

Prioritizing the CES principles

RIVERDALE SCHOOL DISTRICT – The Coalition of Essential Schools stresses small, personalized learning communities in which teachers and students know each other well in a climate of trust, decency and high expectations for all. Per our district strategic plan, our schools are establishing CES implementation goals, providing professional development on CES principles, identifying focus areas based on those principles and integrating CES and Common Core State Standards into the classroom.

Recently, both our high school and grade school principals were accepted into Sizer Principals' Network, comprising 16 principals across the country who lead CES work in their schools. It is designed to provide direct, hands-on support and consultation as we strive to implement the CES philosophy. Through this affiliation, Paula Robinson and Joanna Tobin receive personalized mentoring during the year and guidance through participation in online meetings with leaders in the field.

'Unanxious expectation' in the high school

Two recent CES professional development days in the high school focused on dissecting the CES Common Principles in order to identify top priorities. After discussing, reflecting, analyzing and sharing ideas and understanding, one principle rose to the top for the whole team.

The seventh CES principle calls for the tone of the school to "explicitly and self-consciously stress values of unanxious expectation (I won't threaten you but I expect much of you), of trust (until abused) and of decency (the values of fairness, generosity and tolerance)." It also stresses the use of incentives appropriate to the school's students and teachers and the involvement of parents as "key collaborators and vital members of the school community." (Coalition of Essential Schools 2014).

"We addressed the areas in which our students experience anxiety around school expectations, the practices we implement to consciously reduce anxiety for students, where we can better support our students, where we cause them undue anxiety, and what we can do tomorrow to better implement unanxious expectations," says Paula Robinson, high school principal. "We also discussed how to be more transparent about this goal with our students."

'Using their minds well' in the grade school

The grade school is focusing on **the first principle** of helping students "learn to use their minds well." Essential school districts recognize that in order for students to use their minds well in high school, their grade school learning must give them the tools to do so. Therefore, staff were recently asked to discuss what the concept of "using one's mind well" looks like in their classrooms.

The CES philosophy involves engaging children as workers with an intellectual focus centered on language. This does not just mean reading, writing or talking, but also involves thinking

through math problems and expression of thoughts through art. Many different subject areas can be linked together through integrative themes, helping to reinforce learning. Many lessons use hands-on group projects to spark learning and inspire exploration and collaboration. Through group dialogue, students learn to make sense of the work and foster long-term understanding.

"The grade school is focusing on school improvement through a CES lens," says Joanna Tobin, grade school principal. "For example, how can instructional technology assist students in learning to use their minds well?"

Four Riverdale teachers attended the recent Oregon Tech Cadre in Eugene. Not only did participants learn of new applications and instructional practices, they honed best practices in teaching through discussion and by engaging in ways to inspire student learning. The entire staff will learn some of these ideas and approaches during upcoming professional development time.

A true reflection of Riverdale graduation rates

RIVERDALE HIGH SCHOOL – With various transitions in student information systems and staff over the past few years, there had been some confusion over the proper way to record certain students who did not "graduate" with their class at the end of senior year, such as foreign exchange students who returned to their home countries and fifth-year seniors who graduated after the state's anticipated graduation date.

Riverdale High School has a 98 percent four-year graduation rate and a 100 percent completion rate for the adjusted cohort (meaning after removing those who transfer to other schools, all students graduate). However, if you view the Oregonian's School Guide, you'll notice graduation figures that do not match our true figures. The Oregon Department of Education data used by the Oregonian showed a 2013 graduation rate of 86 percent, which included the miscoded students in its calculation and showed them as drop-outs. In fact, one of these "drop-outs" is now enrolled at Harvard!

We are now recording all students in the correct manner, and while 2014 data may also appear incorrectly on the Oregonian's School Guide page, we are confident that it will be correctly reflected for 2015 and other classes moving forward.