

Making Academic Gains by Engaging Families and Community

DISTRICT PROFILE:

Cabell County School District, Huntington, WV

Metro Status: Urban and Rural

Grades: PreK–12

Total Enrollment: 12,700

Total Schools: 28

Caucasian: 89%

African American: 9%

Asian: 1%

Free and Reduced-Price Lunch Program: 52%

Special Education Services: 14%

Average Class Size: 19.8%

Student-Teacher Ratio: 14:1

THE CHALLENGE

For several years, Cabell County School District (CCSD) had been seeking to address ongoing concerns about student performance in the district's two high schools and career technical center. The district's average graduation rate of 77% lagged behind the state average of 84%. In addition, CCSD had not made adequate yearly progress since 2006. Furthermore, there was a persistent gap between the percentage of educationally advantaged and disadvantaged students achieving proficiency on the West Virginia Educational Standards Test (WESTEST II).

OVERARCHING GOALS

In the 2008–2009 school year, the International Center for Leadership in Education (a partner in Scholastic Achievement Partners) met with CCSD teachers, administrators, parents, students, community members, and business leaders to better understand the district's unique needs and create a scalable, sustainable plan that would help the district 1) increase graduation rates, 2) meet AYP, and 3) close the achievement gap.

NEEDS ASSESSMENT

The International Center conducted a comprehensive needs assessment in CCSD high schools to understand the strengths and challenges of the district and identify areas for improvement. The comprehensive assessment included using the WE™ Survey Suite to collect

data from CCSD faculty, students, parents, and administrators. These surveys are designed to provide insight into different stakeholders' perceptions of the learning environment. The International Center also conducted a Data Analysis Review (DAR) to analyze past trends in the school's performance data and set future growth targets.

In addition, the International Center analyzed the district's high school curriculum using the National Essential Skills Study (NESS). A NESS survey was administered in the school and local community in order to understand how instructional priorities at CCSD aligned with skills sought by local businesses and colleges. The survey results were compared with a bank of data from districts nationwide, in order to contextualize local findings.

NEEDS ASSESSMENT FINDINGS

The needs assessment and NESS analysis revealed two key areas for improvement in the district's secondary schools: increasing the rigor and relevance of instruction and strengthening relationships among teachers, students, parents, and the community. The surveys indicated that high expectations did not consistently exist for student achievement among teachers and students. In addition, the WE LEARN™ STUDENT SURVEY responses showed that students did not feel a sense of ownership of their learning, while parents expressed a desire for the school to do a better job of engaging them in the academic life of the schools. Based on these results, the district recognized that improving student achievement would require not only improving instruction, but also enlisting the support of families and the community to create a shared culture of high expectations.

As a first step, the CCSD Division of School Improvement tasked a strategic planning committee with developing a plan to improve rigor, relevance, and relationships in the district. Dubbed the R3 committee, the group included district officials, the school principal, parents, and leaders from the local government and business community. Twenty students, representing each high school and the career technical center, were also included on the committee. The R3 committee met ten times over the school year, working with the International Center to develop a set of comprehensive recommendations for reform. The committee played a critical role in engaging all the stakeholders in the school community in developing solutions. For example, when the International Center coach led a panel discussion of the perception gaps between teachers and students, students were able to voice their perspectives in a way that greatly informed the committee's problem-solving efforts. By the end of the 2008-2009 school year, the committee had devised a five-year district strategic plan that clearly articulated the goals and strategies for improving outcomes for all CCSD students.

CUSTOMIZED REFORM PLAN

Beginning in 2009, CCSD worked with the International Center to begin implementing their strategic plan for raising achievement in the district's secondary schools. Major goals in the plan included: building increased rigor and relevance into students' educational experiences; improving communication with families and the community; and improving support for family and community engagement in the school.

Increasing Rigor and Relevance

In the fall of 2009, a group of about 40 teachers from the CCSD high schools attended training to learn how to write effective lessons based on the Rigor/Relevance Framework. These teachers became trainers in their schools. They began working to incorporate differentiated instruction, project-based learning, and stretch learning into every classroom. The high schools developed and implemented Career Academies, and made a concerted effort to integrate more relevant activities into instruction—for example, by building in more cross-curricular learning opportunities. The district also formed a community committee to explore supporting extended learning opportunities outside of school. Aided by policy guidelines developed by their International Center coach, the committee succeeded in instituting a board policy allowing students to earn credit through out-of-school learning experiences. This initiative both allowed students to apply learning in real-world settings and strengthened relationships between the school and community.

The district made a particular effort to build increased relevance into the curriculum at the School and District Career Technical Center (CTE) programs. As part of the reform plan, the schools began reaching out to local business and community leaders, and the Career Technical Center instituted a full-time community liaison to build relationships with businesses. This effort yielded valuable opportunities for CTE students to develop their skills in real settings—for example, students in the home improvement program were able to work with Habitat for

Humanity to build a home in their county.

Improving Communication With Families and Community

In accordance with the reform plan, the district began working to improve communication with families and the community. To reach out to parents, CCSD schools began using School Messenger to quickly communicate urgent information, and increased use of podcasts to transmit information about district activities. Schools provided training for parents on how to utilize the EDLINE system, a learning community management system that offers technological tools (e.g., grade books, information portals) to increase parental involvement in schools. CCSD also ensured that all schools had websites so that families could easily access updated information regarding staff e-mail addresses, school calendar information, and scheduled events.

CCSD also launched a media campaign to help build a shared sense of purpose with families and the community. The campaign highlighted the value of education and publicized success stories from the school.

Strengthening Family and Community Engagement

As outlined in the reform plan, CCSD implemented a variety of strategies to facilitate parental involvement in the schools. The schools arranged to hold parent conferences in the evening so that more families could attend after school hours. In addition, when teachers needed to conference with families of at-risk students, the parents were invited to meet with all of the students' core teachers together during a common planning time. The district began encouraging teachers to use Instructional Support and Enhancement (ISE) days for home visits and parent-teacher conferences. High school freshmen and their parents were invited to participate annually in a Success Prep Conference. In addition, the district worked with parents and with the local court system to develop new strategies for addressing persistent attendance problems.

To extend the reach of the school district into the community, community groups and business leaders were invited to be members of district planning committees such as the high school restructuring committee. Correspondingly, district members were invited to participate on community boards. District initiatives and concerns were also communicated through community forums. The district also encouraged schools to form school and community support groups, such as academic booster clubs. Parents and individuals from community organizations were invited to join students' classes.

RESULTS

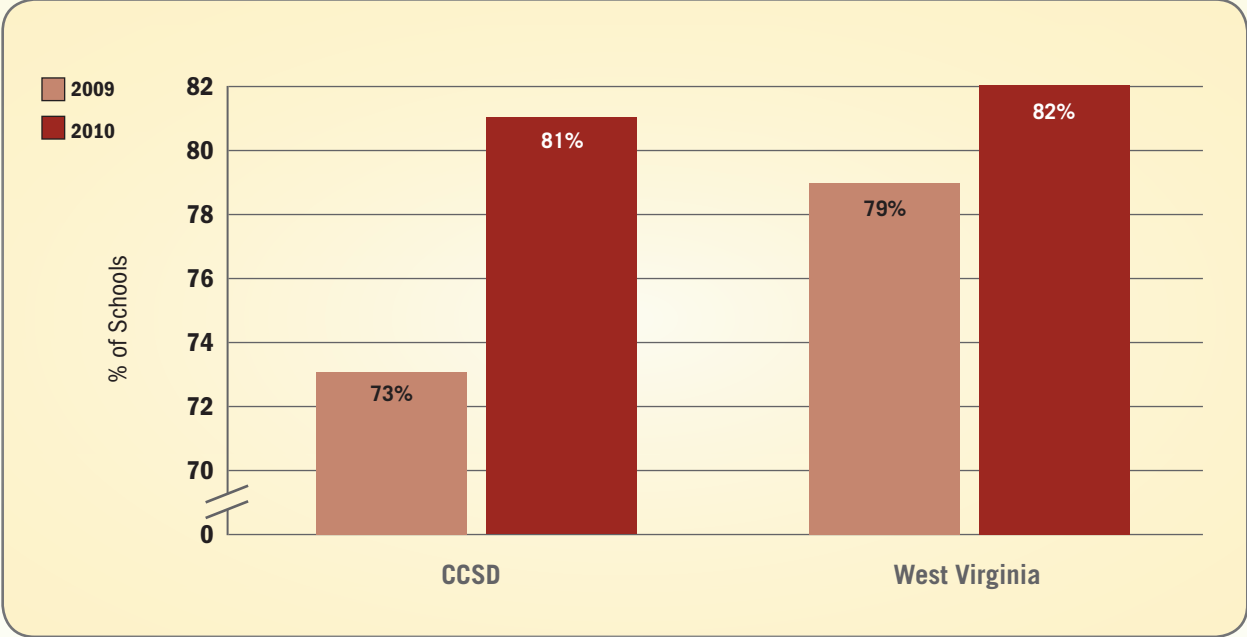
Through their partnership with the International Center and collaboration with families, community members, and local business leaders, CCSD experienced impressive academic gains during the 2009–2010 school year. Such gains were evidenced by the overall improvement in the number of schools meeting AYP, growing from 73% in 2009 to 81% in 2010, bringing CCSD to nearly the same level as that reported by the state (Graph 1). In addition, the graduation rate increased from nearly 77% to 84%, matching that reported by the state (Graph 2). Lastly, it is expected that with increased AYP and graduation rates, progress will be made in closing the achievement gap for economically disadvantaged students in coming years.

CONCLUSION

Facing stagnant WESTEST proficiency scores and an entrenched culture of low expectations, CCSD was able to successfully put district reforms in motion to enlist the support of parents and community members in improving the quality of education across the district high schools. As a result, CCSD was able to successfully improve student achievement as demonstrated by improved AYP and an increased graduation rate. Furthermore, the process helped all participants, through the creation of an empowered environment, to see themselves as part of the solution—laying the foundation for sustaining successes into the future.

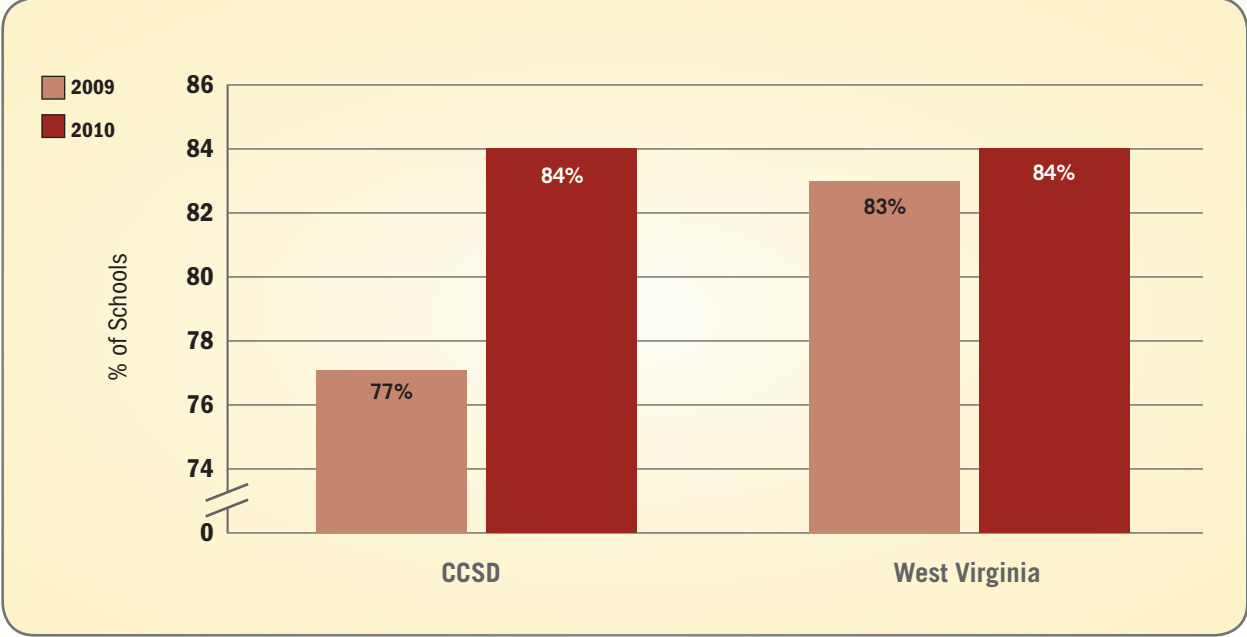
GRAPH 1

Percentage of CCSD and West Virginia Schools Meeting Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), 2009 and 2010



GRAPH 2

Graduation Rates in CCSD and West Virginia Schools, 2009 and 2010



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