

Hopewell Elementary School Taunton, Massachusetts



TRANSCRIPT: “ACCOUNTABILITY FOR ALL”

The Taunton School District has adopted a rigorous promotion policy.

THOMAS QUIGLEY, PRINCIPAL: With education reform in Massachusetts, which kicked in in 1993, there’s been this tremendous accountability to teachers and administrators. But, I always felt, and so did a number of other people, especially the staff here, how about the students and how about the parents? So now you have a mechanism where you can hold them accountable. And the three criteria are: Number one, you have to have less than 14 days of unexcused absences. The second is that you have to have 90% homework completion. And you have to achieve 80% in all five of your subjects—language arts, math, science, social studies, reading. Those are very high numbers, I mean high bar numbers. Think of it, you know, growing up you could get a 60, a D, and you pass. Well, to be promoted, you have to get an 80, which is a B. I remember we had this program in Taunton called Project Best, and you could actually get a medallion for handing in 85% of your homework. Now think of where we’re at now: you can be kept back if you don’t hand in 90% of your homework.

“This leads to life skills”

I think a lot of this leads to life skills. If you think of it, I have a dual life, I’ve been in the public sector; I’ve been in the private sector. Now in the private sector, think if you were absent 14 days, or more. Just think if you only handed in 90% of your field work (I was an engineer). How about if you only did quality work in your reports of 80%? I don’t think you’d be with the company very long. So I think that was part and parcel—we’re trying to—yeah, we have raised the bar, we have very high standards, but I will tell you right now, that this works.

“Out” Card: A Second Chance

THOMAS QUIGLEY, PRINCIPAL: The superintendent said that she supports the new promotion policy as long as there’s an out card. Throughout the year, we will give parents a heads up on what they’re up against. In fact, even this morning I met with somebody, a parent and a student and, just informed them that the homework’s not up to par, neither is the subject matter; attendance is A-OK. Now, let me use that child as an example. She’s in the third grade. If she were not to achieve 80% and 90% of her homework and say her attendance was fine, what she could do is go to summer school. And if she was to achieve 80% in those five subjects, then she goes on from the third grade to the fourth grade.

Now, there's a budget crunch. Because of the budget crunch, it doesn't appear that there's going to be summer school. So now what do you? You do not have this public tutorial mechanism to remediate the child. Private tutors. And the superintendent even brought that up. We have over 60% low income here at Hopewell; how can these parents afford it? Well, just even one day a week, maybe two days a week if they can. If we have to try to financially support them then so be it; we'll do it. We'll do whatever it takes to make sure that this child has that "out" card. And we've been able to save families from themselves and been able to move them on to the next grade.

Now, in four years time, we have kept back I think it's in the order of 70 to 80 students, and one of the interesting takes on this is, is this going to be a stigma on the child? Is this going to upset the child so much that they're not going to be able to function? Is the family going to be whole? I could fill this room with parents that will tell you it's the best thing that happened to their child. And it happens well if it's done early, if it's done in kindergarten, first grade, second grade. From personal experience, I remember two of my best friends being kept back in the seventh grade. It was a disaster. It was just—it was traumatic. We have not had that here at Hopewell. We work with them over the summer, families will come in before school, we will just show them their new classroom, if we have a chance, meet their new teacher—it's not the same. And the idea being is that, even though it's the same curriculum, it's taught differently. It just—it lowers the anxiety level; we've not had this upset. We have not, in four years, had any other student tease another student about being kept back. Not one. They're unaffected by it, other than, it improves their foundation skills, and then we launch them into the next class, and truly we do that. It's just amazing to see. I use the analogy of this wilted flower and all of sudden they just bloom, they just blossom, and they just take off. It's just wonderful. But it's a hard thing to do, and I know that in other communities it would be very controversial.

The Taunton School District also adopted a "21st century report card"

THOMAS QUIGLEY, PRINCIPAL: What I mean by 21st-century report card is that it's very different from what we all grew up with. Twentieth-century report cards were A, B, C, 1, 2, 3. Very basic. But what it does not do, it does not dovetail with the Massachusetts frameworks, the standards we're all being held to, and in the Taunton School District, it does not dovetail with the promotion policy, and that, to me, is key. And basically, you have the five subjects and at the bottom of the report card, it also has attendance and homework. There's a standard code at the top of the report card, and there's three possibilities—that a child could meet the district standards for grade level, that would be an M, or they get a P, they're progressing towards the district standards, or they would receive an N, they're not progressing sufficiently. Why we like this is, it's just a great one-page document where you can see where a child's strengths are, where a child's weaknesses. A teacher can focus on this, a parent can focus on this, a tutor can focus on this.