



Effective Teaching Communities

Lessons from high-needs, high-performing Delaware schools

State education agencies, school district leaders and educators know how much effort has gone into improving teaching in American public schools. But public schools still need to get better — especially at meeting the needs of all students. Only one in three eighth-grade students in the U.S. met the proficiency standards in reading and math according to the 2015 National Assessment of Educational Progress assessments. Half of recent high school graduates (classes of 2011 to 2014) surveyed by Achieve in 2014 reported not being adequately prepared to succeed in college or in a job, and the majority of their college faculty and employers agreed. Achievement gaps between student subgroups persist. Schools with the greatest needs face the greatest teacher and leader turnover. They also often have less experienced and less effective teachers, according to national analyses.

Our Spotlight Series, a project of the Southern Regional Education Board, celebrates schools where teachers are growing and their students are benefiting as a result. In particular, our research focuses on learning from teachers in high-needs schools who are effectively helping their students defy historic achievement statistics. SREB partners with state education agencies to identify high-needs schools where teachers have strong feedback and support systems, and students are outperforming similar peers in similar schools. Despite a prevailing sentiment that there may be myriad factors beyond educators' control, teachers and leaders are positively impacting student learning and students' lives. We hope their stories offer district and school leaders guidance to accelerate teaching improvement and provide policymakers with insights for promoting teacher development and effective teaching.

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This report was prepared by Tysza Gandha, senior research associate, and Andy Baxter, vice president for educator effectiveness at the Southern Regional Education Board. To discuss the report, contact Andy Baxter at Andy.Baxter@SREB.org.

For more information, visit SREB.org/EE.

Methodology Highlights

- Starting in fall 2015, state education agencies in the SREB region were invited to participate in SREB's Spotlight Series. Delaware was among the first states to step forward. Stakeholders from across the state responded to their "Excellent Educators for All" report asking the state to highlight schools that were "beating the odds." In response, state identified high-needs schools where teachers have strong feedback and support systems, and students are defying student growth and achievement statistics
- SREB's educator effectiveness team conducted school visits to learn about the schools' characteristics, practices and successes. School visits were at least two days long. Each school visit included interviews with 10 to 15 staff members, plus observations of teachers at work in and out of the classroom. School visits focused particularly on understanding educator evaluation, feedback and support in order to gain insights for educator effectiveness policies.
- Stories and videos of spotlight schools are available at SREB.org.

SREB studied three Delaware schools in fall 2015: North Dover Elementary, North Georgetown Elementary and Kuumba Academy. **The Delaware Department of Education selected these schools from the quartiles of schools with the highest percentage of students from low-income families and the highest percentage of students of color. The schools also consistently performed well across various measures of student outcomes (proficiency and growth). These schools have outperformed others in measures of educator effectiveness, teacher retention and school climate over the past several years.**

The three schools are located in different counties in urban, small city and rural settings. Two of the schools belong to traditional school districts, and the other is a charter school. Despite notable differences, the schools have similarities that begin to explain their success in helping students beat the odds. Additional details are in the school profiles that follow.

Teachers at all three schools are committed to their students. Regardless of the paths they took to become teachers, or how many years of teaching experience they have, they are all devoted to their schools and passionate about teaching. The administrators at each school — all of who were once teachers — share clear instructional focus and high standards for student outcomes.

Even more distinctive than the drive and talent of individual teachers and leaders is how the staff at each school learn and work together for student success. They attribute their success to leaders and peers who set and reinforce high expectations, model and scaffold effective strategies, and provide daily encouragement and assistance. "It takes a village" is a phrase educators used to describe their school's collaborative culture.

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This report profiles each of the three schools and describes the central characteristics and practices that contribute to their success. The profiles are intended to spur reflection and conversation between state, district and school leaders who are working to improve teaching. The conclusion offers lessons for policymakers, particularly in promoting educator effectiveness, and outlines SREB's future work to celebrate and learn from effective teaching communities across the SREB region.

Profile 1: North Dover Elementary

Student achievement soars when staff and students share a culture of growth

Nearly 400 students are enrolled in grades K-4 at North Dover Elementary in the Delaware Capital School District. The school is housed in a 20-year-old, brightly painted building with a central hallway and two wings. The backyard has plenty of room for children to play — even after two trailers were added to accommodate the school’s growing population.

The school’s student population is diverse. Half of students come from low-income families; two in three are students of color. But unlike most schools, this school was one of only 15 schools recognized as a “Recognition School” by the state in 2013 and a “School of Continued Excellence” in 2014 for achieving exceptional performance and narrowing achievement gaps between student subgroups..

North Dover Elementary

- 387 students in K-4
- 50 percent are considered economically disadvantaged
- 47 percent black
- 34 percent white
- 7 percent Hispanic
- 6 percent multiracial
- 6 percent English language learner
- 27 teachers, 8 additional instructional staff
- 19 percent of teachers have less than five years of teaching experience
- 59 percent of teachers have 10 or more years of teaching experience



Source: Delaware Department of Education school profile for 2014-15

‘Type A’ people

When asked to explain how North Dover helps students beat the odds, Principal Suzette Marine said, “We are ‘type A’ people. We have very high expectations of ourselves. We are competitive with ourselves.” Many teachers similarly described themselves and their colleagues as “type A.” Nicole Johnson, fourth-grade teacher and Capital District graduate, said that after a lesson, “I am always thinking how could I have done it better ... I’m always wanting to improve it next time.” Samantha Bennett, a second-grade teacher with 19 years of teaching experience who has been North Dover Teacher of the Year multiple times, also said she thinks about how to improve. “I still don’t know everything. I’m always reflecting on what I can do better.”

“I am always thinking how could I have done it better... I’m always wanting to improve it next time.”

— Fourth-grade teacher
Nicole Johnson

North Dover’s staff members said they frequently reflect on how they can help improve student outcomes. Speaking about her students’ family support, Mitzi Harrington, kindergarten teacher, said, “We have to be proactive. I call three parents each day and explain what their children are learning. I tell parents how to help; sometimes they just don’t know. I tell them we are a team.” Fourth-grade

teacher Lena Hall shared a similar perspective about engaging parents and described a phone app she uses to send text messages and updates to parents. “I’ve reached about 80 percent of students’ parents in the first month of the school year, and I’m going to keep trying,” she said.

A school started by good friends

North Dover staff attributed the school’s success in helping students achieve to effective collaboration. When the district first opened North Dover Elementary to accommodate a growing student population in the 1990s, a team of teachers and administrators met every Saturday for six months to plan the school’s direction. Many of the teachers taught together at other schools before coming to North Dover.

Mitzi Harrington, who is in her 31st year of teaching, explained, “They wanted to create a school with an open and supportive culture — what you would expect from good friends working together.” Although the principal and most of the founding teachers have retired, the original collaborative spirit of the school remains. “All of us work really well together here, not just in some cliques,” said Gina Baumgartner, the school’s media specialist.

Third-grade teachers Amy Bowen and Stacy Respoli said teamwork, sharing and learning from each other are the most important reasons for their success. Like other teachers, they get most frustrated when nothing seems to work in getting through to a handful of students. “Thankfully, here we have many people to turn to — the counselor, previous teachers — to figure out what works with a kid,” Bowen said.

Teachers at North Dover learn together in many ways. They share information with one another; for example, what one teacher learned from attending a conference. They also trade lesson ideas and tips. They model and observe in each other’s classrooms. They talk informally during planning periods and transitions, before and after school, and through email.

Since most of the staff has worked at North Dover for several years, they all know the best person to go to for different needs. “If I have a question about centers, I ask Amy,” Respoli said. “For science, I ask Stacy,” Bowen said. “Lena is our tech guru ... everyone has a special expertise, and we complement one another.”

“[At PLC meetings] I allow people time to vent if they need it; sometimes we just need to let it out. . . . But I also push. ‘What do you think is going on? What can we change? What have others tried?’”

— Instructional coach
Lindsay Osika

Nicole Johnson recalled observing Lena Hall introduce and set up a lesson incorporating a Skype session. “When I saw how excited her students were, I was inspired to try it with my class too. It also gave me more confidence to do it,” she said. Recently, many teachers at North Dover have had to learn a great deal about educational technology. Respoli said, “We want to increase students’ higher-order thinking ... We are not just letting kids play games on the iPads.”

While a great deal of teacher learning occurs informally, Principal Marine and instructional coach Lindsay Osika also focus on using grade-level professional learning community (PLC) meetings. (In 2011, Delaware led a statewide movement to create PLCs and many schools adopted the practice.) Marine carefully designed the school schedule to make the weekly 90-minute meetings possible for each grade level. Every week, Osika prepares and facilitates PLC meetings to make the best use of teachers’ time. “There is a protocol and agenda each time,” she explained. “I allow people time to vent if they need it. Sometimes we just need to let it out. It’s nice to hear others say ‘I feel the same way.’ But I also push [and ask the group], ‘What do you think is going on? What can we change? What have others tried?’”

Teachers also attributed their growth to individualized coaching from Osika, who continuously pursues professional development. “I am grateful for the support I get from the district and principal with anything I need — conferences, learning resources ... so I can stay a step ahead,” Osika said. Osika goes into classrooms as often as possible to model good instructional strategies and to teach with teachers. The teachers are not afraid to let her know when they need help so she can address specific issues that come up. “We address what they need to change in particular, not generically. They know they are not alone because we do it together,” Osika said.

Getting students to the goal

North Dover teachers share a common goal: helping students make academic gains. This goal is less about meeting a certain level of proficiency and more about infinite growth. The teachers at North Dover are clear about wanting their students to be the best they can be.

Like at many other schools, North Dover educators administer numerous diagnostic and benchmark assessments to students, including DIBELS, STAR reading and math, and Accelerated Reader. An important and regular task for every PLC team is looking at the latest assessment data. Osika prepares reader-friendly reports and provides technical guidance so teachers can correctly interpret the data.

In consultation with one another, grade-level teams use benchmark data to determine in-class groupings, create groups for the schoolwide Walk to Read reading block (students are grouped by level to receive extra support and enrichment) and identify students who need more intensive intervention. Teachers revisit grouping decisions throughout the school year as they receive more assessment data. Osika observed, “Our teachers view data as important information to see student growth. They try not to take it personally. It’s not about them. It’s about what their students are or aren’t learning. It’s about what’s good for kids.”

Respoli said, “We are not afraid to say that something didn’t work. We all know that happens.” Bowen added, “When we talk and plan together, we figure out what’s going to benefit the students the most.” They noted that assessments can also be evidence of growth. Respoli said, “When the going gets tough, we look at the data and see how much growth the students have made!”

At North Dover, teachers are not the only ones who use data to monitor progress. Students also track their progress and reflect on assessment data to improve. In Harrington’s kindergarten classroom, each student has a paper cow with his or her name on it that moves along a wall toward the barn as the student learns more sight words. “The students and parents love seeing the cows move as the year progresses,” Harrington said. “This system motivates the students.”

Older students at North Dover develop the ability to analyze their data as well. When Hall’s fourth-grade class practices math problems, they enter answers into a SmartBoard system that tallies and lists the correct and incorrect answers on the board. The class then reviews the answers together to learn from errors. Just as the fourth-grade teachers look at data to celebrate student gains in their PLC meetings, Hall teaches her fourth-grade class to celebrate progress. One day, Hall exclaimed to her class, “Hey, we just passed the 80 percent correct mark!” The class cheered.

“Our teachers view data as important information to see student growth. They try not to take it personally. It’s not about them. It’s about what their students are or aren’t learning. It’s about what’s good for kids.”

— Instructional coach
Lindsay Osika

Profile 2: North Georgetown Elementary

Tight-knit community fuels commitment to English language learners

North Georgetown Elementary is located in a small, quiet, rural town in southern Delaware where the immigrant population has grown significantly since the 1990s. Many residents have moved to the Georgetown area from Central America to work in poultry-processing facilities, and their children attend school in the Indian River School District. In 2015, half of North Georgetown students were from non-English-speaking homes, and 80 percent received free or reduced-fee lunch.

Six of the 44 teachers at North Georgetown are certified to teach English language learners. The rest had not planned to teach English language learners, but have embraced best practices associated with reaching all students. Based on 2014-15 state assessment data, all student subgroups at North Georgetown, including English language learners, exceeded expected progress. Two out of three students in the subgroup met proficiency standards in reading, and three out of four met proficiency standards in math.

North Georgetown Elementary

- 756 students in pre-K-5
- 53 percent are considered economically disadvantaged
- 63 percent Hispanic
- 28 percent white
- 7 percent black
- 50 percent English language learner
- 44 teachers, 13 additional instructional staff
- 8 percent of teachers have less than five years of teaching experience
- 64 percent teachers have 10 or more years of teaching experience



Source: Delaware Department of Education school profile for 2014-15

Involved parents, invested staff

North Georgetown parents are very engaged, and the schools' educators work across lines of difference (language, background) to achieve common goals. At the school's most recent open house, staff prepared seating for 300, but between 400 and 500 family members attended each of the two sessions. Parents also regularly show up for parent-teacher conferences and are responsive to communications from teachers. "[Parents] know education is the key to a better life, so they help us," said community liaison for the school Gemma Cabrera, who also serves as a translator. "They are grateful to us."

Many North Georgetown teachers observed that parental support is important to student achievement. They explained that many of the parents don't speak or read English and cannot directly help their children with homework. But parental commitment to their children's academic success motivates the students to do well in school. In turn, motivated students inspire teacher investment. As first-grade teacher Emily Pettyjohn said, "The parents are so willing to help, and the students have such desire to learn. I really want to make sure I can meet their needs."

Pettyjohn and most of the teachers at North Georgetown had not planned to teach English language learners, but now embrace the challenge. “Our staff are willing to do whatever it takes to constantly refine their craft,” said Samantha Gordy, assistant principal. For example, Elaine Tingle, third-grade teacher, is taking graduate-level courses in the summer toward an English language learners certificate. Mary Norton, English language learner coordinator, shared that many teachers also volunteer their time after school to help students with homework and lead extracurricular activities.

Teachers said some people in the town do not understand their investment in the school. Many local families have chosen to send their children to other schools farther away. “This is not just a job for us here. It’s a lifestyle — early mornings, long days and late nights. We are making a huge difference in the lives of our students,” said Principal Jeff Forjan.

“The parents are so willing to help and the students have such desire to learn. I really want to make sure I could meet their needs.”

— First-grade teacher
Emily Pettyjohn

Having each others’ backs

The key to the staff’s success may be how well they work together to provide coordinated instructional support for students in the Response to Intervention framework. “We have push-in support from paraprofessionals who work with small groups, where students get help to reinforce learning,” said JoAnn Taylor, special education coordinator. “Those who are struggling get extra attention. We also have pull-out intervention with the English language learner-certified teacher and specialists.”

Teachers commonly reported that they don’t support the students alone. “We could not meet students’ needs if we worked in isolation,” a fourth-grade teacher said. “We are like a family; we share and help each other. We say, ‘Try this,’” said Maria Hazzard, a first-grade teacher.

Regular assessments, called progress monitoring, indicate which students need help and in what areas. Instructional specialists take the lead on assessing students and pulling data reports together. Then, they share the reports at weekly grade-level professional learning community team meetings. The teachers “backwards-plan” from the data. “We dig into the data to diagnose what students need,” said Meghan Fulmer, reading specialist. Students are tested at least every six weeks and as often as every two weeks. Grade teams review new data as they become available to adjust decisions about how the school’s teachers, paraprofessionals and specialists will coordinate their efforts to meet each student’s needs. “We communicate really well in our grade teams and with the specialists and admin,” said Tara Risse, a fifth-grade teacher. “We have each others’ backs.”

Making it work for all kids

The leaders and teachers at North Georgetown set very high expectations for students. Principal Forjan’s main message is “No excuses, no exceptions ... I want the students to go as far as they can go.” Using the term “no excuses”, many teachers discussed how they avoid “watering down” the instruction. They insist on maintaining the highest expectations for their students, whom they believe are highly capable.

But setting the same expectations for all students does not mean expecting them to learn the same way. “Our [English language learner] students need a lot more visual clues, more explanations,” Tingle said. North Georgetown teachers demonstrate mastery in using multiple texts with illustrations and sounds to teach reading. (The school uses educational technology, including SmartBoards, computers and iPads.)

For example, one day during a reading lesson in Hazzard’s class, students read a digital story about a boy who did not give up on learning how to play baseball. Students took turns reading along with the teacher, reading solo to the whole class, reading highlighted keywords, touching words on the screen as the teacher read, and using their bodies to show the meaning of the word (“Show us how you bat, Jose!”).

Teachers also use many forms of whole-class and small-group discussions to give students numerous opportunities to talk, which is important for language development. In Robbins’ science class, students answered questions, spoke out loud, showed their work product for others to see and used hand signals to participate (Shaking one’s fist with thumb and pinky finger extended means “I agree.”). Robbins also carefully grouped students with others they got along with and built in many small-group discussions.

“The leaders and teachers at North Georgetown set very high expectations for students.”

Testing accommodations are important to make sure students do not feel “knocked down” when they don’t do well. English language learner teacher Meg Lawson makes sure her spelling tests include multiple options. Some students might take a multiple-choice version of the test, while others write out whole words. For an optional challenge, some students write sentences with the words. Stephanie Fair, second-grade teacher, also gives her students different testing options. Some students get a list of keywords they can use; some get extra time to prepare.

“We have high expectations, but we also have to be flexible to make it work for all kids,” Fair said. Risse said along the same lines, “You are teaching children. Treat them how you want yours to be treated. You conform to them and watch them grow.”

Profile 3: Kuumba Academy

Teaching rigorous academics and building character

Kuumba Academy is a public charter school in Wilmington, Delaware. Kuumba was founded in 1998 in partnership with the local Christina Cultural Arts Center in response to community demand for stronger schools. It is now housed in the Community Education Building, a renovated high-rise office building donated by Bank of America for charter schools and community-based organizations. Kuumba started as a K-5 school and began expanding to become a K-8 school in 2015-16, with plans to eventually become a K-12 school.

About 500 students attend Kuumba. Over 90 percent of students are black, and 60 percent of students come from low-income families. Unlike at most schools serving inner-city communities, Kuumba students consistently exceed expected growth on annual state tests. Kuumba was one of 15 schools recognized by the state in 2012 and 2013 for achieving exceptional performance and narrowing achievement gaps between student subgroups.

Mission driven

Kuumba’s goal for students is a year and a half of annual progress in learning. Kuumba’s staff are also determined to engage at least 80 percent of families, a goal that stems from their core belief that parents are the primary educators of their children. “We are here to prove everyone wrong [who may say] that these students are not going to achieve,” Principal Sally Maldonado said. She was drawn by the school’s mission to close the achievement gaps between student subgroups and started working at Kuumba as a teacher in 2002. Many other Kuumba staff came for the same reason, some from alternative-route certification programs and some after teaching at a traditional public school.

Kuumba Academy

- 464 students in K-7
- 58 percent are considered economically disadvantaged
- 92 percent black
- 7 percent Hispanic
- 1 percent English language learner
- 31 teachers, 10 additional instructional staff
- 58 percent teachers with less than five years of teaching experience
- 25 percent teachers with 10 or more years of teaching experience



Source: Delaware Department of Education school profile for 2014-15

Chelsea Baxter, a fourth-grade teacher who struggled with a learning disability as a child, said, “I want to advocate for every child no matter what circumstances they are from.” Kindergarten teacher Tykisha Bratchner said, “I am a product of the inner city myself. Teaching these kids is my passion. I see their potential ... They are so intelligent. I also like helping their parents who may not feel they have the expertise.” “I’m wiped at the end of the day,” said second-grade teacher Colleen Sheeron, “but I’m committed to making a difference for this community and can’t imagine working anywhere else.”

One rock at a time

Although the relatively young staff at Kuumba has no shortage of passion and energy, the school’s leaders know enthusiasm alone isn’t enough. Closing achievement gaps takes effective curricular and instructional models. And educators at the school need a strong professional learning system.

Kuumba teachers spend two weeks of every summer in extensive professional development, and school leaders make sure teachers receive high-quality training. “We are super picky about professional development,” Maldonado said. She recalled that the math professional development helped staff boost students’ math proficiency rate from 49 percent to 87 percent. “The teachers had been frustrated with the spiraling curriculum they had before, and students surveyed said they hated math; they didn’t understand. So we approached Wilmington University and the Math and Science Foundation who led us to a PD program by a Florida professor. We had training sessions on Saturdays, and teachers were observed implementing and given feedback. Teachers cried, but it worked!”

Teachers also complete professional development on implementing the Expeditionary Learning (EL) instructional model during the summer and on teacher work days. “No lectures: our professional development is actually work time,” said Baxter, the fourth-grade teacher. Kuumba contracts EL trainer and coach Jennifer Bond for 32 days a year to lead trainings and facilitate PLC meetings with grade teams. They use the meeting time to set goals, develop lesson plans and design projects with guidance and feedback from Bond. She also conducts walkthroughs to understand how implementation is going throughout the building.

“Each time, I had something to change by the next day. We also look at student work together to see where I can grow. It’s not about what I’m doing wrong or making judgment. It’s about getting better.”

— Second-year teacher
Kelly Hepburn

In addition to Bond’s technical assistance, teachers also receive ongoing, job-embedded professional development in literacy and math from the school’s two full-time instructional coaches. The instructional coaches implement the teacher evaluation and feedback system, which involves frequently observing teachers and providing the concrete bite-size feedback they need to improve. (Kuumba requested and received state approval to use the Teaching Excellence framework, an alternative to the state’s DPAS-II educator evaluation model, and the first such “alternative” model to be approved.)

“Using the Teaching Excellence framework, I observe each teacher for 10 to 15 minutes every two weeks. I videotape the lesson and take notes, then identify one ‘big-rock’ issue. I meet with the teacher 24 to 48 hours later and go through what went really well and why it worked — probing other areas to understand what is going on — then decide action steps,” literacy coach Samantha Connell explained.

Kuumba teachers consistently reported that the personalized feedback and support provided by the coaches are invaluable. Kelly Hepburn, a new teacher, said she especially benefits from the help of her coach. “Each time she observes I have something to change by the next day. We also look at student work together to see where I can grow. It’s not about what I’m doing wrong or making judgment. It’s about getting better.” Colleen Sheeron, an experienced second-grade teacher, similarly appreciates the coaches’ full support: “I go to them when I have a situation. It’s not a blame game. We have a problem to fix and move forward.”

Leaders, coaches and teachers at Kuumba rely heavily on student data to inform their professional learning. Maldonado routinely looks at and compares student data across Kuumba and other schools and districts to determine where Kuumba needs to grow. Math coach Sally Todorow facilitates data discussions in PLC meetings. “We have 50 minutes: 20 minutes for analysis, 30 minutes for planning. We use assessment data to pinpoint who is struggling and decide what we are going to do.”

Teachers are also constantly monitoring student progress. Sheeron uses many types of data, including exit tickets and benchmark assessments, to gauge student progress. She has a wall chart with four boxes (exceeded, met, approaching and below) with student names in each. “To meet your goals, you cannot wait until the end of the year to know where students are,” she said. Kuumba staff also look to data to identify areas of success. “It is so important to monitor the impact of our work using internal assessments and to celebrate small victories along the way,” Maldonado said.

Preparing students for life

The school’s mission of helping all students succeed and the staff’s collective investment in professional growth continue to fuel Kuumba’s student achievement. To increase its impact on students, the school adopted the Expeditionary Learning (EL) instructional model three years ago in an ambitious step toward achieving the ultimate goal of many teachers: preparing students for life.

“We wanted to develop their critical thinking; we wanted them to grapple.”

— Principal
Sally Maldonado

“We knew our students do well on tests, but it was low-level [thinking]. We wanted to develop their critical thinking; we wanted them to grapple,” Maldonado said. School leaders reviewed several possible models and finally selected EL for its equal emphasis on rigorous academics and character education.

“EL is about educating the whole child, developing citizens who care and who will do good and do well,” Connell said. With hands-on support from the EL coach, as well as useful guides and templates, each grade-level PLC develops a guiding question for each half-year (for example, how do we take care of the Earth?) and designs an extensive interdisciplinary project (for example, writing a bilingual book about trash management and selling it to raise funds for an environmental cause).

Another important component of EL is the Crew student support system. The school's daily schedule includes a 30-minute period when students check in with a smaller class and a different teacher. Crew not only dedicates time for students to build relationships with a peer support group and an additional adult, it is also the system built into the school day for teaching students the socio-emotional skills they need for successful learning and living.

For example, Hepburn's third-grade class brainstorms various ways they can deal with feeling frustrated. Hepburn explained, "We have high expectations for kids. They are going to college. So every day, we teach habits of scholarship, like getting help, not giving up and being reflective to help them be successful." Autumn Green's sixth-grade class learns about communicating clearly through a drawing exercise in which one student describes a picture to another student who draws something based on what he or she heard. "We want students to develop good relationships with others, be able to articulate how they feel, understand others and have empathy," second-grade teacher Meaghan Serres said.

Summing up the work at Kuumba, Sheeron said, "We are molding children here, developing their work ethic, responsibility, kindness, perseverance. We want them to be survivors in life, not just well-behaved in school."

Lesson Learned

Based on SREB's research and findings, we believe there are valuable lessons policymakers and educators can take away. What are the implications of these schools' success stories? In particular, what are the implications for other states' policies to promote educator effectiveness?

Lesson 1: Teachers who work in concert can help students beat the odds.

The three schools show what is achievable through deep professional collaboration. An effective teaching community means more than having regularly scheduled meetings or frequently sharing teaching materials and tips. The staff at each of the three schools are highly organized and efficient in using their collective resources (time, expertise, instructional and student support specialists, and paraprofessionals) to pull off what they could not achieve alone.

To nurture effective teaching communities in every school, educator preparation and professional learning systems should develop the knowledge and skills of teachers and leaders. The systems should also build their capacity to effectively collaborate with a focus on student results. Teacher evaluation and feedback systems should set high expectations for teacher collaboration, clarify what effective and exemplary collaborations look like, and reward teachers for individual and collective achievements.

Lesson 2: Commitment and sense of efficacy are as important as instructional know-how.

Teachers at the three schools share a moral commitment to serving all students — a key ingredient in the schools' success. Many teachers also said actually seeing the fruit of their labor in terms of positive student outcomes builds their sense of efficacy and helps them persevere through tough periods. Teacher preparation, induction and professional learning programs should continue to cultivate teachers' commitment to the success of all students.

Lesson 3: The pursuit of growth unlocks teacher and student performance.

The teachers in all three schools focus their energy on improving. They push themselves to keep growing professionally, and they understand there is always room for improvement — even if they are already

proficient. These teachers also have high expectations for students. Their day-to-day focus with students is less about hitting a fixed achievement goal and more about growing as much as possible.

Teacher preparation and professional learning programs should develop teachers' appetite and skills for growth, perhaps drawing from the accumulating body of knowledge about the growth mindset and grit from researchers like Carol Dweck and Angela Duckworth. While teacher evaluation must partly be about assessing teachers' proficiency in meeting standards, teachers' growth must also be emphasized.

Those programs should also equip teachers with skills to use data to identify areas for improvement and see evidence of student success. School leaders must ensure teachers experience success in changing student outcomes, no matter how incremental, and celebrate small victories often. Teacher evaluation should strike a balance between giving teachers honest appraisals and recognizing their successes with students.

Lesson 4: Teacher evaluation can be the primary factor in building educator capacity, but it should also be part of a systemic approach to educator effectiveness.

None of the teachers at these schools attributed their success solely to their respective educator evaluation systems. They value aspects of the systems' design that align with their process of professional learning and improvement.

Teachers across the schools commonly reported receiving invaluable feedback from principals and instructional coaches who conducted frequent classroom observations. Teachers and leaders also value opportunities to analyze student data to reflect on how they can improve individually and as a school. They appreciate planning done by principals and instructional coaches that has leads to more strategic and individualized professional development for teachers.

Policymakers should consider how their educator evaluation systems align with investments in educator professional learning, from mentoring processes to individualized growth plans. Further, policymakers should create conditions where formal classroom observations and informal observations are both part of a robust system for giving teachers frequent feedback. As part of the feedback process, principals and instructional coaches should be encouraged to model effective instruction and provide relevant resources to help teachers implement new strategies.

Lesson 5: School leaders must orchestrate effective teaching communities.

Teachers in all three schools attributed their success in helping students beat the odds to school leaders, including principals and instructional coaches. Those leaders maintain the school's focus on student success, lead the school's efforts to improve student outcomes, and provide teachers with practical and moral support.

In all cases, school leaders previously were teachers. They keep up with their own professional growth, attend trainings and PLC meetings, and spend as much time in the classroom as possible. By staying connected with the realities of the teaching practice, they maintain their credibility with teachers and are likely to be more effective as instructional leaders.

More schools could benefit from principals and teacher leaders who can effectively orchestrate high-impact teacher collaborations. Principal preparation and teacher leadership programs should focus on developing deep instructional knowledge. These programs also need to develop candidates' skills and dispositions to facilitate adult learning, coordinate schoolwide efforts and inspire others to exceed expectations. Teacher evaluation results could be very useful for identifying high-performing teachers who might be well-positioned to become teacher leaders. (Principal evaluation should also align expectations for principals with what it takes to nurture effective teaching communities.)

Conclusion

Understanding what makes some teaching communities more effective than others is only a first step. Work remains to determine what policies help develop, nurture and sustain effective teaching communities. SREB's educator effectiveness team will continue to study the role of evaluation, feedback and professional learning systems in schools to gain insights for shaping policies and practices. SREB's Spotlight Series will explore these important questions in future work.

To learn more about SREB's Spotlight Series or to share examples of great teaching communities, please contact Andy Baxter at Andy.Baxter@SREB.org. Visit SREB.org/EE for more stories of effective teaching communities and educators.

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Educator Effectiveness

Southern Regional Education Board
592 10th St. N.W.
Atlanta, GA 30318-5776
(404) 875-9211
www.SREB.org

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