

It's all about collaboration and expectations

Photos: Ed Morykwas, School Life

What we can learn from the Salina turnaround

In Hifa Muhsin's geography-science class at Salina Intermediate, 8th graders Manal Elgahmi, Nasreen Nasser, and Rana Almaradaie lead the rest of their classmates through a lesson on weather forecasting. Students work in small groups to discuss concepts and find solutions to problems.

"As a team, everybody is contributing," chimed in Ms. Muhsin's, sitting off to the side.

Even among the students, there's a lot of collaboration going on at Salina.

The students are mostly Yemen. Sixty-five percent are new to the country. Ten percent don't speak a lick of English when they enroll at Salina. Eighty-eight percent of the students receive free or reduced lunch. In most cases when a school's poverty is up, its test scores fall.

Yet, at Salina, as the number of poor students rise or remain steady, test scores are climbing.

Last year, the school's fourth grader's performance in reading on the Northwest Evaluation Association's Measure of Academic Progress test shot up one full grade level in only one semester, even as the school's poverty rate approached 90 percent. Even more impressive, sixth graders grew one year in reading on the NWEA. On the math portion of the test, 8th graders showed over a year's growth (14 months) over one school year.

The school's ascent took time- about four years from the arrival of Jamel Lawera, a teacher turned principal who was determined not to let the school flounder. Lawera worked with his staff to change the culture of learning, which included making sure teachers, students, and their parents were all on the same page. The new culture of commitment included collaboration and high expectations.

"There's a lot of passion here," said middle school social studies teacher Angela Talukder. "I love it here. I've worked in other schools outside the district. The parents here are heavily involved, they're welcoming. It just feels like a family."

"I feel like the morale here is incredible," said middle school teacher Sharifah Ahmed. "I feel like we're growing and getting better every year."



Salina students move to their next class in a quick and more orderly fashion.

Staff Mindset is Key

But there's no magic formula Principal Lawera can bottle up and send to other schools. He says the success is the result of a process that requires all teachers to work together with the belief that students can achieve despite their challenging backgrounds. Strong leadership is a must, and data is continually analyzed.



Salina principal Jamel Lawera collaborates with staff regularly to help students produce better results.

"It's a mindset. Everyone believes all children can learn and they believe they will," Lawera said. "It really (has) to do with the staff choosing to come together and work together collaboratively to create the best environment, and create really strong relationships with the community as well."

Ms. Talukder agrees staff collaboration is a "huge" factor in student success.

"There's more an atmosphere that we're all working together for the same goals," she said. "The mindset is let's try to work together to get things done."

The Beginning of Change

When the district named Lawera Salina Intermediate principal, the school was performing so poorly that it was a whisker away from being designated a "priority" school by the state.

"The pressure came down that I could potentially lose my job," said Lawera.

So much for the first year honeymoon.

"I didn't know what was going to happen, if I was going back to teaching," said Lawera. "I went and got my teaching certificate updated just in case. I have to fall back on something, you know?"

Instead of retreating, Lawera took a risk. He put an emphasis on building relationships with community organizations and hiring highly qualified teachers to rebuild the school from the ground up.

"I had (teachers) who didn't want to be here because they thought this was a losing battle because we have newcomers and kids who are six or seven years behind," said Lawera.

Those who didn't meet Lawera's standards eventually weeded themselves out. "Either teachers climbed on the bandwagon of being supportive or they left. It was a high turnover of staff, but wouldn't you want to pick your own high qualified people to be here?"

With his team coming together, Lawera put a laser-like focus on digging into data, bringing all staff onto the same page and creating a culture where everyone had the same goals. He teamed up with his teachers to closely monitor



Salina teacher Sharifah Ahmed coaches students through a poetry exercise to engage students and encourage critical thinking.

the progress or struggles of every student. Weekly meetings helped identify those falling behind, and plans were designed to help them catch up.

"Everybody has to hear the same message," said Lawera. "We started bringing everyone in together...teachers were getting the same message and training. After a period of time, that led to strong changes in terms of our achievement."

Accountability increased as well.

"Our kids' needs are different than a lot of the kids," said fourth grade teacher Diana Alqadhi. "We have a lot of kids who are newcomers, refugees, so we're going to spend more time. We have to."

Empowering students

Lawera has found a way to transform Salina with his own approach, which was fairly simple and perhaps explains the new look school—things like college murals painted on the walls, after school clubs and tutoring, a PTA, a school spirit cheer squad, a mascot, student leadership programs and other solutions to get students engaged in school, including a program (AVID) aimed at increasing student confidence and providing them with the skills to succeed in high school and college.

"I said, why can't our school be like every other school in America?"

In short, Lawera gave students choices.



Part of Salina's turnaround started with pride and Wildcat mascot Hashem Baalawi.

Culture of readiness:

Part of Salina's turnaround is a focus on college success with 7th and 8th graders. The "AVID" program is targeted at students who might not otherwise attend college. Now, college is on their minds and their school walls.



Student Buy-In

When Lawera opened the door to student opportunities, and every teacher at Salina treated every child like they were the most important things in their life, kids soared. Test scores shot up. Parent involvement rocketed.

"You strengthen the mother, you strengthen the child," said Hebat Abdelbaki, Salina's lead teacher.

School spirit and student involvement shot up too. Kids see their teachers and administrators staying after school and coming in on Saturdays to make sure their needs our met, and they return the favor by giving their best every day.

"We have teachers who care deeply about us; teachers who stay after school and help us with homework," said eighth grader Rafat Mohamad. "Our teachers are our role



models and we don't like to disrespect them.

"(When I was in fourth grade), we didn't have after school activities," said eighth grader Amil Musaed. "Now we all get to participate in sports and recreation. We have so much to do, we never get left out. We all just want to come to school. We have so much change at Salina right now."

Letting students choose encourages them to learn and grow academically and socially. Salina offers things like student council, peer mediation, and a mascot. That's right, a real, live school mascot. How does a kid dressed up as a Salina Wildcat help student growth?

"To me, it's representing our school and encouraging everybody else to push themselves to their limits," said Hashem Baalawi, who is the school mascot and a big reason

student attendance shot up at basketball games this year. "I'm teaching them and how to believe in themselves for confidence."

There's a lot of 'believing' going on at Salina Intermediate these days. The students want to be here, and the teachers want to be here.

"I don't see myself leaving this building," said Ms. Ahmed. "I'm very comfortable here."

Because there is choice, the possibilities at Salina are limitless.

"Almost every single aspect has been changed in this building, from the behaviors, to teachers buying in," said Mr. Lawera. "When you have all the kids and teachers doing that, you have a school that's great. My expectation is to keep aiming high."

Promise Kept



Some of the first beneficiaries of a growing program known as the Henry Ford Collegiate Academy (HFCA).

Enrolling in a great college was simply a dream for some district high-schoolers — until The Henry Ford Collegiate Academy came along. Here's the story of the first graduating class.

Zahraa Mougneh was scared. "I wondered if it was the right thing to do," she said.

Mohamed Alhamadi's mother had her doubts.

"She didn't want me to go into it because she thought it a fifth year of high school," he said.

Three years and many doubters later, Alhamadi, Mougneh, and dozens of other Dearborn Public School students will graduate this month with not only their high school diploma, but also with a two-year associate degrees from Henry Ford College (HFC).

"It's exciting," said Mougneh. "My family and friends are coming."

History will be made on May 17, 2016 when Mougneh and 47 other Dearborn Public Schools students graduate from the Henry Ford Collegiate Academy (HFCA).

The Academy began three years ago to offer district's high school students their diploma and associates degree in five years, at no cost to the students or their families.

"It's free and I'm done," said Madison Neff, who will also graduate with her diploma and associates degree. "I like being able to brag about that. College is so expensive. With that gone, it's so much easier."

District students can qualify for the Collegiate Academy at the end of their sophomore year based on the scores they receive on the PSAT test. Once they're in, they meet with college counselors to schedule classes for the next three years.

The first Academy class will receive their diplomas and degrees through what State Superintendent Brian Whiston



HFCA Counselor Robin Armstrong

calls "a great partnership" between Dearborn schools and Henry Ford College (HFC). Dearborn was the first district in Michigan to offer the free diploma and degree five year program, and now "there are about 20-30 other districts copying Dearborn's model," said Whiston.

Whiston made a promise to Dearborn students when he was first hired as the district's superintendent in 2008: All high school students who attend Dearborn Public Schools can get their diploma and associates degree on the district's dime. Up to \$9,000 savings for two years. He challenged kids to get a head start on college and he persuaded the state to invest in the program, after a failed attempt.

"Some of the members of my team said if it wasn't approved once, then why are we applying again?" said

Today, 200 students are enrolled in the Collegiate Academy and the program is expected to grow.

Whiston. "I said, because I believe in this program and we're going to make this happen. Building support behind the scenes, and the good work Gail (Shenkman) and the team did in terms of writing the proposal, I think the combination got it through."

Today, 200 students are enrolled in the Collegiate Academy and the program is expected to grow.

"I think this year is going to be a landmark year," said Robin Armstrong, the Academy's counselor and primary program recruiter. "We now have documentation and data to support what we hoped would happen. There is no cap. If 500 students are eligible and 500 students want to come, they're welcome with open arms."

Students say knowing that they're a part of history is exciting. So is knowing they didn't pay a penny.

"Very, very exciting especially since it's all paid for," said HFCA student Diala Dabaja, who will transfer to Lawrence Technological University for electrical engineering in the fall. "They're paying for your classes they're paying for your books, you have nothing to worry about."

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Students like Dabaja praise the Collegiate Academy program as a way to save their families tuition costs and finish their college degrees early. They're graduating with 60 credit hours, and all of those credits transfer to state public universities, including the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

"We're ahead of the game," said Dabaja.

The students credit their counselor or Robin Armstrong with successfully navigating their high school-college experience.

"She helped us with everything, picking the classes, getting us started through our life," said Alhamadi.

As seniors last year, Alhamadi and others walked at commencement with their respective high school classes. You can walk into the Collegiate Academy without walking away from the high school life.

"I was in soccer all four years," said Neff. "I did prom and dances. Anything a normal high school student did, I did."

Neff is enrolled at Western Michigan University for next fall to work toward her bachelors in veterinary medicine. She said the transition to WMU will be much easier because the Collegiate Academy made her a better student.

"It helped me become more responsible with classes," she said. "It's a much smaller step than just going straight into college and not being prepared."

Mougneh also said working toward



HFCA graduate Mohamed Alhamadi is transferring to U-M-Dearborn, debt free.



The Collegiate Academy will propel Christian Plonka to the U-D-Mercy, as a junior.



HFCA students start taking college courses their junior year in high school.

her degree as a high school student.

"I'm ready for all those hard classes and long nights because I've been doing it here," said Mougneh, who will pursue dentistry at the University of Detroit-Mercy.

Alhamadi said he is transferring to the University of Michigan-Dearborn to study electrical engineering.

Each of the students have a game plan for college.

"I'll eventually go for my masters," said Dabaja. "I have an internship this summer with Chrysler."

"After the two year hygienist program (at UD-Mercy), I graduate with a bachelor's degree," said Mougneh. "I get my hygienist certificate and my bachelors. Instead of eight years, it will be six years for me."

Saving time and saving money. Something other students wished they would have acted upon three years ago.

"My friend was offered Collegiate Academy," said Dabaja, "but he turned it down. Now, he tells me, I wish I did what you did."

Saving time and saving money. Something other students wished they would have acted upon three years ago.

"All my friends said they didn't know what this is, and they just thought it was new and not true," said Mougneh. "When I actually did it, they regret not doing it."

They tuned out the doubters to try something new. They took a risk three years ago. Now, their rewards await on graduation day May 17 at the Ford Community and Performing Arts Center: A high school diploma and associate degree, built on a promise.

"I appreciate the students standing up and making it happen," said Whiston. "They are the pioneers who are going to make thousands of other kids have the success because they were willing to be the trailblazers to make it happen."

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