

Chesapeake school transforms itself with culture of success

CHESAPEAKE

Up on the chalkboard, Lily Brabble has written a big "54% " on one side and a "99% " on the other.

"Ten years ago," she tells her group of fidgeting fifth-graders, "students at Camelot scored just a 54 percent pass rate on the SOLs in writing. That means almost half the class didn't pass."

Some students make "tsk, tsk " sounds. One boy boos.

"Last year," Brabble continues, referring to tests taken last school year, in March, "students scored a 99 percent. That means, if this class had 100 students in it, just one of them didn't pass."

"What happened?" she asks. "Be serious."

Hands shoot up. Students care more about learning today than they used to, one suggests. Teachers today are more lovable, says another. A couple cite new teaching strategies.

In the past decade, Camelot Elementary moved from being one of the lowest-scoring schools in Chesapeake to one of the highest. Ten years ago, for example, only 20 percent of third-graders passed the history section of the Standards of Learning test. Last school year, 100 percent did. And, it turns out, Brabble's fifth-graders did even better than thought, actually scoring 100 percent after the scores were broken down by grade level.

The reasons behind the transformation, teachers say, are many: new teaching methods, more technology and experiments with educational initiatives.

But these, they say, all stem from something that's a little fuzzier, often overlooked and maybe even dismissed as somehow not quite legitimate: a change in the building's culture.

In the same way that company leaders can be credited with creating a corporate culture that helps lead to success, teachers say Principal Stephanie Johnson created an environment at Camelot where teachers collaborate and feel free to take risks.

It's just after 8 a.m. at Camelot on a Monday morning, and the just-arrived students are walking to class, a few with their hands held over their ears.

"Good morning, good morning, good morning to you," Johnson blares out, in a not-quite-melodious voice. "The day is beginning, there's so much to do."

Camelot Elementary serves the Camelot neighborhood, a small community located in the north section of Deep Creek, near the Portsmouth line.

The neighborhood was built in the 1960s and is lined off neatly by Cavalier Boulevard to the west, Deep Creek Boulevard to the east and Military Highway to the south. It's a grid of streets with names such as Sir Gawaine Drive, Sir Tristram Court and Excalibur Street, with the elementary school located on Guenevere Drive.

About 70 percent of the children who come from the working-class neighborhood receive free or reduced-price lunches, and school staff often talk about the challenges their students face at home.

When they arrive at school, students enter what has become a laboratory for educational experiments.

In Jeffrey Kotchik and Valery Valentine's shared classroom, boys are on one side and girls are on the other, with a wall in between.

One group studies English and writing with Valentine in the morning, while the other studies math and science with Kotchik. Midway through the day, they switch. The practice is still rare and sometimes controversial, but educators who support same-sex classrooms say boys and girls learn differently and that teaching them separately helps each group learn better.

Down the hall, in Lorie Kolbicka's classroom, she's teaching the same group of students she taught last school year - a practice called "looping." She'd clicked with her third-graders so well the year before - and the students clicked so well with one another - that when it came time for her to leave them, she asked whether they could move up to fourth grade together. She's one of several teachers at Camelot who have moved up a grade with their students; research shows it helps children ease into a new year with less anxiety, and that students spend less time during the first month of school just getting acquainted.

Last school year, one third-grade teacher wanted iPods for all her students so they could create podcasts on ancient Greece and Rome. Johnson's first reaction: Twenty iPods can add up to a lot of money real quick.

But she scrounged around and found some funding. Now, teachers like the digital players so much they hope to purchase them for the entire third grade.

"She's always willing to say yes," Kolbicka said. "That's tremendous."

This year, someone even brought in research showing that students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder concentrate better while sitting on rubber exercise balls during class instead of chairs, because they can move around.

"We're going to try it. We're buying 10 of them," Johnson said. "What if it works?"

Like any organization, schools have always had their own feel and way of operating. It's only since standardized testing has become more prevalent that thinking about how to improve a school's organizational culture seems innovative, said Christopher Wagner, an associate professor of educational leadership, research and foundations at Western Kentucky University.

Wagner is president of the Center for Improving School Culture, a group that helps schools analyze whether they have a healthy, happy building, and provides resources to help them improve.

The push for standards and accountability at schools has led more officials toward new programs, initiatives and strategies, Wagner argues. In the meantime, they overlook the softer stuff, such as attitudes of employees and teacher relationships. Then, when scores hit a ceiling, they're frustrated when adding on new initiatives doesn't work.

"Nothing is really going to work well unless the culture works well," he said. "You can have a great program in a school with a toxic culture, and it's not going to go anywhere. If you have a lousy program in a school with a great culture, it'll probably do pretty well."

When Johnson first arrived at Camelot in 2001, she was a little wary of jumping in and shaking things up.

She made only two real changes her first year, she said: She asked teachers to begin writing extra comments on the back of report cards again, and she moved some filing cabinets from a back closet into a big room, where they were more accessible. Even that was tricky, she said.

"The idea of not having it up in the front office, it was like it was unbelievable," Johnson said. "What a problem it became for people." To help it go down more smoothly, she put a stereo in the new filing room, put up decorations, bought new file cabinets and installed a telephone.

Over time, the tweaks to the school's environment added up. She left treats or notes in teachers' mailboxes at the start of each week. She left her door open and made a point of wandering through each classroom every morning.

"I wanted them to see that subtle change," she said. "And I wanted, very gently, very quietly, to get some of the people here to realize that a bigger change was coming."

Gradually, once she felt teachers had grown more comfortable with the new regime, she began making bigger changes. The previous principal kept meticulous records of old test scores in her office, but teachers didn't look at one another's results. So Johnson started posting test scores where teachers could see them.

If, during her daily classroom route, she saw something going on in one that she liked, she'd tell the teacher next door to drop by and watch for a bit, while Johnson herself took over the class. She started doing more training workshops and eventually had the teachers themselves conduct some of them.

At many schools, teachers teach the same grade level for decades. At Camelot, teachers often won't know what grade they're teaching next year until the start of the summer - a technique that keeps them on their toes, Johnson says, and helps them understand what students need to learn in each grade to progress.

A few teachers who were uncomfortable with the changes left, Johnson said, either retiring or transferring to new schools.

"If they didn't feel that energy, they moved on," she said. When she replaced them, Johnson said she often looked for young teachers fresh out of college "so they don't come in with attitudes of, ' This was always what we did at my old school. ' "

Teachers at Camelot like to talk about teaching techniques and methods, and they do use a lot of them: the four-square writing strategy, the seven-step reading strategy, the word-source spelling method. But all of those are a result of the building's culture of collaboration and experimentation that was established early on, Johnson said.

"We have to make everybody feel good," she said - not just because it's nice and fuzzy, but because it matters for student achievement. Other principals looking to pull up their scores often come to her and ask whether they can observe a day at Camelot, to learn some new tricks, Johnson said.

"But it's not just the day, or the moment," she said. "It's the whole experience."

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