

SUCCESS IS POSSIBLE

Success

Four key factors for change **TIME TO EDUCATE**

Erica Bryant Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK Before Public School 64 in the Bronx closed, serious disturbances frequently disrupted Taisha Rodriguez's teaching.

Poor, homeless and traumatized students received little support. Parent teacher conferences might attract 10 percent of parents. The environment, she said, was toxic.

"There were many, many days I would cry upon having to go in or leaving."

The year it closed, 2016, only 11 percent of kids at P.S. 64 passed the English language arts (ELA) exams and 16 percent passed math.

Rodriguez was skeptical that The Walton Avenue School, P.S. 294, which would replace Pura Belpre, P.S. 64, in the same building would be any different.

The students at The Walton Avenue School would be from the same neighborhood, about a mile northeast of Yankee Stadium, where the median household income is \$25,771. They would bring the same troubles and baggage.

By 2017, The Walton Avenue School saw 60.9 percent of its students pass state ELA exams and 78 percent pass math — results that were more than 20 percentage points higher than the state average.

Last year it had zero suspensions and 93 percent attendance rates.

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Daniel Russo, principal of P.S. 294 The Walton Avenue School in the Bronx, interacts with summer program students on July 26. JOHN MEORE/THE JOURNAL NEWS

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Something. Had. Changed.

Rodriguez says that people who are opening a new school should “let go of everything that was and open yourselves to the possibility of what might be.” It’s advice that might well find a home among the affected staff and families of the newly shuttered Kodak Park School 41, now getting ready to reopen as a new school in the fall.

As the Rochester City School District prepares to open a new school — its 19th new school since 2002 — New York State Education Commissioner Mary-Ellen Elia admits that the process has yielded little to celebrate in Rochester. “Rochester has done this multiple times without a lot of successes.”

However, there have been successes elsewhere, Elia said. She points to the Bronx’s The Walton Avenue School as an example of a reopening done right.

The staff of The Walton Avenue School has created a place where kids receive enough support to learn. Maria Lopez, who attended School 64 as a child, says The Walton Avenue School has been a wonderful place to send her daughter Star. “I felt like I was handing her over to secondary parents.”

At The Walton Avenue School, 90 percent of the parents show up for parent teacher conferences and also for yoga classes, movie nights and cooking lessons. There is a garden that provides free produce. Last year there were zero recorded suspensions. The school outperformed the state average on the New York School Quality Index, which rates schools based on attendance, suspensions, class size, teacher experience and diversity.

The principal is Daniel Russo, who was a fifth-grade teacher when he applied to open The Walton Avenue School through a Bloomberg administration New Schools Design and Development program. After his proposal was selected, Russo went through an intensive administration training program. In 2013, the school began phasing in, grade by grade, as School 64 was phasing out and finally closed in 2016. The Walton Avenue School, which operates under the same union contracts and regulations as other New York City public schools, outperforms most of them. Here are four things that have contributed to the school’s success, according to principal Russo and some of the school’s parents and staff.

Build a healthy school culture

Everyone interviewed about The Walton Avenue School mentioned that Russo is at the front door every morning to welcome students and every afternoon to wave goodbye.

“That was a really, really powerful thing,” Russo said. “It lets parents know that the school’s leaders are always around and always available to them.”

During the first year of The Walton Avenue School, much intentional work went into building the school’s culture. The building had seen safety issues in the past and many students weren’t used to the idea of staying in their classrooms. Parents weren’t used to coming to activities that would support their kids’ education. The staff worked hard to instill the idea that the school was a place of learning, where parents were an essential partner.

To do this, leaders also had to build a culture of trust among the staff, many of whom were jaded after having lived through several unsuccessful attempts to turn the school around.

“There was a lot of work to be done around having everybody buy into a cohesive educational philosophy and school mission,” Russo said. Once everyone was on the same page, the staff was able to act as a “cohesive team that was passionate in turning around a school for a community we’ve grown to really love.”

Staff went out into the streets to talk about the school and its mission. They also created events that drew parents and families in, from movie nights to free donuts, to yoga classes to cooking instruction.

“He (Russo) got parents in whatever way he could,” said Rodriguez.

Lopez said that the school has become a community gathering place. “If I walk by on a Thursday at 5:30 p.m. you see parents in one gym doing yoga and then you see kids in the other gym playing ball.”

School events are now the place to be.

“The kids be so hyped about it... her friends would be there and it would be like hanging out,” said Lopez. “My daughter comes home saying ‘I have to go,’ like it’s the so uncool thing to do not to go to this one meeting.”

Outsource mental health supports

Russo negotiated a partnership with Abbott Health and Counseling in the Schools, two organizations specifically devoted to mental health.

“I cannot emphasize enough — to a new school, old school, any school that serves a high-needs population — the power of a robust mental health partnership,” Russo said. These partners provide support for students and for anyone who might impact a student’s life. As an example, Russo said that a parent who is getting out of a bad relationship and needs support might come to the school to seek counseling services.

Such encompassing mental health supports are critical to make sure that students —especially those facing poverty, homelessness and other stressors — are accessible for learning. Lopez said she took advantage of the services when her family was temporarily homeless and living in a shelter and her daughter was experiencing anxiety. She said the social-emotional supports provided to the students are helpful. “They take children and help them express their feelings more healthy and safe,” she said.

Rodriguez said that in P.S. 64 there was inadequate support for kids who were coming to class with severe issues and causing disruption and violence.

“You just felt so helpless, there was nothing I could do to make this better.”

Now there are trained counselors helping kids cope with the stress in their lives.

“We need more than just one guidance counselor and one social worker,” Rodriguez said. “Now you are not managing behaviors, that is being done by professionals.”

Support teachers and help them support each other

Russo said that his school invests heavily in professional development.

“All of the work in turning a school around happens inside the classroom,” he said. “Nurturing the teachers is paramount.”

While many schools used their improvement grants to extend the school day, Russo decided to devote the resources to professional development and planning time for teachers.

“I felt like we would get more bang for our buck,” he said.

At The Walton Avenue School, professional development is team-based and geared to prepare teachers to meet high-needs students. Teachers are encouraged to work through current problems with their fellow teachers, under the guidance of a coach. The school tries to create a “constant cycle of reflection and refining everything that we do,” said Russo. He said they are also committed to being honest about what’s working and what isn’t.

Rodriguez said that teachers collaborate at The Walton Avenue School in a way that she has not experienced elsewhere. At P.S. 64, a lack of resources to help needy students had created a toxic environment, leading to an adversarial relationship between staff and administration and among teachers.

“You ended up feeling very frustrated and very alone,” Rodriguez said. “You get the feeling that the administration is after you and you don’t trust your colleagues.”

At The Walton Avenue School, she said things are different. “We can rely on each other and we work together in a way I had not seen before. Every school year has its challenges, but the fact that I know it’s not me alone trying to figure this out makes a world of difference.”

Let math and ELA teachers focus on those subjects

A couple of years ago, The Walton Avenue School experimented with departmentalization by having its most dedicated and effective third-grade math teachers focus entirely on math, rather than teaching all subject areas. The test scores improved dramatically, so the school expanded the model to fourth and fifth grades. Limiting the scope of a teacher’s instructional responsibility allows him or her to focus on one subject intensely, Russo said. They can become “exceptional mathematicians” or “literature gurus.”

Can RCSD imitate this success?

Replication in education is nearly impossible, said Lynn Gatto, director of elementary education at the University of Rochester’s Warner School, a former New York State Teacher of the Year and winner of Presidential Award for Excellence in Math and Science. “What works classroom, in one classroom school or district won’t work in another because we are talking about human beings!”

This can be seen in the fact that the RCSD has tried departmentalization of elementary school math and ELA teachers at a number of schools, with nowhere near the success seen at The Walton Avenue School. And it impossible to photocopy Russo, whose charisma, leadership and passion for helping kids clearly help the school succeed. “I swear it’s like these are his personal children,” said Lopez, of the relationships Russo has built with her daughter and others at the school.

However, there are certainly lessons that can be learned from The Walton Avenue School and its focus on culture, mental health, extensive teacher-directed planning and professional development, and departmentalized curriculum.

Where does Rochester stand on these four key factors, as it opens a school in place of School 41?

1. Build a healthy school culture: The school has planned orientations and open houses to begin the process of welcoming students to the new school. To build a “family-like” environment, the school will be organized in “pod” structures that include 5 teachers, 3 classrooms and 60 children. This will give kids the opportunity to build strong relationships with more than one adult. Before school starts, teachers must read “Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain,” a book by neuroscientist Zaretta Hammond that helps teachers reach students. “The biggest dream is that we create a school where the staff is on the same page and the kids come to school who find staff members who have experience building strong relationships.” said principal Christine Calouri-Poles. “People are raring to go.”

2. Outsource mental health treatment to professionals: The yet-to-be-named school is in the process of selecting a community organization for a partnership in support of student wellness and mental health. Center for Youth, Coordinated Care Services Inc., Ibero American Action League and the YMCA are among those under consideration. The community agency will be onsite to help students and Calouri-Poles said that she hopes services will also be available to families. “When the students go home we want those resources to be fluid,” she said. The school has also hired a social-emotional teacher coach to help teachers help students with social emotional growth and healing.

3. Support teachers and help them support each other: According to an agreement reached with the Rochester Teachers Association, teachers at the replacement for Kodak Park School 41 will have an additional 20 days of professional development and have 40 to 50 minutes a day for dedicated common lesson planning time. This will allow them to work together on specific challenges.

4. Let math and ELA teachers focus on single subject: School 41's replacement will not be departmentalizing its ELA and math teachers, but the school will organize itself in a "pod structure," that will include three classrooms, five teachers and 60 students. This structure will allow teachers and students to move between classrooms and adjust based on teacher strength and student need, said Calouri-Poles.

The RCSD has tried departmentalization of English language arts and math teachers at several schools including School 54, School 43, School 34, School 2, School 7, School 20 and School 35. This structure may make sense for some schools, said Chief of Schools Carmine Peluso. But it hasn't caused a dramatic increase in test scores that would encourage the Rochester district to mandate the arrangement across all schools.

Gatto said she suspects that the success of The Walton Avenue School teachers is more related to planning time and effective professional development than departmentalization.

"Good instruction always comes down to the teacher, not the structure of delivery," said Gatto. "Teachers need to have the time to plan and organize strong lessons as well as continually developing their subject area practices."

The teachers of the yet-to-be named school are preparing for two weeks of intensive professional development in advance of the first day of school. "People are raring to go," said Calouri-Poles.

Taisha Rodriguez wishes them luck as they try to replace a troubled school with a school that will allow kids to achieve their potential. It is possible.

"Many times I have said I started teaching when I became a Walton Avenue School teacher," she said. "That was when I really started to reach kids."

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Daniel Russo, principal of P.S. 294 The Walton Avenue School in the Bronx, works with fourth-grade math teacher Delis Deleon on July 26. JOHN MEORE/THE JOURNAL NEWS



Outside of P.S. 294, The Walton Avenue School, in the Bronx on July 26. JOHN MEORE/THE JOURNAL NEWS



Rodriguez



Gatto