

2013 NATIONAL BLUE RIBBON SCHOOLS CONFERENCE

Networking Session Prompts Best Practice Discussion



Several hundred National Blue Ribbon School (NBRS) representatives gathered for interactive networking even before the official start of the Recognition Ceremony on November 18, 2013. Aba Kumi, NBRS Director led the session with colleagues Elizabeth Williamson, Region III Communications Director, and Helen Littlejohn, Region VIII Communications Director. Principals, teachers, and superintendents and shared best practices for school improvement. Many used sticky notes to record ideas, which are collected here.

School Culture and Community tips received the greatest number of notes. NBR schools use many approaches to create positive cultures with a sense of belonging, for example:

- “House” or “family” structures, where students are part of small teams within or across grades.
- In a variation on “families,” cross-grade level student groups do monthly service projects or other activities and remain together as groups year after year.
- Small schools where every teacher knows every student.
- Programs such as Book Buddy that pair students from different grades to read together.
- A bullying prevention program based on the idea that those who know each other treat each other better.
- No bells.
- Dress code.
- Science Lab BYOD – Bring your own device.
- Kids’ Academies: Before and after school opportunities (ex. music, languages, arts, sciences, technology and physical education) that allow students to grow, develop and expand their interests and talents.
- We have built community in our K-8 school through a program called Faith Families. Each month students meet in cross-grade level groups to do a service project. These groups stay together year after year.

Staff Collaboration and Communication practices are important factors.

- Total staff collaboration (even specialists) PE, music, art, reading teacher).
- Staff: Dedicated, Flexible, Supportive, Collaborative.
- Collaborative teachers who support each other and our students in achieving high expectations.

- Vertical communication and alignment.
- Teachers work collaboratively to create a success plan for all at-risk students.
- Use of data so all stakeholders are informed and work together to make changes.

Common forms of collaboration mentioned were Professional Learning Communities, although other mechanisms were also mentioned:

- PD webinars.
- Professional learning teams for Common Core.
- Departmental/school-wide book studies on best practice.
- Before and after school programs to enhance learning instructional leadership team.
- Comprehensive staff development program focusing on new technology, Common Core, best practices.
- Engaging teachers and students in self-reflection and evaluation to meet their needs and reach success.

Guided by Student Data, schools achieved excellence through a variety of Instructional Approaches, such as:

- Intentional analysis of student/teacher data, using historical data for predictive purposes to compare with current students.
- Data broken down by the teachers through guided activities; purpose is to reach the needs of each student.
- Data teams – to identify learning goals, measure success and improve!
- A school-wide focus on creativity, critical thinking, and collaboration—to develop the whole child and support achievement beyond solely academics.
- Combined classroom interactive learning projects, for example, 1st grade with 6th grade.
- Departmentalizing classes, especially K–5, so that students have the same math, science, English, etc. teacher throughout their elementary school experience.
- Capstone Project with older kids (HS) – cross age with elementary level students.
- Creative structures within the building – flexible supports with more resources/interventions in primary grades.
- Paideia Seminar.
- Plan for five different instructional math levels for grades 5-8.
- Keep classroom size below 20 in K-3 classes.
- Writing lab – peer tutors are scheduled there, trained how to support student writers. Students can drop in or they will go out to support other Language Arts classes.
- Responsive Classroom.
- Chinese culture study.
- International Baccalaureate.
- Senior (high school) internships promote global connections.

High Expectations tend to be fulfilled:

- Don't give kids a way out of college prep. Require all 11th/12th to enroll in two AP courses.
- Increase rigor and relevance for college.
- Discipline with high expectations.
- Focus on teaching students to teach themselves and to love learning.

Another side of high expectations is often Student Supports, with Differentiated Instruction and Intervention.

- Many notes named RTI (Response to Intervention) specifically while others simply referred to “intervention,” but it is clear that successful schools have intervention processes that lower the student to teacher ratio by deploying a variety of personnel to meet the student needs across a spectrum of abilities.
- Revamped and improved child study process to assist struggling learners.
- Curriculum support—when art, music, PE, and Spanish teachers have free bells in their schedules, they are assigned a grade level to help with remediation in the classroom.
- Mentoring and supporting students at risk.
- Before and after school tutoring (college-approved credits for teachers) to enhance student learning.
- Utilize math teachers for one on one math support labs and supports for special ed. students.
- Keys to success – lowering the pupil to teacher ratio by placing two teachers in the classroom during the literacy block.
- Students referred for behavior and academics.
- Student support team plans interventions and meets to discuss.
- Differentiated classroom instruction using staff for “double dosing”/small group instruction to push both struggling students and the more advanced.
- Math interventions, math coach, coach flexible grouping.
- Reading intervention classes no larger than 4:1 ratio.
- Reading Recovery.
- Instructional support teachers.
- Co-teaching model for special education.
- Allocation of resources within school (aides assist with push-in daily guided reading grades K-2).
- K-2 push-in guided reading. Teacher/reading teacher and 2 teacher aides provide direct reading service for ½ hour every day.

Partnerships with Community and Families are another source of strength in NBR schools:

- Many avenues are used to get messages out: social media, website, PLNs (professional learning networks).
- Parents: communication, rapport, support.

- Establishing partnerships; business or community relationships.
- 4-week series – Kids’ -Academies started for opportunities to broaden learning. They are run by parents and community.
- Great kids + great families + great teachers = success.

No school succeeds without effective Leadership. Participants shared a few ideas:

- One amazing source we found is growingleaders.org with Dr. Tim Elmore. Our attendance at his summer institute changed our faculty.
- Content-area teacher leadership teams. Each teacher is a member of a leadership team.
- Consistent long term leadership – only 3 principals at our school since 1967.
- Lesson plan feedback walk-throughs.
- School-wide participation in the National Blue Ribbon application process.

Some notes also spoke to Student Leadership:

- Build leadership in all students from 3-year olds to 13-year olds.
- Student ambassadors are developed for all school events.
- Provide students with risk-taking opportunities.
- In a K–8 school, 8th grade leadership skills are developed.