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Urgency powers Roosevelt's transformation

Struggling North Portland school plugs into ambitious plans for success

BY JENNIFER ANDERSON

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No, the infusion of \$7.7 million in federal cash into Roosevelt High School did not buy endless pizza parties, a brand-new gym or a massive field trip to Hawaii.

The school's "transformation" money, as it's called, instead brought a new attitude for the long-struggling North Portland community, and change from the inside out.

That much was visible on a recent Wednesday afternoon, the day students are dismissed an hour and 45 minutes early to allow teachers time to meet and review their students' progress.

About 15 teachers gathered in a classroom and hunkered over their laptops, getting their first peek at the newly arrived first-quarter grades.

"If they're getting a D or failing, why?" asks Charlene Williams, the new campus principal. "It's either based on their attendance, low skills or lack of motivation."

To pinpoint a root cause, teachers meet like this every week to crunch the data and talk – a seemingly obvious strategy most educators say they simply don't have enough time for.

Once they identify what's happening, teachers put together a plan for the students and offer the intervention they need. A home visit, perhaps or extra tutoring or after-school classes.

So far, the strategy appears to be working, resulting in higher grades, better attendance and fewer disciplinary actions in the first three months of school.

"It's a wake-up call for all students," says Catherine Theriault, a language arts teacher at Roosevelt for the past 19 years. "They feel the urgency in the building."

Prior to this fall, Roosevelt was segregated into three small academies under the Gates Foundation-funded "small school" model for the past six years.

By the federal government's standards, that model failed at Roosevelt, since the school's graduation rates, test scores and other measures of achievement landed in the state's bottom 5 percent.

The good news was that the lowly status made the school eligible to receive the federal money, which came with strings attached.



CHRISTOPHER ONSTOTT / PORTLAND TRIBUNE
Roosevelt High School teachers Jacquie Dixon (right) and Rafael Bobenrieth talk about how they can work together and help improve struggling students' performance during an after school meeting.



Roosevelt Principal Charlene Williams chats with Dana Preece and her son Collin Preece at an after-school function. Williams is turning the school around with a variety of new programs with the help of a \$7.7 million in federal school improvement grant. TRIBUNE PHOTO/CHRISTOPHER ONSTOTT

Rather than choosing a more drastic option offered with the federal money – such as turning into a charter school or firing the entire staff – the school opted for the “transformation” model of reform, which involves replacing the principal and improving the school through comprehensive curriculum reform, professional development, extending learning time and other strategies.

Williams, who had previously led the Pursuit of Wellness Education at Roosevelt (POWER), put her name in the hat to apply for the campus principal spot because “the turnover has to stop,” she says, noting that in the past 20 years, there have been more than 40 administrators on campus.

Now, in the first four months of the transformation, there’s already an air of success, Williams says. Teachers and administrators finally have enough support to be free to fully focus on instruction. And the students have noticed.

“Kids are smiling more,” she says. “They feel there’s some sense of security and safety.”

Improvement already seen

While the federal money is enabling the change, the new leadership team at Roosevelt is driving it.

As a girl in North Carolina, Williams loved math and science, and excelled at it. Her grandparents, whom she lived with, urged her to go into engineering. She went into teaching instead. It was her math teachers who inspired her to do so.

“I was just starstruck; I loved them so much,” says Williams, who moved here in 1998 and taught math at Rosemary Anderson High School, an alternative school in North Portland. “They shared with me the inequities in education. ... When you look at the achievement gap, there begins your economic gap.”

Williams believes that with all the work under way, the key to her students’ success boils down to one basic thing: high-quality instruction, which the district and Portland teachers’ union will take up in January when contract negotiations resume.



Roosevelt High School qualified for \$7.7 million in federal cash, which is being spent on replacing the principal and improving the curriculum, professional development, extending learning time and other strategies. TRIBUNE PHOTO/CHRISTOPHER ONSTOTT

While the district tackles that hot potato, Roosevelt has its own goals to meet.

The climb to the top will be steep. A year ago, the school functioned as three independent schools: the Spanish-English International School (SEIS); Arts, Communication and Technology (ACT); and the slightly higher-performing POWER Academy.

Now and during the next two years, the lines between the three schools will blur and the campus will function as a single comprehensive school in 2012.

Williams' goals are ambitious.

After the first 90 days of school, just two weeks ago, she announced that the freshmen led the way, with 92 percent attendance, 75 percent passing their math class and 85 percent passing their English class.

That's already astronomically higher than the recent past. Just last year, each of Roosevelt's three schools had reading and math scores ranging from 37 percent to 56 percent meeting or exceeding benchmarks.

Graduation rates were much higher – 59 percent at ACT, 60 percent at SEIS and 80 percent at POWER.

Nevertheless, the \$7.7 million in federal money over three years will pay for extra staff to better coordinate data, technology and community partners.

It's also paying for consultants to help train teachers as coaches for their peers in literacy, math, science and social studies.

In addition to the federal boost, Roosevelt is in line for a lot of love over the years. If Portland voters approve a \$548 million bond measure next May, the school would receive a full renovation during the next six years.

The district also has designated Roosevelt as one of seven "academic priority zone" schools this year, which brings extra funds for wrap-around services, and a more teacher-friendly hiring practice to ensure each teacher is the right fit for the building.

Selling school's merits

Changes inside the building are only half the battle, the Roosevelt community knows. While there are

more than 1,300 students within Roosevelt's neighborhood boundaries, just 46 percent choose to attend the school, for a current enrollment of 680.

With all of the improvements, the district hopes to attract more students and grow by 30 percent, to 940 students, by 2014.

To that end, one of the new full-time positions is a parent, family and community coordinator, whose responsibility is to manage the school's vast number of academic, social and cultural partnerships – a whopping two dozen at last count.

Enter Nike Greene, an energetic 1992 Roosevelt alumna who lives in North Portland and has two daughters, one of whom will attend Roosevelt as a freshman next year.

Three years ago, when it was time for her older daughter to start high school, she confesses that she had dismissed Roosevelt without much thought.

"I had heard the rumors, looked online and saw they haven't met benchmarks," Greene says. "For me, Roosevelt was not an option."

Instead, she enrolled her daughter at De La Salle North Catholic School, a North Portland private school.

Now, she says, one of the biggest challenges in boosting Roosevelt will be reaching out to those parents and community members who have the same mindset she once did.

She wants to clear up the misconceptions and shine a light on what the new Roosevelt has to offer, like a full band and choir program and even a recording studio for the first time in many years.

In past months Greene has visited the middle schools in the cluster to talk with students and staff; recently she fielded a question about school safety.

Greene explains that since the Portland Police Bureau's North Precinct closed, the police have opened a mobile office on the Roosevelt campus, so there's a constant presence in addition to the school's own security officers.

Freshmen and sophomores are required to stay on campus for lunch, and juniors and seniors may leave campus for lunch only with permission from their parents and teachers, based on good behavior and academics.

As for parents, in early December she began their weekly "parent campus day" on Wednesday mornings from 9 to 11:30 a.m. That's when parents are invited to campus to observe and help out. Nine parents showed up on the first day, and Greene is excited to keep up the momentum.

"The biggest thing is North Portland is a very relational community," she says. "The best way to sell Roosevelt is to get people on campus. ... The more people we have here, the more we show our students, staff and community that they're welcome. This is the St. Johns community, not just Roosevelt High School sitting alone by itself."