

ANSWER TO A CITY'S PRAYERS



Against a backdrop of poverty, hopelessness and corruption in Detroit, an SFA elementary school becomes a symbol of hope and achievement.

THE CHALLENGE

For several years, Detroit had served as a punchline for nearly all of modern America's problems.

The resignation of Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick in 2008, the images of abandoned, foreclosed properties in suburban neighborhoods, and the 75% school dropout rate have provided softball pitches to media outlets looking for metaphorical examples of political corruption, the housing crisis, and struggling public school systems. This negative media coverage of Detroit reached its lowest point when Dateline NBC devoted an entire segment to the city that portrayed rampant poverty, hopelessness, and desperation in almost apocalyptic proportions.

Against this backdrop, Detroit Edison Public School (DEPSA) acted on its high expectations for its students, buoyed by a partnership with Success for All. The vision of the school started at the top, with superintendent and principal Ralph Bland's drive to create a school environment where the entire community takes responsibility for success. At the classroom level, the striving for student achievement would come as a collaboration between the SFA reading program and the DEPSA staff, most notably school SFA facilitator Gail Withers.

THE SOLUTION

When Withers joined DEPSA, in December 2005, the school had been operating for seven years. Fifty-eight percent of students were reading at or above grade level - slightly above the state average, but not satisfactory according to the high expectations of the school.

Although the SFA program was already being utilized through a partnership with Edison Learning, Withers, along with the school administration and teachers, committed themselves to a more thorough application of SFA to drive up achievement.

Soft-spoken and modest, Withers became one of SFA's most effective facilitators, demonstrating continued ability to absorb knowledge from SFA coaches, use data to drive instruction, and assist teachers with program implementation. For Withers, one of the main advantages was the Success for All Foundation (SFAF) Member Center, which allowed staff to input data to track student progress.

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GAIL WITHERS, SFA Facilitator

"The data tools help us to see the weak areas in the school that we need to focus on and set goals to improve," she explains. "In the classroom, data helps to determine if a weak area is with an individual student, a group of students, or with the teacher implementing the program; we can use the data to help us target this and then move forward with a plan to offer the teacher support and professional development to improve the implementation."



EACH COMPONENT OF SFA, FROM WORD POWER TO CLASS DISCUSSION, IS A RESEARCH-BASED STRATEGY THAT WORKS. CHILDREN BECOME BETTER READERS WITH THE IMPLEMENTATION OF EACH INTERLOCKING PIECE OF THE PROGRAM.

CHERYL ANDRADE, Teacher

Driven by Teacher Dedication

Much of the Detroit Edison Public School Academy's success is a result of teacher dedication to the Success for All reading program, according to SFA facilitator Gail Withers, even if there is sometimes a period of adjustment needed to its proven methods.

"Initially I struggled with the SFA program and its hands-on approach to reading instruction," says Cheryl Andrade, a first-grade teacher. "Traditional programs did not utilize the power of teamwork [cooperative learning] among the students in class, extensive data collection and analysis, or a technologically advanced system for generating and presenting data."

Andrade's initial struggles faded away as she devoted time and study to the SFA program and all its components. She also had many opportunities to collaborate with other teachers in SFA's professional learning community meetings to discuss different strategies and skills in the classroom.

Now, Andrade has mastered the program and is a true believer in SFA: "Each component of SFA, from Word Power to class discussion, is a researched-based strategy that works. Children become better readers with the implementation of each interlocking piece of the program.

THE RESULTS

Against all the negative mainstream media coverage about Detroit, DEPSA became a prime example of what happens when citizens don't give up on the city's future. The collaborative effort of administrators, teachers, students and SFA helped to make DEPSA the first charter school in Detroit to receive the prestigious Blue Ribbon Award from the Department of Education. This award is given to schools that show dramatic gains in student achievement. DEPSA, with 54% of students living below the poverty level, continually outperformed other public schools across the state.

"To get an idea of the kind of schools philanthropic leaders want to create in Detroit, look no further than Detroit Edison Public School Academy," wrote the Detroit Free Press in a profile of the school.

After three years of heightened SFA implementation under Withers, DEPSA achieved massive gains: 87% of students read at or above grade level, a 30% increase. As well, the students continually beat the state average on the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP). DEPSA has been such a success that it plans to open a high school campus, funded by a grant from Excellent Schools Detroit, a non-profit coalition.

Despite the achievements, Withers says that the school staff won't be satisfied until 100% of students at DEPSA are reading at or above grade level. In a city frequently portrayed as doomed to failure, the Detroit Edison Public School Academy shows that there are many people left that will not only fight for success, but will continue fighting until everyone has achieved it.

FOUNDED IN 1987, the nonprofit Success for All Foundation is dedicated to ensuring that every child, from pre-kindergarten to grade 8, becomes proficient in reading and learning – opening up new doors for a lifetime of achievement. Not only has SFA been proven time and again to help with student reading ability and math performance, it also addresses non-academic concerns, improving behavior, attendance and parental involvement. Please contact us for more information.

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