learning communities (PLCs),
- William Daggett’s Rigor/Relevance framework.,
- Yale RULER training on socio-emotional learning,
- Restorative Justice programming, and
- Professional development on the psychological trauma experienced by children of poverty.

The central office has also brought in Read 180 and various software programs for improving achievement results for students and accelerating performance of students farthest behind. Recently the district has kicked off a year-long leadership development process where key central office personnel will coach principals.

Achievement Results at Burk HS

In 2007, each IB graduate was accepted into at least two universities. Each enrolled in an institution of higher education, though there is no formal data as to how many stay enrolled in college. In the rest of Burk High School, only 72% of the students graduated in 2007, a figure that has remained relatively constant over the last five years. There is no data on how many of these students are accepted into how many colleges or universities.

State achievement assessments reveal wide achievement gaps between White/Asian students and African-American/Latino students and between students of affluence and students in the free/reduced lunch program.



External Audit

Because of district status on the state “low-performance watch list,” an outside consulting company contracted by the state conducted a one-week audit of the instructional program and organizational strength of each school. In the official report that followed, the consulting company celebrated the IB program as one of the few pockets within the district that consistently possessed high rigor and high expectations for all students. In the rest of the report concerning Burk, the consulting company reported wide variation in teaching quality, expectations for students, and the degree to which teachers taught the written curriculum.

Discussion Prompts:

1. What is the problem at Burk High School?
2. What are the contributing causes of this problem?