



February 5, 2012

These 5 Indy schools succeed despite high poverty and other challenges

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Principal Joyce Akridge grabbed a microphone during first-grade lunch at Indianapolis Public School 79. The chattering quickly hushed. Dozens of smiling faces turned toward her.

Akridge had them right where she wanted them -- attentive, engaged, excited.

And then began what the kids at School 79 think is merely 10 minutes of fun. In reality, it's a clever way to keep students learning even during time that otherwise would be wasted.

Akridge quizzes them on math. How many 10s in 50? The arms shoot up. Then she shifts to English.

"We've been working on rhyme words, right?" she asks, followed by a ripple of bobbing heads. "I'm going to say a word, and if you know what it rhymes with, would you raise your hand? What rhymes with 'bat?'"

At a table in front of her, the high-reaching arm of a young girl sucking on a spoon catches her eye.

"Hat!" the girl shouts out.

These lunchtime mini-lessons are just one of a multitude of strategies that have helped propel School 79 into an exclusive club.

An Indianapolis Star analysis of state school rankings and demographic data reveals that School 79 is one of five local schools -- and just eight in the state -- that earned an "A" despite confronting the type of challenges that so often are used to explain poor performance in urban schools.

Specifically, The Star looked at schools with four demographic criteria: At least 75 percent of students live in low-income homes (earning less than \$42,000 a year for a family of four); no less than 45 percent of the students are minority; about 10 percent are in special education; and at least 20 percent are English language learners.

About 42 percent of Indiana's 1,843 schools that were rated last year earned A's under the state's school accountability system. But of the 47 schools that fit each of The Star's four demographic criteria, just 17 percent rated an A.

That includes School 79, Sunny Heights Elementary School in Warren Township, Clinton Young Elementary School in Perry Township, the Christel House charter school and School 90.

Each school has traits that make it stand out, but these five also have a lot in common.

Making every minute count

For Sunny Heights Principal Kathy Handy, everything starts with the schedule.

Her taped-together, laminated 21-by-11-inch grid details who is doing what for 428 children in minuscule five-minute increments from 8:40 a.m. to 3:40 p.m.

From it, Handy finds time for luxuries many schools say are impossible -- in-school tutoring, in-school teacher training, gifted-style enrichment for every child.

"Every five minutes makes a difference," she said. "We're tweaking it and oiling it so that every classroom we have, every minute of staff time, is being used."

Take, for example, fourth-grade lunch. Sunny Heights has three fourth-grade classes. In the past, all three classes showed up for lunch together, leaving students to wait in a long, slow line.

"I don't like lines," Handy said. "I'd rather they be in the classroom."

So she engineered the lunch lines away.

Now, fourth-grade classes all operate on slightly different schedules that allow them to arrive for lunch five minutes apart. By the time the second class arrives, the first class is just clearing the lunch line. When the third class is sitting down to eat, the first class is finishing up.

This simple strategy allowed Handy to cut the lunch period by 10 minutes over time.

What Handy calls the "fluidness of learning" is evident in many ways. The school's art room was designed, at her suggestion, with two doors -- one for students going in, one for those going out -- eliminating bottlenecks and opportunities for misbehavior.

Effective time management also has made possible the highlight of the week at Sunny Heights -- "Flex." The program allows students to learn in depth about a country.

"It's enrichment," Handy said. "Remedial kids usually never get enrichment. This ensures every student gets an enrichment activity."

Here's how Handy made it happen.

For one week out of every nine-week grading period, each class goes to a 50-minute "Flex" lesson, taught by the gym, art, music and library teachers. Students study places such as Mexico, Tanzania and Korea through art, literature, music and sport. On Friday, each class puts on a presentation to the other classes. Parents are invited.

"Our kids don't mind missing recess," Handy said, "but they don't want to miss Flex."

Flex also releases classroom teachers for a full week of specialized training during those 50 minutes.

"People from other schools will sometimes say, 'How can you do that?' " Handy said. "You have to constantly rethink things to maximize the use of your people."

All five schools have recognized the opportunity to use what was previously thought of as downtime for learning. Principal Joyce Akridge's lunchtime quizzes at School 79 are, indeed, fun -- she ends them with an improvised school song set to the tune of the "Notre Dame Victory March" -- but they also reinforce the day's concepts.

At School 90 and Clinton Young, teachers routinely quiz kids one-by-one on the lessons of the day -- as they stand in lines for lunch or the bathroom.

At each school, every minute counts.

Principals use aggressive but thoughtful hiring practices

Mary Mayfield was pretty shocked when Mark Pugh -- a principal at another school -- showed up to observe her teaching the day after she put her name on the district's list of teachers seeking transfers.

"I hadn't even told my principal," she said.

Pugh, the principal at School 90, doesn't wait for good teachers to come to him. Watching the transfer list like a hawk is just one strategy he employs to build the best teaching staff he can.

"When I'm bringing somebody in, I want to find the right people for the job and allow them to do their job," Pugh said. "I try my very best to hire quality teachers. Then I try to provide them with tools and the environment and support they need."

Crafting an effective team, one that works well together and has good skills for the types of issues children bring to school, is a focus for all five principals.

At Clinton Young, one of Principal Andrea Korreck's favorite tactics is to hand job candidates a simple puzzle -- the sort one might find on the table at a Cracker Barrel restaurant -- and ask them to solve it. Their reactions say a lot. Some will cheerfully give it a try. Others will look at her as if she's nuts. She's even had angry job candidates flat-out refuse.

"As principal, I have to ask people to do things they won't necessarily want to do," she said. "It gives me some idea how they might react."

Clinton Young was a deeply troubled school four years ago when the district redesigned it with a new principal and mostly new staff. Korreck, who was on the committee that led the redesign, came on as principal two years ago, right after budget cuts forced the layoff of 12 teachers, nearly half the staff.

"We were just annihilated," she said. "They had worked so hard for two years to jell as a staff. So much attention was paid to getting the right people."

Korreck eventually rehired two teachers who wanted to come back, and Clinton Young has been able to maintain a rare camaraderie. The quality and cooperation of the staff is a big part of the school's turnaround story.

"It's people, she said, "not programs."

Still, building an effective, cohesive team is not easy.

"It is a challenge to build camaraderie," Pugh said. "Teachers by their nature are territorial. It is unique to have a group of teachers work as well as they are working here."

At School 90, Pugh interviews a job candidate and then lets teachers interview the candidate as well. Afterward, they discuss the candidate's individual strengths and how well the person might fit in.

"It isn't magic," School 90 social worker Lisa Spurrier said. "It's something we've worked toward. When we get a new person in, it takes time."

Why does it work so well at School 90 right now?

"We like each other," Mayfield said with a smile, "and we're all quirky."

Keeping standards high when confronted with dramatic change

Joyce Akridge, the School 79 principal, moved into an apartment down the street from the school when she started teaching there 38 years ago.

She and her husband still live close enough that her students occasionally ride by on their bicycles.

Things have changed. Back when her son, now age 41, attended School 79, the neighborhood around West 34th Street was mostly white working class. He was often the only black student in his class.

Over the years, more blacks moved into the neighborhood. But since she became principal five years ago, the influx of immigrant families -- mostly Hispanic but also from Southeast Asia, Africa and elsewhere -- was sudden and acute.

The school, which once didn't have enough foreign language speakers to justify full-time support staff for them, suddenly jumped to more than half of its enrollment learning English as a second language.

"The thing about us is we embraced other cultures," Akridge said. "It's made such a nice school. This school was always nice, but it has been great to add to our school culture while maintaining high expectations."

School culture is a complex mix of the backgrounds and personalities of the people who make up the school and the purposeful steps a school takes to ensure that, whatever challenge it faces, the focus is on learning.

With more immigrant children, School 79 had to adapt. It was now mostly a school for children learning English at the same time they were learning other subjects.

Some of the adaptations were small. Teachers began to label everything with English words -- chairs, desks, bathroom doors, items in the cafeteria. Akridge sought out training for teachers, and for herself. She took classes at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis and soon earned certification as a teacher of English as a second language.

But one thing, Akridge said, must never change: "You should always expect the best of every child."

At School 90, Pugh is accustomed to explaining to parents why their kids face discipline even for small dress code violations, such as missing socks or lacking a belt. It doesn't matter if it's an A student.

Violators head to the "guided learning center," a sort of penalty box classroom where students complete the day's work without any contact with others.

"I had a conversation at recess one day with a girl who was new to our school," said Mary Mayfield, the School 90 teacher. "She said, 'You know how it's really easy to get in trouble here? At my old school it was really hard to get in trouble.' It's because we care so much. We're on them."

But it's not just about punishment.

Take School 90's approach to attendance. Students with perfect attendance are announced daily. At the end of the week, they are entered in a drawing for a small prize.

For Christel House, which opened in 2002, building a positive school culture was a deliberate focus

from the beginning. The day starts with a morning meeting in which kids greet each other and give feedback on the good and bad of what's been going on in school.

"We make a big investment in what we expect and how they interact with each other and adults in the building," Principal Carey Dahncke said.

The effort extends to parents. Teachers make a home visit to each student and contact them regularly. Dahncke thinks that promotes even more of a cooperative spirit for the school, student, teacher and parent.

"It's an easy trap to fall into that kids who misbehave get all the attention and kids who behave get nothing," he said. "This way, when a teacher calls, it's not always something bad and it's someone who's been to their house and maybe had dinner with them."

Understanding the problem before trying to solve it

Schools often apply the wrong solution to perceived problems, Christel House Principal Carey Dahncke said.

Data, he said, help schools identify the true problems and employ the best solutions.

"You really have to know what's going on," he said. "Otherwise teachers can feel powerless. They know there is a problem, but they're not sure what it is."

Dahncke gave the example of kids not coming to class on time. Schools that think tardiness is a problem might start ratcheting up penalties for everyone. But what if there were data that showed the same 12 kids were late all the time but others were mostly on time? Then, he said, you can target those kids who are always late to try to figure out ways to get them to be on time.

Christel House tracks all incidents of discipline, and Dahncke can display them by student, location, time of day, consequences applied and other factors.

Academic report cards are data-heavy at Christel House, too. Instead of a half-dozen letter grades, each subject is graded one through four, with similar grades for the state standards students are expected to meet below those. Some report cards have as many as 40 numerical grades.

That level of detail, Dahncke said, allows teachers and students to target a specific area for improvement as opposed to broadly trying to raise a science grade.

Kathy Handy, principal at Sunny Heights, has her own story on how data can be used to target progress.

At the start of the school year, Sunny Heights enrolled a new student who tested significantly behind her grade level in reading.

That triggered immediate daily interventions -- 15-minute tutoring and extra reading during the school day among them. In a workroom, the students' test scores are boiled down to index cards stamped with color-coded labels. Here, teachers can see how kids are performing in stark relief.

For the new student, teachers did an inventory of what kind of books she liked and crafted a plan to link her reading interests to her classroom work. Every three weeks, every student in the school takes a short diagnostic test to see whether their scores are moving up, down or staying the same.

Right before Christmas, the girl asked if she could visit Handy's office to tell her some good news. In one semester, she had made a year's worth of test gains in reading.

Sometimes, data that makes a difference isn't even academic.

Three years ago, Mark Pugh, School 90's principal, noticed teachers were reporting a large number of students were disciplined for not finishing homework.

He went room to room, asking, "What's going on?"

"You could see the patterns," he said. "We talked as a staff about making sure homework assignments are relevant. The intent of homework is to review what you've done that day and prepare for the following day. You can't just send home spelling words to be written five times."

Better homework assignments -- more interesting and intellectually challenging -- worked. The frequency of students disciplined for failing to complete homework dropped.

Principals set direction, provide support, clear roadblocks

The other four traits aside, truth is, none of the five schools make the A grade without strong leadership that starts in the principal's office.

Somebody must be in the forefront, establishing a direction, tracking progress, solving problems and inspiring the best in both teachers and students.

At Clinton Young, that someone is Andrea Korreck -- a principal who understands effective communication means listening to teachers and recognizing their needs.

Korreck also is not afraid to try creative ways to encourage unity and support among the staff.

That includes even ideas intended for the kids. When students were reading the children's book, "How Full Is Your Bucket?" she borrowed its central premise -- that people can fill each other's "buckets" with kind words about them.

Copying an activity for kids, Korreck handed out a bucket to each adult in the school. She then encouraged the adults to drop notes of encouragement in each other's buckets.

Assistant Principal Jennifer Sheets said she receives notes that say things such as, "I appreciate your sense of humor," and "Your smile makes things better."

With the Super Bowl in town, the school had a "Soup Bowl" carry-in after school Friday.

"We have difficult jobs," Sheets said. "Things can weigh on you every so often. Andrea recognizes the need for fun time together and team building."

Korreck also recognized something in Sheets that not even Sheets saw in herself.

Korreck needed a detail-oriented right hand, and Sheets, at the time a lead teacher at a different school, came highly recommended. In their job interview, Korreck wanted to see what Sheets could do.

Could she, in a matter of minutes, come up with a schoolwide plan that allows for everything a school needs to do -- teach kids, get them to lunch and provide for "specials" such as gym, music, art and library?

Sheets recalls the moment.

"She said, 'You have 10 minutes. We have five specials. Every class needs a lunch. I need a schedule.' "

Then Korreck left the room.

After she was hired Sheets learned she progressed further with the schedule-making than any other candidate for the job. Two years later, scheduling is one of many critical tasks for which Korreck relies on her.

"I didn't know scheduling was a strong suit for me," Sheets said. "I kept thinking during my interview, 'Why is she having me do this?' "

Margaret Silk, a teacher at School 90, said the school owes much of its success to its principal, Pugh, and his vision.

"He gives us our tasks and says, 'Tell me what you need to be successful as a teacher,' " Silk said. "He lets us do our jobs.

"When he steps in the door of my classroom, I'm glad to see him."

Additional Facts

Principals' principles

- » **Purposefulness:** They are deliberate about what they do and how kids spend their time.
 - » **Team building:** They prioritize hiring, training and teamwork to build an excellent teaching staff.
 - » **Culture:** Discipline and high expectations for students are consistent.
 - » **Data:** They make efficient use of data to target student needs and tailor instruction for each child.
 - » **Leadership:** They all groom leadership skills in others.
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