

A Model of: Building a Collaborative, Vision-Driven Culture

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BY THE NUMBERS

- 570 Students
- 70% White
- 23% African-American
- 22% Students with Disabilities
- 10% Migrant
- 93% Free/Reduced Lunch
- 95% Attendance Rate

All constituents in our extended school community—all students, staff, parents, community partners and representative groups of alumni—gather on a regular basis to define the vision for South Heights Elementary.

WHAT is our strategy?

At South Heights Elementary, we are committed to our students—not just from kindergarten to fifth grade, but throughout students' lives. The culture we build—a culture of inclusiveness, love, and high expectations—has profoundly impacted our students. As one 5th grader recently told a visitor, "South Heights is like a machine, and we are all the parts. If one part quits working, the whole machine stops."

All constituents in our extended school community—all students, staff, parents, community partners and representative groups of alumni—gather on a regular basis to define the vision for South Heights Elementary. Together we create goals that define our culture and drive the work of our school. These goals are outside of local, state and national mandates. We call our goals "next practices." We know that all great organizations are driven by a strong vision. Why should we be any different? The excitement and call to action generated by the momentum to meet these goals keeps us moving forward.

Having a strong vision and a focus on culture eliminates the "clutter" that many schools deal with as they trying to constantly address the "weakest" area in the last testing round. Our vision goals are about changing education in our community. We don't chase fads. We create "next practices" that others follow.

CULTURAL VALUES AND VISION THAT ENDURES

We initiated this strategy because our school really wanted to solidify our culture and goals so that all community members could feel connected to our work. Our vision is so defined and central that it deeply affects hiring. New hires, especially in leadership positions, are chosen based on their ability to fulfill our vision.

Our visioning process has evolved over the last 15 years. South Heights "re-vision" every five years. Our most recent process for creating a vision was as inclusive as possible, involving all stakeholders.

HOW did we build this strategy?

The strategies we have developed to address our goals are constantly evolving depending on what the data shows.

One of our core beliefs is “Ideas Rule, Not People.” Individuals or teams are empowered to pilot strategies to address needs, on an everyday basis. Our vision and core beliefs provide the filter for these ideas. If a strategy or idea aligns with our vision, we pilot it. If the pilot is effective, we take it school-wide.

ATTEND TO CULTURE AND INVITE EVERYONE INTO THE CONVERSATION

At South Heights, we take data about culture very seriously. We pay close attention to data from Kentucky’s TELL survey, and we volunteer to participate a local university’s culture audit. Finally, we interview students and make sure that school leaders spend significant time observing and checking in with students to see how everyone is doing. This immersion into the daily life of our students provides up-to-the-minute insight into the feel of the building. The principal often pulls students to the side and asks them questions about our core beliefs and if they feel like we are meeting our responsibility.

When the data shows that we have room for improvement in an area of culture, we respond. For example, a few years ago the TELL survey data showed that some teachers felt like they weren’t being heard. We recognized this as a real problem, and developed the “Big Blue Circle” (BBC) as a response. Each week, chairs are gathered into a circle in a different location in the building and at different times. Attendance is voluntary, but BBC is always well attended. The principal brings a notebook, listens and writes. This gives everyone, regardless of role, an opportunity to have input in the outcomes of our school. Since implementing the BBC, our data has shown dramatic improvement in terms of teachers feeling heard and valued.

RECOGNIZING OUR ACCOMPLISHMENTS

As we complete a vision goal, large or small, we take several steps to make sure our students and community are aware of the accomplishment. After completion, we flood social media with pictures and send texts that describe the goal achieved. We make our students aware when a goal has been achieved and “check it off” on large vision boards. Students pass the boards every day and I often see them pointing to the ones left unchecked. We also involve our students in large events that signify a vision goal achieved. Earlier this year, all 570 of our K-5 students attended a press conference about a new community collaboration that is launching to serve them. They create the goals in our vision process, participate in bringing them to completion and then celebrate the victory.

FOLLOW US:



@1199Rob

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VALUING STUDENTS: FROM CRADLE THROUGH COLLEGE

At South Heights, we want all of our students, regardless of background, to have the same access, support, and opportunities as our own biological children. This fundamental belief is demonstrated in our “1199 Forever” commitment (1199 is the address of our school building and our informal school “brand”). We show students that they have our support well beyond their completion of fifth grade, by providing mentoring and support to our middle school and high school alumni, helping our graduates with college and financial aid applications during their time in high school, and attending high school graduations in 1199 Forever t-shirts and cheering for alumni. Our graduates come to see us when they leave for college, and come back to visit us during college breaks.

It's important to us that our students can picture themselves going to college. We hold college visits for all of our students each year, beginning in kindergarten. Each grade level visits a different college, so that by the time they graduate every student will have experienced six different college campuses. Now that many of our graduates are attending college, these tours are often led by our own alumni.

We know that family outreach makes a big difference to student success. Each year, the day before school starts, our staff goes on a “Home Visitation Blitz,” in which each teacher visits the home of every student in his/her class, introducing him/herself to the student's family and welcoming the student with a hug. This warm welcome and outreach not only helps families feel more connected to the school, it provides staff with a deeper understanding of students' home contexts and the life experiences students are bringing into the classroom.

Finally, we know that our students need more than academic support. We are currently building the Audubon Kids Zone, a community school program modeled after the Harlem Children's Zone. Through this model, we'll be able to provide wraparound support to the families of our current, future, and past students, addressing issues of poverty, health, and housing. We see this model as building a “big hug around our kids,” ensuring that all students come to school well-supported and ready to learn.

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WHAT evidence measures the success of our work?

South Heights Elementary determined that combining traditional student data such as test scores and pre- and post-assessments, with non-traditional data such as surveys, student polls would help us monitor the strength of the school's culture and the degree to which stakeholders agree on making progress toward our goals. Using these different forms of data provides us with ongoing snapshots of where we are.

We also regularly conduct surveys, created by the leadership team, that utilize current research on what effective leaders do. It is simple but focused on high-leverage activities. Scores that we receive on this survey drive our subsequent practice until the next survey.

Data indicates that students are striving to be their best. This is most noticeable with reduced discipline referrals, increased attendance rates and increased advancement.

- Attendance rates have improved over a 15-year time period from 91% to 95%.
- Discipline referrals decreased from 800 in 2000 to 280 in 2015.

PROUD OF ALL OF OUR ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- In the span of the past 15 years, we have moved from being one of the lowest 25 schools in the state to Kentucky to the highest 27.
- Our strong vision, branding and willingness to collaborate with community stakeholders have resulted in the commitment to create a public school version of the Harlem Children's Zone. Initial investment, data collection, and program design has begun. We hope to be a model of community Response To Intervention (RTI).
- We have hosted more than 500 visitors from around the U.S. in the last five years and we have connected with hundreds more. Schools have contacted us stating that they have implemented many of our strategies with much success. Our goal of "changing the world" is happening school by school.
- As a part of our College Tours program, more than 5,000 elementary students have visited campuses around the state.

BUILDING COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

We have been lucky to find strong support for our vision in our community. We believe that successfully securing partners happens for several reasons:

1. People and businesses buy into inspiring visions. No one wants to be a part of "average." We provide an uncommon vision that can have incredible community benefits and that gets recognized.
2. We know how to share a message effectively. Our partners know that their deeds and/or funding will receive traditional and non-traditional publicity when we successfully reach a goal.
3. We study great organizations and how they build great visions, cultures and collaborations. We repurpose those strategies into our school's processes with great success.
4. We don't ask for money; we ask for partnership. If a business becomes a true partner, it will recognize the need and help fund the vision.

FOLLOWING UP on this strategy

RELEVANT RESOURCES

[Schools that Change: Evidence-Based Improvement and Change Leadership](#)

by Lew Smith and Michael Fullan

Profiles eight successful schools that offer different models of transformation. Chapter seven focuses in-depth on South Heights Elementary.

[The Power of Family School Community Partnerships: A Training Resource Manual from the National Education Association](#)

Mini-discussions, strategies, activities, visuals, and discussion make this manual useful for schools as they forge richer relationships with families

[Building Community Partnerships: Resource Roundup](#)

by Edutopia

Examples and strategies for fostering successful business and community partnerships to the benefit of schools

[Teach Like a Pirate: Increase Student Engagement, Boost Your Creativity, and Transform Your Life as an Educator](#)

by Dave Burgess

Inspiration, practical techniques, and innovative ideas that help increase student engagement, boost creativity, and transform educator experience

