

STUDENT CENTERED

Combining Teacher Engagement and Student Dreams

BY JENNIFER MARTIN



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I'm the principal of Apalachee High School (AHS), a Title I school with 1,760 students nestled in Barrow County outside the small city of Winder, GA. Rebounding from the recession, the county once represented middle-class America and is now struggling to represent the lower middle class. Barrow County is a quaint place that survived on the textile industry, with the railroad running through town and prosperity looming.

Today, students come to school seeking their place in society. Teachers are eager to guide them, and they understand the power of building great relationships. However, teachers are looking for ways to better define their roles and to make the information they impart useful in the classroom.

Leaders in education are well aware that changing the culture of a school is the greatest task. Even if a faculty is willing to embrace change, the revolving door of initiatives can grow tiresome. Positivity is the key to a

successful school culture. We asked teachers to examine their own passions. Have you become apathetic? Are you part of the stagnant factor, focused only on completing your curriculum and potentially losing sight of the greater purpose?

Encourage Kids to Dream

We challenge teachers to stick to the standards while also remembering their audience. Students come to us each day with dreams. Some dreams involve going to a four-year college, while others focus on

fitting in to the workforce or standing strong as a leader in the military.

The bottom line is, the dreams of students should not go unrecognized. More than hope, there is a definitive path to achieve any dream, and teachers need to believe in this first, positively promoting this idea to students as they work their way through their high school journey. AHS made a decision to create positive professional learning opportunities specifically geared toward increasing critical thinking and student engagement.

The Power of a Plan

We realized we had to focus on the delivery of standards and the acquisition of knowledge but at different levels for all students. To start, across all departments, we had an engagement problem. This is common in schools across our state (and country) and is often blamed on student apathy. However, we can only control ourselves. So combating this issue begins with intentional planning. While our school has common summative assessments, we really needed to focus on the power of common formative assessments by making sure students were digesting the information as the year went along. Essentially this meant that teams began to plan formative assessment intentionally. We reasoned that if Apalachee High School assessed enough informally, there would never be a reason to retest after a summative assessment. Instead, remedial teaching happens in real time, and students show growth in real time.

Teachers saw the power of this impact, and the different departments determined to lead professional learning focused on engagement and critical

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MAKING IT WORK

Here's how you can implement an initiative that enables teachers to positively build relationships with students while also providing choice:

- Build leadership capacity by asking teacher leaders what areas of concern they have in relation to their content.
- Expand content parameters with a focus on strategy, providing teachers the opportunity to reflect on how this can work inside and outside of their core classes.
- Create a plan for positive professional learning based on strategies in use and their impact.
- Provide students and teachers choices relating to extended learning time use.

thinking. Specific books were purchased with a theme of engagement, but with a practical approach relating to content. Teachers experienced positive results in the classroom based on their reading. Professional learning sessions were then designed for the whole school to share the successful strategy in a practical format. If it was successful in English, what element of the strategy could be utilized in math? Our whole group sessions became focused on sharing the strategies, but the strategy initially came from small-group and content-specific professional learning. Instead of planning professional learning for the year, we planned it based on what was working in the classroom. Professional learning, as a result, happens in real time.

In addition to this specific focus on engagement and critical thinking, our students were able to choose what they wanted to participate in during their R.O.A.R. (Ready, On task, Attentive, and Responsible) time. Each day, students attended

an extended learning session for 30 minutes. Our teachers were able to choose their R.O.A.R. offering, and students were able to sign up for this time based on their interest. Other options include book studies, journalism, STEM integration, and chess club. If students begin to fail their core academic classes, they are placed in remedial R.O.A.R., providing them interventions and support until their work improves. The thematic choices for R.O.A.R. allow teachers to positively build relationships with students while also providing choice.

Beginning this school year, we asked teachers: “How will you intentionally engage your students—daily—by encouraging crucial thinking? And, how will you positively contribute to the culture of our school?” These questions prompted persistent and positive professional learning, which benefits and engages all students. 📖

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