

North Carolina Fourth Quarter Legislative Report June 2019

“One day, all children in this nation will have the opportunity to attain an excellent education.”

--Vision of Teach For America

This year marks 28 years of partnership between Teach For America and the state of North Carolina. As a partner, Teach For America is committed to maximizing our contribution to the state by recruiting, training, and supporting excellent, diverse teachers and leaders and growing our number of alumni living and working in North Carolina. We are also committed to strengthening the North Carolina Teacher Corps.

In the fourth quarter, we have the honor of welcoming our newest group of leaders to the state as they prepare to teach in the 2019-2020 school year. They join the growing network of Teach For America corps members and alumni across the state committed to providing an excellent education to North Carolina's, and the nation's, students. As our alumni base continues to grow and mature, our incoming corps members are exposed to more and more examples of the diverse, innovative talent that exists in our network.

From every field, our alumni are contributing bold, new innovations that expand opportunities for students in low-income communities and address the root causes of educational inequity. One such innovation is a micro school in Edgecombe County that is being led in partnership by our alumni and community stakeholders.

The schools in Edgecombe's Northside district struggled with low student performance, attendance, graduation rates, and more. “This is a place that we had, pretty consistently, very high turnover in staff,” said Erin Swanson, Teach For America alum, and director of innovation for Edgecombe County Schools.¹ “Low student achievement ... we were talking about scores that were 10% proficient, maybe 20% proficient, but persistently low-performing.”

Erin Swanson, Valerie Bridges, the district superintendent; Donnell Cannon, Teach For America alum and principal of North Edgecombe High School; and Jenny O'Meara, Teach For America alum and principal of Phillips Middle School began collaborating around an innovative solution to address the gaps they were seeing. The team created a “micro school,” a pilot program that would be located on an existing high school campus but start by serving just 30 students—a mix of eighth and ninth graders from schools in the Northside feeder pattern. The eighth graders were sourced from Phillips Middle School and the ninth graders were sourced from North Edgecombe High School, which is also where the micro school is located.

In addition to conducting a series of empathy interviews with parents and students, the team visited innovative schools across the country looking for ideas to adapt. They landed on a goal that by age 25, every student should be pursuing something they are passionate about, aware of their agency in the world, and using their abilities to create positive change. The redesign includes multiple new and



Erin Swanson
Teach For America,
2002 Eastern North
Carolina alum



Donnell Cannon
Teach For America,
2012 Eastern North
Carolina alum



Jennifer O'Meara
Teach For America,
2011 Eastern North
Carolina alum

¹ Kinlaw, Robert. “How Public School Educators Built a Radically Innovative School.” *EducationNC*, 13 May 2019, www.ednc.org/2019/05/13/how-public-school-educators-built-a-radically-innovative-school/. See Appendix A.

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innovative components like “meta moments” which are meditation and reflection exercises, a weekly curriculum centered around identity, culture, and self-actualization, passion projects and standards labs, and daily affirmations of themselves and others.

Throughout the pilot year, the students were assessed socially and completed the same standards tests as other students throughout Edgecombe County. According to Swanson, student scores at the School of Innovation have generally been equal to, or exceeded, other schools throughout the district. Beginning next year, every eighth, ninth, and tenth grader in the Northside feeder pattern will have practices from the School of Innovation incorporated into their school days.

We are honored that, in partnership with the community, Teach For America alumni and corps members are innovating and re-imagining the way our education system serves children. We remain grateful for the state’s generous investment, which allows us to find promising leaders, develop and cultivate their leadership skills and mindsets through classroom teaching, and support them throughout their lifetime. We are pleased to update you on our progress in the fourth quarter.

Statewide Impact

Teach For America’s greatest contribution continues to be the diverse, innovative, and courageous leadership force that we bring to North Carolina and support across our state. Our network of individuals continues to expand opportunity for children through working in classrooms, schools, and from every sector, field, and place where people shape the broader systems in which schools operate.

Our alumni base across the state of North Carolina has grown from 1,520 last year to 1,668 this year—a growth of nearly ten percent. We continue to be committed to leveraging the scale and diversity of our network to make sure we are learning faster and smarter.

Across the state, forty-eight Teach For America alumni are school leaders. In the fourth quarter, EdNC released an article about Sarah Reeves, a 2009 Teach For America alum and school leader of Shamrock Gardens Elementary School in Charlotte and the growth the school has experienced. The school exceeded growth in 2018 after meeting growth for the previous three years and 48.8% of the students are economically disadvantaged.² In 2014, the school received a D performance grade despite exceeding growth. For the next four years, the school continued to meet growth, and raised its grade to a C in 2015-2017 and a B in 2018.

Principal Reeves reflected on the reasons behind the growth at the school, saying:

I had a lot of wise mentors tell me: You can’t do anything well and expect your data to soar unless you first focus on a strong culture within your staff, you reduce teacher turnover, you make your school be a great place to teach and learn. Once you do that, and then you begin to implement best practices in data-driven instruction, that is truly where the shift happens — not only for a short peak of one or two years, but a continued upward slope.

² Sorrells, Analisa. “Creating a Culture of Care to Fuel Data-Driven Instruction at Shamrock Gardens Elementary.” EducationNC, 28 May 2019, www.ednc.org/2019/05/27/creating-a-culture-of-care-to-fuel-data-driven-instruction-at-shamrock-gardens-elementary/?utm_source=EdNC%2BSubscribers&utm_campaign=881ff281c0-Weekly_Wrap_CAMPAIGN&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_2696365d99-881ff281c0-274989217. See Appendix B.

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We are grateful to be able to support our corps members and alumni throughout their careers as they work to impact education from a variety of sectors. We are thankful for the state's support that allows us to continue to cultivate our corps members' and alumni's leadership across North Carolina.

North Carolina Teacher Corps (NCTC)

Teach for America is committed to partnering with the state to inspire more North Carolinians to teach and lead as educators here. While we know great teachers exist across the nation, we believe that teachers with personal ties to North Carolina can make a unique contribution to our state, bringing a special sense of urgency and commitment to educating North Carolina's children.

We know that personalized, individual, and tailored contact with applicants is one of the strongest strategies in influencing applicants to preference a North Carolina region. As such, we significantly increased our communication strategies on our regional end to match the support candidates received from our national recruitment team.

In the fourth quarter, our newest group of NCTC corps members joined Teach For America to begin their lifelong journey in education. Our NCTC corps members represent 26 different colleges and universities including the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, North Carolina State University, Duke University, Davidson College, and Wake Forest University. Our North Carolina connected corps members make up a diverse group of teachers and leaders across the state:

- The average GPA is 3.4
- 68% are people of color
- 41% are teaching math or science
- 15% are the first in their families to graduate from college

We begin recruitment for our 2020 corps of teachers in October. Our North Carolina Teacher Corps initiative continues to be cited as a model for the entire organization, and we remain committed to improving our program year over year. Our strategies for the upcoming year include:

- **Alumni Outreach:** We will strategically match our North Carolina alumni callers with final round applicants based on their interests and career paths. Alumni will use these calls to inspire applicants to choose to teach in North Carolina rather than choosing to teach out of state.
- **NCTC Webinars:** We will host webinars specifically for North Carolinians moving into final round of interviews. These webinars will highlight stories of current corps members, alumni, and students with North Carolina ties who choose to lead in our state.
- **Strategic Stewardship:** Our staff will call all applicants with North Carolina ties who are rated as the most competitive and highly likely to be admitted to the corps. These applicants often have competing offers and we plan to use these calls as an opportunity to share more about the education landscape in North Carolina and why their leadership is needed in our state.
- **Statewide Calendar of Events:** We are building a statewide calendar of events across our regions that will be shared with our national recruitment team. This will allow recruiters to easily advertise our local events to prospective applicants.

Regional Updates**Eastern North Carolina**

Teach For America's greatest contribution has always been diverse, courageous leadership. We are a network of individuals who expand opportunity for children, working from classrooms, from schools, and from every sector, field, and place where people shape the broader systems in which schools operate. The Eastern North Carolina team is committed to maximizing this broad network of alumni across the region.

Throughout June and July this summer, Teach For America-Eastern North Carolina is partnering with Rocky Mount Prep and Warren County Schools to offer a one-of-a-kind localized teacher training program called Eastern North Carolina Residency. The program provides free summer school classes to more than 500 students yearly, many of whom lacked access to any such summer learning prior to Residency's launch in 2016. We are excited to share that our Rocky Mount Residency site is where Teach For America Eastern North Carolina originally began 28 years ago.

By basing our summer programming in Eastern North Carolina, we have contributed more than \$700,000 to local businesses and community members via housing, food, and staffing opportunities. We are excited to share updates from the 2019 Residency in our September report.

Charlotte

Joining Teach For America means that our members have lifelong access to a professional support network and opportunities to build a meaningful career. In Charlotte, they join a network of more than 500 leaders who share a passion for education and are eager to work toward the day when all kids have access to an excellent education.

In the fourth quarter, six Teach For America alumni won Teacher of the Year for their respective schools:

- Audrianna Green teaches fourth grade at Allenbrook Elementary School. She graduated from Virginia State University.
- Joshua Johnson is a math multi-classroom leader at Coulwood Middle School. He graduated from Ohio University.
- Tahlia Jolicouer teaches upper elementary at Ashley Park Pre-K – 8 School. She graduated from Johnson C. Smith University.
- Precious Kotte is an Exception Children teacher The Metro School. She graduated from Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College.
- Melissa Hinchman teaches math at Vance High School. She graduated from Queens University of Charlotte.
- Megan Judy teaches third grade at Charlotte East Language Academy. She graduated from the University of South Carolina – Columbia.

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North Carolina Piedmont Triad

In the fourth quarter, the North Carolina Piedmont Triad had seven teachers nominated for Rookie Teacher of the Year by Guilford County Schools:

- Qeona Greer teaches fifth grade at Gillespie Park Elementary School. She graduated from West Georgia University
- Emily Haston teaches high school Spanish at Grimsley High School. She graduated from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
- Nicollette Jones-Flowers teaches third grade at Fairview Elementary School. She graduated from Walden University.
- Wesley Simmons teaches third grade at Parkview Village Elementary School. He graduated from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. We are excited to share that we recruited Wesley through our North Carolina Teacher Corps efforts.
- Hannah Fearnow-Pegg teaches third grade reading at Montlieu Academy of Technology. She graduated from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. We are excited to share that we recruited Hannah through our North Carolina Teacher Corps efforts.
- Jaelyn Felder teaches high school Reading at Northeast Guilford High School. She graduated from Appalachian State University. We are excited to share that we recruited Hannah through our North Carolina Teacher Corps efforts.
- Rachel Williams teaches high school English at Eastern Guilford High School. She graduated from Duquesne University.

Financial Reporting

Teach For America is steadfast in maximizing the state's investment through fiscal responsibility and investing donors in our important work in North Carolina. We remain grateful for the state's investment and are committed to making every public and private dollar work hard for students across our state. We look forward to updating the state on our progress in our next quarterly report.

How public school educators built a radically innovative school

ednc.org/2019/05/13/how-public-school-educators-built-a-radically-innovative-school/

by Robert Kinlaw | May 13,
2019

May 13,
2019

What would a school look like if it was designed, from the ground up, by the students in its classrooms?

That was the question a team of educators in rural Edgecombe County started asking themselves two years ago. The schools in the county's Northside district have long struggled with low student performance, attendance, graduation rates, and more. It was time to create something different for students, as something about the current system clearly wasn't working well enough.



"This is a place that we had, pretty consistently, very high turnover in staff," said Erin Swanson, director of innovation for Edgecombe County Schools. "Low student achievement ... we were talking about scores that were 10% proficient, maybe 20% proficient, but persistently low-performing."

That's part of what prompted the collaboration between Swanson; Valerie Bridges, the district superintendent; Donnell Cannon, principal of North Edgecombe High School; and Jenny O'Meara, principal of Phillips Middle School.



February 22nd, 2019 at the School of Innovation. Robert Kinlaw/EducationNC

There were a few factors that emboldened the team to create a whole new school rather than implementing smaller changes. Nearby Martin Millennium Academy, a school in Tarboro with a Spanish-immersion program, had succeeded in bringing families back to the public school system by using new, innovative models. This model was something that already existed in a few other North Carolina counties, but it was new for Edgecombe County and had a positive impact in the area.

There was also an opportunity to become a Restart school, which gave administrators charter-like flexibility without giving up the opportunity to serve lower income students. Becoming a Restart school means reworking existing school facilities to serve the same group of students in a new way. The Edgecombe team created a “micro school,” a pilot program that would be located on an existing high school campus but start by serving just 30 students.



Those 30 students included a mix of eighth and ninth graders from schools in the Northside feeder pattern. The eighth graders were sourced from Phillips Middle School and the ninth graders were sourced from North Edgecombe High School, which is also where the micro school is located. The team also applied to be a part of Transcend's second collaborative cohort, and they were accepted, which kicked off a yearlong process of determining what the school model would actually look like.

The first step in that process? Listening.



Jenny O'Meara, principal of Phillips Middle School, talks to Miracle, one of her students, while they walk through her neighborhood.

The team conducted empathy interviews with students and parents, asking them what they wanted and needed in a school. Many students said the material they learned in classes wasn't applicable or useful in real life. They also wanted more social-emotional connections in school, expressing a desire to be more open with their teachers and feel free to talk about things that were happening outside of the classroom.

What emerged from those conversations was a portrait of a student who was three-dimensional — a student with needs, wants, hopes, and dreams; a student with profound experiences, good and bad; and a system that they couldn't relate to. Traditional school just felt too far removed from their own realities. Parents said they wanted more opportunities — and better opportunities — for their kids to prosper.

From the interviews and listening sessions, the team, in collaboration with the community, set a baseline goal that ultimately drives all their innovative work around educating children in schools. That goal is this: By age 25, every individual should be pursuing something they're passionate about, aware of their agency in the world, and using their abilities to create positive change.

In addition to conducting local research, the Edgecombe team visited innovative schools across the country looking for ideas to adapt. In these classrooms, they observed innovative approaches and took notes.



Inside North Edgecombe High School Principal Donnell Cannon's office.

"We had lots of chart paper that was all marked up and thought through," said Bridges. "We would process, we would think on it, we'd come back to our next session and tear away everything we had and start over."

All of this research eventually culminated in a list of several innovative components that, together, create the North Phillips School of Innovation. It's a radically different approach to teaching the same standards as the rest of North Carolina's public schools. Many of these elements trace back to this concept of fostering an environment where students feel loved and supported by their peers.

EdNC filmed students at the school for its pilot year in addition to giving the students two video cameras to film with. You can see the story in our new short film, [We Drive It — Inside the North Phillips School of Innovation](#).

META MOMENTS

This exercise is focused around ideas of meditation and reflection. An unfortunate reality is that many students in the Northside feeder pattern of Edgecombe County experience poverty and trauma at higher rates than the average student. Studies increasingly show that what happens at home has a significant impact on a student's ability to excel in the classroom.

Meta Moments give students a chance to process the complex emotional experiences to which they may be subjected. It gives them space to check their emotional head space, reflect on their role in the world, and simply recognize their own existence before sitting

down to focus on a math problem or other bit of schoolwork that feels meaningless and far removed from the clutches of reality.



Students write down their reflections in journals, and entries can be designated as something to share with the whole class or only a teacher. Each student has a chance to think about their current state, put their thoughts to paper, close the notebook, and move on with a fresh mind — a practice backed by both common sense and science.

AFFIRMATIONS

Each morning, students are given an opportunity to verbally affirm themselves or their peers for a job well done. Sometimes that can mean a self-congratulation for catching up on a project. It could also mean recognizing another student who provided emotional support in a time of need. The students speak candidly about their appreciation for each other and highlight others' successes.

In addition to the verbal component, the wall of the school's main classroom features a large collection of cork boards with "Affirmations" written above. Each board is dedicated to one student and functions as a place where peers or teachers can pin affirmations. The result is a colorful wall of positive words and a constant reminder of the love and support offered in the space.

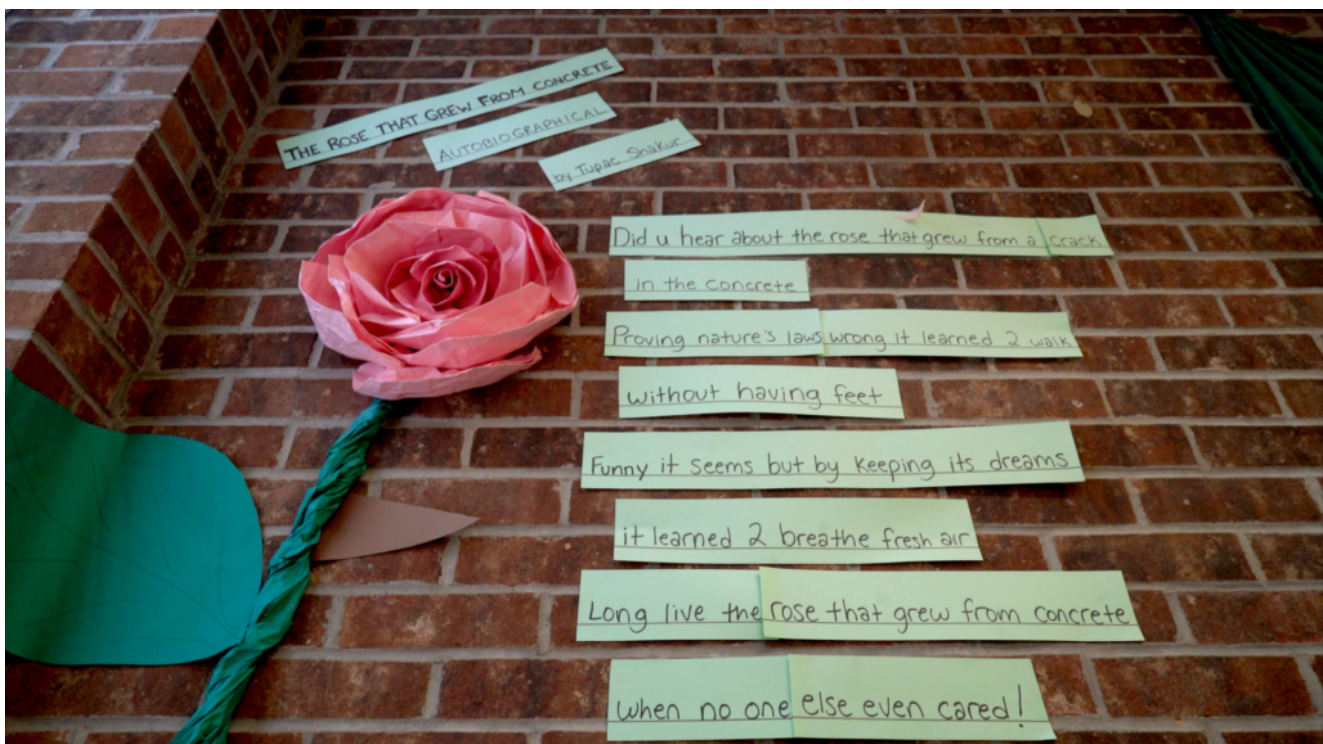
Students also have more subtle opportunities to affirm each other throughout the day, particularly in a community sense. At the beginning of the year, the students were grouped into one of three "houses" a la Hogwarts. The students experience pride and a sense of

belonging based on their affiliation. Engaging in friendly competition between groups fosters cooperation and builds trust.

ROSES IN CONCRETE

Once per week, students attend a session called Roses in Concrete. This is a curriculum centered around identity, culture, and self-actualization. Students learn about oppression and privilege with the hope that one day, if they are ever marginalized for their identity while pursuing their dreams, they will have the knowledge and tools to navigate the situation successfully.

Students aren't just learning about historically oppressed groups, they're learning how to understand their own agency and take charge of their destinies. They're learning how to be respectful to people they disagree with while owning their identities and understanding all of the cultural expectations that may come along with them.

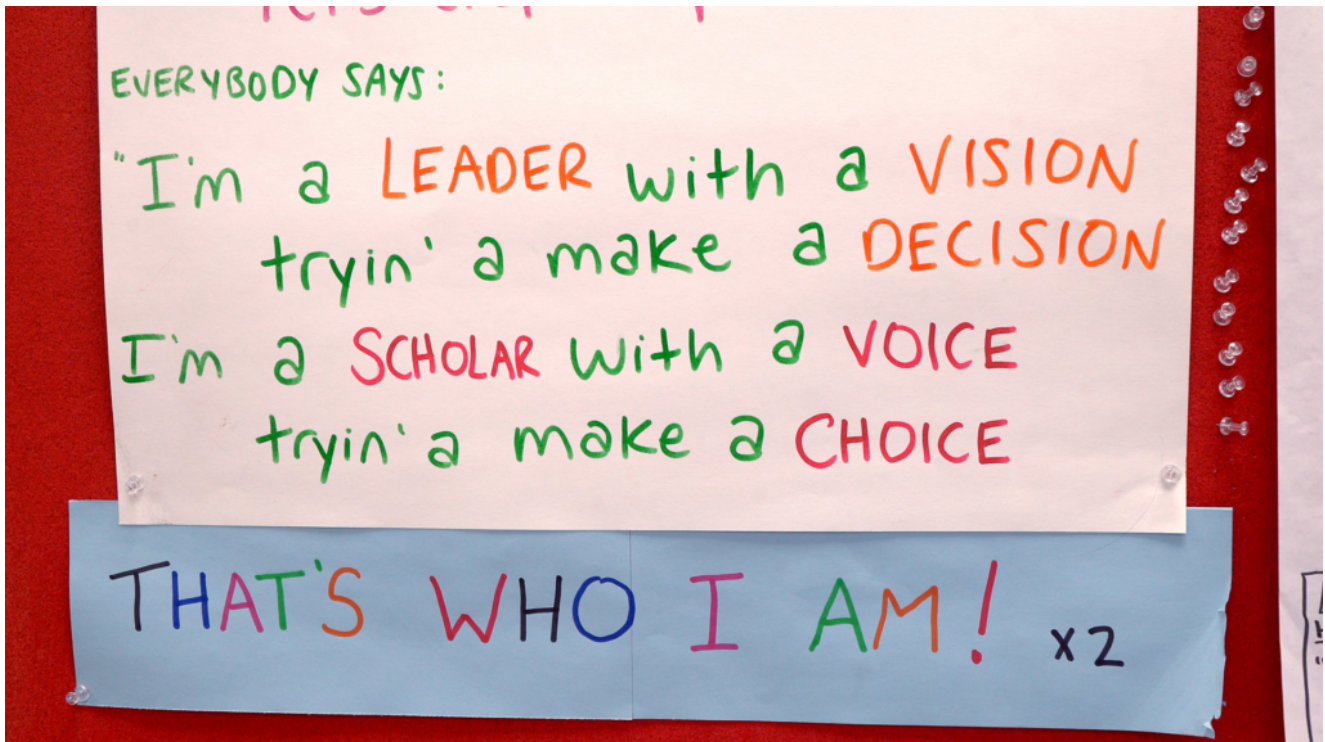


These themes of identity and agency don't go away after Roses in Concrete ends each Wednesday. In the classroom, students sometimes perform a chant called "That's Who I Am." It's a rap centered around the concept of having a plan and executing it rather than passively waiting for life to begin or for circumstances to change. After a unison chant, students take turns saying a sentence that describes a positive trait of theirs.

"I am brave!"

"I am smart!"

"I am amazing!"



PASSION PROJECTS & Standards Labs

Students primarily learn academic standards by completing passion projects. The “passion” element is critical and is a direct response to students who said that school felt irrelevant to their lives. The goal is to expose students to brand new passions they weren’t previously aware of, and then connect those dots to a profession the student is genuinely excited about — something that could give them a good enough reason to stay in school and reach higher, professionally or academically.



Project status for each student is tracked here, in the hallway between two classrooms.

One staple of passion projects is flexibility on the part of the teacher to tailor the project to the individual student. If there is another way to teach the same concept that will resonate better with one specific student, within reason, that student's project requirements are tweaked to better suit them. This is especially important in a class with students whose academic performance and behavioral temperaments vary widely. In the School of Innovation, there are EC learners in the classroom right alongside AIG learners. Every student will not find the same things interesting.

“We don’t want them to go to college just to go to college,” O’Meara said. “We want them to go knowing that they love something in this world, and they want to put a mark on something.”



One student's work-in-progress for a house design project.

The original dream for the School of Innovation was to have no classes at all — but rather to cover the whole curriculum with project-based learning. The team soon discovered, however, that using solely projects to cover the required math standards, along with some portions of other subjects, was quite difficult. For now, the solution is to fill in the gaps with “Standards Labs” where students can access this content at their own pace. Wrapping all the standards into a project-based approach is still a long term goal for the school.

THE RESULT: SELF-ACTUALIZATION

Together, these exercises teach the importance of individuality, but also what it means to be part of a collective. They teach students how to accept and manage life circumstances that cannot be changed, but also empower them to make better decisions when they can.

What does this all mean on a practical level? It means students are more aware of who they are, what they want, and how they might go about achieving it. Or at least that’s how the students themselves have described the process so far.

At EdNC’s BRIDGE gathering in Greensboro, we premiered *We Drive It* — our documentary about the School of Innovation. Afterwards, four of the students from the school participated in a panel that took questions from the audience. More than anything, they talked about the emotional support and relationships fostered in the school and how it has changed the ways they think about themselves.



<https://youtu.be/wHPCDTwh15w>

One woman asked the students if they thought all kids would benefit from a school like theirs. Darquavias Lancaster (the second student from the right) said yes, noting that at first, he didn't want to go to the school, but the longer he stayed, the more he liked it.

“When I first got there, I used to just be a reactor,” said Lancaster. “If you’d say something to me, I’d just start blowing up at you. Now, I actually think about what I’m about to do, and the decisions I make.”

Students at the School of Innovation are being evaluated in several areas, from their ability to communicate with others to their competence in sending emails. To measure their social-emotional development, students take the Panorama survey and are regularly given similar survey questions. In many non-academic metrics, students have already shown a clear improvement: they come to school more and leave early less frequently. They get in trouble less often — even students who were “problem kids” regarding behavior have received significantly fewer disciplinary actions.

From an academic perspective, the students are responsible for taking the same End-of-Grade tests and meeting the same standards as the rest of North Carolina’s eighth and ninth graders. Throughout the pilot year, they’ve also taken the same standards tests as other students throughout Edgecombe County. According to Swanson, student scores at the School of Innovation have generally been equal to, or exceeded, other schools throughout the district.

The one exception was math performance, where students at the School of Innovation initially lagged slightly behind, leading the team to revert to a more traditional math class approach. But Swanson said she expects the overall improvements will be evident during end-of-year evaluations, noting that since things like ACT scores can be a gatekeeper for opportunities, it's imperative that students do well on them — but that is likely, considering the evidence so far.

Beginning next year, every eighth, ninth, and 10th grader in the Northside feeder pattern (that's eighth grade students at Phillips Middle School and ninth and 10th grade students at North Edgecombe High School) will have practices from the School of Innovation incorporated into their school days, including Meta Moments, Roses in Concrete, and Affirmations, along with a multi-classroom leader and other elements meant to give students the personal attention they need to pursue their passions. They'll also work on interdisciplinary passion projects every day in Design Labs and Standards Labs.

Only time will reveal the ultimate impact of implementing such an approach on a wider scale. In 2022, the first class will graduate that experienced a full four years of innovative schooling. The passionate team in Edgecombe hopes that when those graduates are 25, they'll be in a place they didn't know was possible before, changing their world in ways they didn't know they could.

Innovation

Creating a culture of care to fuel data-driven instruction at Shamrock Gardens Elementary

ednc.org/2019/05/27/creating-a-culture-of-care-to-fuel-data-driven-instruction-at-shamrock-gardens-

elementary/
by Analisa Sorrells | May 27,
2019

May 27,
2019

This is the first piece in a week-long series on schools, districts, and organizations across the state using data in innovative ways. [Follow along with the rest of the series here.](#)



At Shamrock Gardens Elementary School in Charlotte, everyone in the building — the students, the teachers, the custodial staff — can recite the school's three goals.

1. Create a culture of care
2. Instill a love of literacy
3. Utilize data-driven instruction

Every meeting at the school, whether it's a student support meeting or a literacy intervention meeting, starts with these three goals in mind. You'll find them incorporated in the school's [improvement plan](#) and hanging on the walls of Principal Sarah Reeves' office. And, according to Reeves, even the order of the goals has a purpose.

When Reeves first arrived at Shamrock Gardens Elementary in 2014, she heard data-driven instruction (DDI) discussed in a negative light — but that wasn't her experience with the practice at previous schools.

"I felt like I was able to really close achievement gaps for kids. I was able to customize and tailor my instruction to meet their needs. In the school where I had come from, it was a really positive thing," said Reeves. "A lot of my initial conversations were like: 'We're beating teachers over the head with data, we're multiple choice-testing kids to death.' It was almost like as soon as you said DDI, people said: 'Why is that the only thing driving instruction?'"

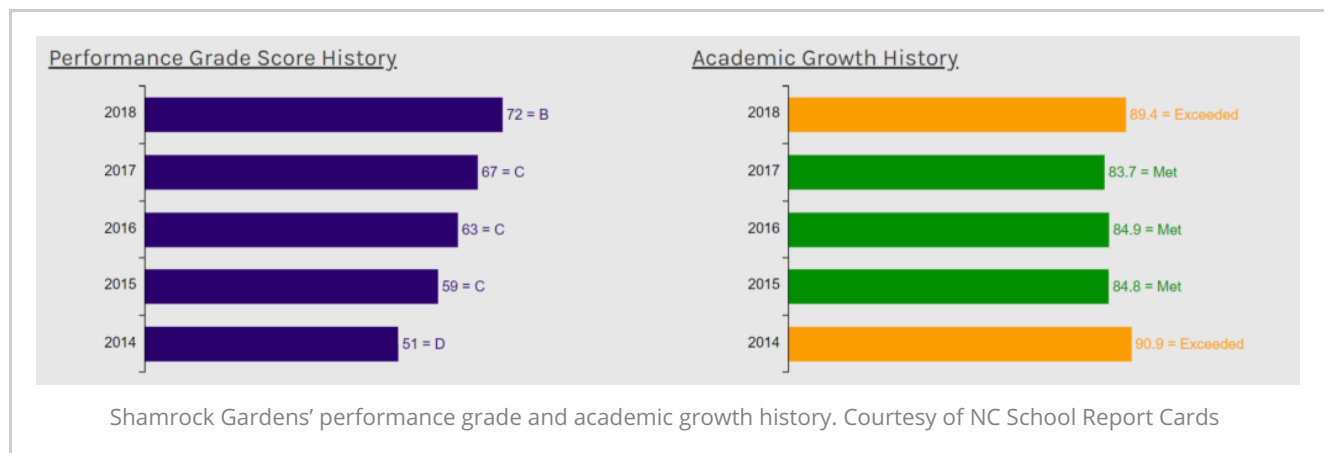
Shamrock Gardens Elementary

- District: Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools
- Enrollment: 548 students
- Performance: Exceeded growth in 2018 after meeting growth for the previous three years
- 48.8% of students are economically disadvantaged

Through those conversations with teachers, Reeves realized it wasn't *actually* the DDI that teachers were frustrated with, but rather the thought that data and numbers were overtaking everything else at the expense of considering the whole child. That's when she decided it was time to step back from an emphasis on DDI to first address the school's culture.

"I had a lot of wise mentors tell me: You can't do anything well and expect your data to soar unless you first focus on a strong culture within your staff, you reduce teacher turnover, you make your school be a great place to teach and learn," said Reeves. "And once you do that, and then you begin to implement best practices in data-driven instruction, that is truly where the shift happens — not only for a short peak of one or two years, but a continued upward slope."

Shamrock Gardens Elementary has seen tremendous growth over the last five years. In 2014, the school received a D performance grade despite exceeding growth. For the next four years, the school continued to meet growth, and raised its grade to a C in 2015-2017 and a B in 2018.



For Reeves, this steady growth is a testament to the fact that the school didn't go after data-driven instruction right away. Rather than chase numbers and metrics, the school slowed down and focused on the culture, health, and wellbeing of the teachers and students.

"I sat down and listened to the teachers to hear: What is it going to take for you to love what you do every day and love coming to school?" said Reeves. "There were some people that the passion was already there, but there were others that felt defeated by this mentality of, 'Let me put your data up on a projector in the middle of a staff meeting and talk about what we need to do differently.'"

Another part of establishing a culture of care was shifting teachers' mindsets around the role of data from defining a teacher's quality or a student's worth to being used as a tool to improve student outcomes. Since teachers are assessed by their EVAAS scores, Reeves said she often had to send a counter-intuitive message to her staff: While their focus needed to remain on urgency, efficiency, and being the best educators possible, one test did not define their quality.

"I've heard leaders say that teachers need to be concerned if their data looks a certain way. It's the polar opposite culture at Shamrock, where I'm saying it's one test, it's okay, we will get there," said Reeves.

"You have to focus on the instructional culture of your school before DDI can be done effectively. I think that's a common, easy pitfall that leaders make is they go right after that DDI and right after the systems and structures and, as a result, there's a lot of unintended consequences that come from that mentality."

In Reeves' third year at the school, the time was right to dive into data-driven instruction. Previously, teachers were looking at the data, identifying what kids needed, understanding where the gaps were — and that's where the process ended. Reeves spent time with the teachers on the importance of extending that data-driven practice: once gaps are identified, a plan is created, that plan is practiced, and that plan is followed up on.

"You could crunch numbers for days, but it's about what you're doing to respond to that data that's the most important part," said Reeves.

Teachers learned how to read Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) reports, identify students in different percentiles, disaggregate data by subgroups, and more.

At the end of that year, Reeves spent a summer in the Relay Graduate School of Education where she had an 'aha' moment: she'd been looking at the data all wrong. When Reeves was first trained on DDI, she was taught to use common interim assessments, create six-week plans to reteach the standards, and then reassess.

"There was this whole new concept that you look at data every week or two, and as opposed to just looking at the numbers, you physically take out the student work samples and you do work sample analysis," said Reeves.

While disaggregating the common interim assessment data allowed teachers to identify and target what students needed to relearn, that data never actually told the teachers what the students' misconceptions were.

"We might say they chose B, but B was the distractor, and we need to go back and teach this again. But it was never about: let's figure out how this kid solved this problem, and oh my gosh they flipped their 6 and their 2 and that's why this whole problem is wrong," she said.

When Reeves returned to Shamrock Gardens after that summer, she brought the concept of weekly data meetings with her. In addition to administering common interim assessments four times a year to track student data, teachers began to use “checkpoints” throughout the school year where they collected authentic student work samples. These checkpoints tend to be open-ended rather than multiple choice, allowing teachers to glean where misconceptions are happening.

“I’m convinced that’s why we made the growth that we made. We really soared last year. It’s where the rubber met the road, and we just took off,” said Reeves. “There’s just a lot of power in the teachers learning and understanding the standards better, but also understanding where the student misconceptions lie and actually teaching to that rather than, okay, I have to reteach this standard because we only have this percent mastery.”

Data meetings are held every other week depending on subject area. During the meetings, teachers review examples of high, medium, and low student work samples of a particular question that a majority of students struggled with from a previous checkpoint.

They discuss the most common misconception within that question and map out how they will teach their students to fix that misconception. Then, teachers have the chance to practice reteaching that standard in front of their colleagues, giving them a chance to garner feedback before taking it back to the classroom.

If this process sounds time-intensive, it is. But all of this is accomplished during the teacher’s 55 minute planning period.

“Some people say: You spend 55 minutes on one lesson?” said Reeves. “But my argument to that is, if it’s a power standard and it’s a true misconception that a majority of the grade level grappled with, what better thing to spend 55 minutes on than the most needed standard to be re-taught?”

While common interim assessments and checkpoints supply the school’s data on student achievement, the focus on data doesn’t end there. Remember the school’s first goal? Create a culture of care. To ensure the school got this right, Reeves decided to incorporate it into the school improvement plan. But, to do that, she first had to find a quantifiable way to measure culture.

While state and district-level parent surveys exist, Reeves wasn’t getting the answers she needed in an actionable time frame, so she decided to implement parent surveying in-house. The questions in the survey depend on what the school wants to know that year.

“If it’s instilling a love of literacy, why don’t we ask our parents: Does your child love to read at home? Or, if it was creating a culture of care, why don’t we ask our parents: Does your child feel like someone at school cares about them and knows who they are as a person, or knows something about them outside of school?” said Reeves.

Once Reeves saw the success of parent surveys, she implemented similar mechanisms for students and teachers, allowing them to share feedback using surveys. Through Google Forms, students provide feedback to their teachers. Then, teachers disaggregate the data and identify what they will keep doing, where they will grow, and what their action steps are to achieve that growth.

These surveys are administered to students twice a year — once in October and once in March — allowing time for teachers to act on the results. Professional development plans in teacher evaluations are also aligned to these surveys. Now, the culture of care at Shamrock Gardens is quantifiable.

“The pitfall is we talk more about academics because that’s the thing we have the tangible hold on. But if we actually have a tangible hold on the culture, and we have actual feedback that says we need to fix blank, blank, and blank, we can talk about that just as much as we can talk about the academics,” said Reeves. “And I think teachers really like it because we can look at data-driven instruction in a whole child sense — it doesn’t just have to be academics.”



Shamrock Gardens Elementary students pose for a photo during recess. Analisa Sorrells/EducationNC

Data on the whole child doesn’t end with surveys. This year, Shamrock Gardens opted-in to a district pilot with [Panorama](#), a student survey that assigns scores based on social-emotional wellbeing and provides teachers with actionable data that can be used to customize and tailor character education and social-emotional lessons.

And, another part of measuring the culture of care at Shamrock Gardens is tracking and addressing student chronic absenteeism rates. At the beginning of the year, parents sign learning compacts acknowledging the importance of sending their child to school. Then, at the beginning of every month, students take home letters that they have to get their parents to sign and return that list how many days they've missed and how that compares to the average student at Shamrock Gardens.

While Reeves acknowledges that chronic absenteeism is a difficult issue to tackle since it's often correlated with socioeconomic status, the school has seen a 1.5% decrease in its chronic absenteeism rate.

“If kids love learning and know that an adult cares about them at school, they’ll want to come. I have a fourth grader who wakes himself up and walks to school every day. He wasn’t here yesterday, and I met him first thing at the door and said: ‘I missed you, where were you yesterday?’” said Reeves. “So it’s just building those relationships and getting kids to know when you’re not here, you’re missed, and we notice.”



Analisa Sorrells/EducationNC

When asked what advice she would give other school leaders working to implement data-driven practices, Reeves emphasized the importance of transparency and aligning the work to the vision and mission of the school.

“It’s very easy to get overwhelmed with data. It’s very hard to understand — with all of these numbers coming in — how do I prioritize and actually put some tangible things into action to move the dial?” said Reeves. “Because we’ve been so clear, it really does streamline the process for everyone and build a lot of investment and buy in from the whole team. If I’m a week late in delivering feedback, I get emails that say, ‘Hey, I want to know my survey data!’ That’s truly the success — when you have buy in from your staff.”

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