
Case Study 1

Small Charter High School, Mediocre Results

R.I.G.H.T. for Success High School

The R.I.G.H.T. for Success High School (**R**esponsibility, **I**ntegrity, **G**enerosity, **H**umility, **T**eamwork for **S**uccess) opened four years ago, and its first graduating class is set to go off to college. Jonah Levinson, the founder and principal, has decided it is time for him to move on. A former Teach for America teacher, economics major, and ninth grade math teacher, he was the main designer of the school, including its academic assessment series. After a rigorous nationwide search, you have just been appointed the principal who will take Levinson's place. You collect the following information about the school from the school's website, the principal's annual report to his school board, and an interview with the principal.

The R.I.G.H.T. for Success High School enrollment is currently limited to 200 students (50 in each grade), due to building capacity. Every Friday the students, staff, administrators, and parents of the school gather in the gymnasium to celebrate their accomplishments. Focused on building community traditions and a sense of pride, these weekly celebrations honor students for meeting academic goals or providing a positive influence in the community. School faculty and parents are often commended as well, for the guidance and support offered to the students and for their efforts to go beyond the classroom textbook to truly provide an education to the students.

In addition to stating an emphasis on high academic expectations (all students enroll in AP level classes and take the AP Exams; all ninth grade students take the PSAT; all eleventh grade students take both the SAT and ACT—exam fees and tutoring sessions are paid for by a generous and anonymous community activist), R.I.G.H.T. for Success High School places a unique emphasis on building positive character and attitudes in its students.

Two full-time "Advancement Coaches" work with the students and their families to prepare for college, in line with the school's goal that 100% of students will graduate and enter either a two- or four-year college. As part of the preparation, the Advancement Coaches keep track of student performance on several measures of academic readiness: PSAT, ACT, and SAT, and individual student portfolios. These portfolios include the following at each grade level: a series of four practice PSAT/ACT/SAT tests; six subject-based interim assessments created by the faculty and administered every six weeks; semester exams for every class; and an essay creation/oral defense for all seniors. The essay/oral defense must focus on how the students have used/plan to use their academic knowledge in

their larger community. During Defense Week, parents, business leaders, local politicians, and civic/community leaders attend as a participative audience (an audience allowed to question/critique the statements of the presenter) for the students.

While Levinson proudly touts the success of getting the first graduating class into college, you note that over half of the students are only being accepted at the local community college that has no admissions criteria, and only 20% are enrolling in four-year colleges. Moreover, as you look at that year's assessment data, only 45% of the students were proficient on the state test (well below the statewide average and only marginally higher than other neighborhood high schools), and few achieved a score of 1000/1500 on the SAT. No one passed the AP exams.

You schedule a visit of the school in the last month of the school year in preparation for assuming leadership the following year. During that visit, you gain the following additional information:

1. The original ninth grade students were years below grade level, especially in math and reading. On a pre-test the class average grade equivalent was 6.5 in Math and 7.0 in reading. While teachers still adhered to four practice PSAT/SAT/ACT exams each year, they had also begun using middle school level text books and workbooks to help students get up to speed.
2. In leading the teachers in designing their own interim assessments, Levinson had the national standards for Reading (National Reading Panel) and Math. Teachers designed Math assessments using the NCTM focal points, but they noted that there were large discrepancies in content and rigor between their interim assessments and both the state tests and SAT/ACT. Levinson was proposing an additional screening tool for each cadre for your first year as principal, and he suggested that you add a commercially created assessment that was aligned to the state test.
3. Levinson had worried that involving all teachers in academics, the Friday Celebrations, college preparation, and tutoring was stretching them too thinly. To address this issue, he removed all tutoring and SAT Prep responsibilities from the teachers and hired a set of college students to lead those sessions in the afternoon. Teachers were excited about this change.
4. The data reports on each cohort of students were extensive: you had results reports for each test, performance descriptions, wrong answer analysis generated by a computer-based program, and lengthy data reports with standard-level analysis. Teachers meticulously filed each of these reports in individual student file folders that were housed in the Main Office. When you asked the teachers how students were doing academically, they showed you all the reports in the file. When you asked them what they did with that information, they said it was useful to know where the students stood. A few teachers mentioned that it influenced their thinking about lesson planning. Most said that they were important for helping the Advancement Coaches identify proper post-secondary options for each student.
5. Due to the quantity and frequency of assessments, it took some time for the scanning program and computer equipment to generate reports. Most often it took

a week or more to scan and return student's classroom exams—some teachers never returned the semester exams.

Even with the strain on their teaching responsibilities, teachers at R.I.G.H.T. were committed to the school's mission and felt good (if not thrilled) about their initial results. The parents and community members were very supportive, and the summer professional development calendar for the following year included time for an academic retreat, curriculum planning, and assessment realignment.

Case Study 2

Medium-sized District K-8 School, Failing School

Johnson K-8 Community School

You have been selected to lead the Johnson K-8 Community School, effective July 1, 2008. Fifty percent of the students at Johnson K-8 were identified as special needs and 95% participate in the Free/Reduced Lunch Program. Seventy percent are English Language Learners (the majority are from Spanish-speaking nations, but there are several small groups of students from Nigeria, Chad, Ethiopia, and Zimbabwe, as well as 10 students from the Czech Republic).

Due to repeated poor performance on the annual state test, Johnson K-8 is identified as “Year 4/Corrective Action.” Reading scores are regularly the lowest in the district: the recent (2008) eighth grade assessment recorded 4% of students at the state proficiency target and earned the school a spot as the lowest eighth grade performance in the state. The enrolled students will take the 2009 state test, and according to district contracts, student performance is calculated in the administrative evaluation and bonus structure.

Originally opened in 1974 as an elementary school serving kindergarten through sixth grade, the school merged in 1996 with a neighboring middle school due to declining enrollment. The school now serves 446 students, organized into three divisions:

1. The Primary Division
 - a. 30 kindergarten students
 - i. 1 Teacher plus a half-day teacher assistant
 - ii. Children are enrolled in a full day program
 - b. 70 students enrolled in both first and second grade
 - i. Each grade has three classes
 - ii. Each grade level has one full-time assistant
2. The Intermediate Division
 - a. Third, fourth, and fifth grades with 60 students in each grade level
 - b. Two classes of 30 students in each grade level
 - c. In each grade, one teacher is responsible for math/science and the other teacher is responsible for literacy/social studies

3. The Upper Division
 - a. Sixth through eighth grades; each grade has 32 students.
 - b. Students rotate between content-specific teachers (LA, math, science, social studies)
4. Instructional Support
 - a. Director of staff development
 - b. Half-time reading specialist
 - c. Half-time special education aide for intermediate and upper divisions
 - d. Half-time computer education teacher

Walter Lockhart, a 36-year school district veteran and current director of staff development, has acted as interim principal since November, when Marcia Myles resigned after two years as principal. Her resignation was requested by the school board after months of repeated parental and community demonstrations against the lack of supervision that resulted in playground fights, disorderly classrooms, middle school students frequently leaving the building to walk to the neighborhood park (a half mile away), and three separate incidents in which a student was injured crossing the street at dismissal with no adult supervision.

While safety and supervision have ignited the public discontent, Lockhart first developed and implemented new supervision/duty schedules for the staff. He then attempted to refocus the staff on teaching and learning. As director of staff development, he believed in empowering already knowledgeable teachers to reach and transform students' lives. Abiding to union regulations, Lockhart designed a schedule that provided for a series of professional development sessions every Tuesday during school and every Thursday for an hour after school. Lockhart shared important administrative and facility updates via e-mail, written memos placed on teacher desks each Monday morning, and announcements during lunch periods in the cafeteria. His first focus area was conflict resolution (in the hopes that the guidance counselor would start a mediation or conflict resolution program). The second focus for staff development was a concerted effort to increase the staff's awareness of the districtwide interim assessment program. The series of professional development that he launched (and district office staff led) was as follows:

- Faculty pep rallies about the importance of assessment at the beginning of the year and right before state tests
- Analysis of last year's state test results at the beginning of the year: faculty noted areas of weakness (the degree of specificity of the state reports allowed them to identify needs such as problem solving, critical reading, etc.)
- Development of professional learning communities: workshops showing the effectiveness of professional learning communities; Tuesdays then became time for teachers to meet in grade-level teams and discuss their progress with the students (these meetings were led independently by designated teachers who each designed their own agendas for the meetings)
- Development of standards-based classroom assessments based on the state standards
- Analysis of the state-mandated interim assessment data

Even though the district had used interim assessments for the previous five years, it was clear that few if any of the staff at Johnson K-8 had ever logged into the program. Seven veteran teachers met with Lockhart every day after school for two weeks in December, and they admitted to not using the system, since all the data showed was that the kids scored low. “We see that every spring on the state test,” said one teacher. “We don’t need to see low scores four more times during the year—it’s just depressing.” The teachers went on to complain that the **various reports were confusing, difficult to read**, and that many of the younger teachers simply did not have enough experience to deal with such low-performing students. When you met with Lockhart, he told you how he always responded to these critiques by emphasizing that the assessments were aligned to the state’s academic standards, that small groups of teachers from all grades and subjects were invited to review the assessments before publication (his teachers weren’t invited because of the school’s performance), and that the content adequately reflected the topics and difficulty that the students would encounter on the annual test.

Case Study 3

Medium-sized District K-5 School, Average Results

Kincaid Elementary School

You have just accepted the position of principal at Kincaid Elementary School, a school with 350 students (approximate 60 per grade level). The following information is provided by the regional superintendent to familiarize you with school essentials.

In the lobby of Kincaid Elementary School, a 1964 traditional brick building, the bulletin boards are reserved for charts and graphs of students' academic success. According to the recently posted chart, nearly 64% of Kincaid's third to fifth grade students performed in the "Basic" category on last year's state reading assessment (up from 61% the previous year). In mathematics, the school has experienced a plateau, with third through fifth grade students scoring 47% "Basic" each of the last three years.

The outgoing principal is Tala Bradshaw. Bradshaw has been principal of Kincaid for 16 years and is pleased with the student performance. She knows that the school is not on top of the district performance list, and she believes that with stronger teachers and better student motivation, the school could show more than modest yearly increases. However, Bradshaw has struggled with the newly introduced curriculum standards for elementary schools. She approved a request from her fourth grade teachers not to attend the district workshop series on the fourth grade writing assessment, and only one fifth grade teacher attended the workshop on the new science standards and science assessment. He said he learned nothing new and would rely on his experience. Bradshaw had hired Clarence Morris, the science teacher, during her first week as principal at Kincaid, and she was initially impressed with the young man's dedication to his students. Over the years she had noticed Morris relying on the same activities and the same classroom arrangement—his students rarely did science experiments, rather spending time reading and taking notes.

Given Morris's popularity with the staff, other teachers had followed Morris's model, and classes at Kincaid had slowly turned from a buzz of conversation and activity—characteristics that drew Bradshaw to elementary school in the first place—into a quiet "studious" school with classrooms full of students sitting at desks completing workbooks and taking notes. As you reviewed the state test performance of the school before and after the change, you noted no change in results. Morris's influence did not seem to have helped nor hindered the school's performance. Morris had completed his master's degree in leadership and had successfully completed the district's principal intern program. Bradshaw

was hopeful that he would be named the new principal so that the students and staff would be in the hands of someone who knew them best. When you were named new principal, Morris “was busy” when you asked if you could meet with him before the year began.

Following directives from her new regional superintendent and the director of elementary curriculum, Bradshaw held two staff development days in September on the school district’s new interim assessment package. A representative from the company walked teachers through a computer program which displayed student scores on the state test, able to be manipulated by variety such as gender, ethnicity, and even by content standards (the newly adopted curriculum standards which everyone was still reviewing). This information was supposed to be used to plan initial instruction and possibly group the students according to need, or perhaps even to provide special tutoring to specific students. In addition to the history of state test performance, the trainer explained that the district had purchased a series of assessment for every grade (first to fifth) to help familiarize students with the new content and new format of the state assessments. When you met with the trainer to understand what was accomplished and prepare for the upcoming year, she noted that as she was discussing the different assessments and the process by which student answer sheets would be scanned and saved, many teachers lost interest. People were grading papers, sending text messages, or just staring. She did see three teachers huddled around a laptop walking through the demonstration site as the trainer clicked through. The teachers were taking notes, excitedly whispering and pointing fingers at the screen.

Follow up training sessions were part of the district’s contract with the service provider, but the sessions were always after school, and Bradshaw told her teachers she could not require them to remain in the building after 3:35. The trainer noted that the same three teachers who were excited during the opening training were the ones that attended regularly and actively tried to analyze the data and use it in their classroom. When you analyzed the state test results by teacher, these three teachers had slightly better results, but not as great as you would have hoped, given their notable dedication.

Since this was a district initiative, Bradshaw had little to do besides pass out and review the calendar, appoint someone to distribute copies of the test booklets/student answer sheets every eight weeks, and send a report to her regional superintendent after each round. For this, she usually asked her secretary to log in and run the grade level charts for her. Bradshaw had an assistant principal and a few subject coaches, and they did most of the observation/coaching of the staff. Bradshaw dedicated herself to the full-class, formal observations.

Case Study 4

Large District 6-8 School, New School

Central Springs Middle School

You have been selected as the principal of Central Springs Middle School, currently undergoing construction and scheduled to open for students on August 25, 2008. This appointment is effective May 12, 2008. Faculty applications for all grades and subjects are being received by the District Personnel Office and will be forwarded to the school for your review. While you will have to abide by some of the seniority rules that apply to in-district transfers, you have been given more freedom to hire the teachers that you feel are going to serve you best.

All school administrators and any instructional staff hired as of June 13 will attend a five-day district-sponsored retreat, followed by five days of school-based PD/planning. During the district-sponsored retreat, you and your staff will learn about the district's Middle School Effectiveness Plan (MSEP) including ideas on schedule, interdisciplinary teams, adolescent literacy instruction, and the new community volunteer requirement for eighth grade students. Information will also be presented on school transportation needs, after-school activities, and the new state assessment parameters. The five days of school-based PD/planning are yours to design, but it is required that one of those days focus on assessment. Central Springs Middle School may utilize its own series of formative assessments (either creating the assessments or purchasing them from an outside vendor). At minimum, you must administer formative assessments to all incoming sixth grade students in language arts and mathematics, and to all incoming seventh and eighth grade students in language arts, mathematics, writing, and science. Depending on your school's performance on the Spring 2009 State Assessment, Central Springs Middle School will be allowed to continue developing and administering its own formative assessments.

The student population of Central Springs Middle School will be the most diverse population in the district. The following table provides some student demographic information, based on current and projected enrollment:

Demographic	Grade 6	Grade 7	Grade 8	TOTAL
General Ed.	280	220	264	764
Special Ed.	120	180	136	436
Free/Reduced Lunch Program	312	288	328	978
ELL	140	167	206	513

Demographic	Grade 6	Grade 7	Grade 8	TOTAL
Afr. American	200	200	200	600
White	64	64	64	192
Hispanic/Latino	100	91	73	264
Croatian	36	45	63	144
Male	200	200	200	600
Female	200	200	200	600
TOTAL	400	400	400	1200

You will launch the school with 400 sixth graders. In addition to the core teaching staff, you have been given a budget to hire the full-time equivalent of six instructional support staff, and you can define them as you wish (e.g., librarian, parent coordinator, reading specialist, literacy/math/science coach, assistant principal, etc.). You have been granted permission to have 100 minutes per week of PD/teacher planning time built into the school day.

Case Study 5

Small K-5 School, Good Results

Mountaintop Charter School

Mountaintop Charter School has 250 students, grades K-5, and it has consistently outperformed other neighboring schools over the past five years. Charlene Goode, founding principal, is about to leave to launch a teacher training institute, and you will be taking her place as the second principal the school has ever had. As you interviewed for the job, you found teachers, parents, and students to be very proud of their accomplishments. They were much more concerned about you keeping in place everything Goode did rather than trying to improve the school. As you looked closely at the data on state test performance, you noted that while Mountaintop always outperformed the district average and always came close to the statewide average, there were four or five schools in the city with similar student demographics that consistently outperformed Mountaintop. You also noted that Mountaintop's results seems to have declined slightly over the past few years, something which Goode was quick to dismiss as "an anomaly."

Mountaintop prided itself on being a data-driven school. They had elaborate "Battle Plans": teacher action plans after each interim assessment that included specific strategies, dates, and times for re-teaching difficult standards. There was a sophisticated computer program connected to Scantron software that produced immediate spreadsheets with question-level analysis of each interim assessment. It even had a feature that told teachers the likely error in student thinking if they chose any given wrong answer. The Dean of Curriculum leads this entire process, including one-on-one analysis meetings with each teacher.

The interim assessments that Mountaintop used were built upon the foundation of a high-achieving charter school in another state. That particular state had less rigorous assessments than Mountaintop's state, but Goode was confident that there was enough alignment to guarantee positive results. In particular, these assessments placed emphasis on mastering core foundation skills in computation (math) and grammar (literacy), even if those weren't reflected on the state tests.

In talking to Goode, you asked her the biggest challenges she faced. She said she had essentially turned over the data-driven process to the dean, so her own observations were connected more to the lesson plans than directly to interim assessment results (the dean was in charge of making sure that changes occurred in the lesson plans to reflect assessment

results). In speaking with a teacher, you also noted that she had an assessment analysis binder in her room that stayed there. You asked her when/where she did her lesson plans, and she commented she mostly did them on Sunday night at home. She claimed she had a good enough sense of the assessment results that she didn't have to refer to them again after the test itself.

Finally, you had the chance to speak to two alumni who are currently in high school. They lamented the lack of preparation for college prep classes and hoped you could improve that at the school.