Uncommon Schools

EXCELLENCE NORTH★STAR COLLEGIATE TRUE NORTH PREPARATORY

SPRINGSTEEN CHARTER ELEMENTARY SCHOOL: *BORN TO RUN?*

A Case Study for Uncommon Schools

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OVERVIEW

In the late 1990s, Newark was seeing a boom of new public schools—both district and charter. With a seed grant from the Bruce Springsteen Foundation, the Springsteen Charter Elementary School opened in 1999 with forty Kindergarteners. Marc Jones joined the school as its founding principal. Jones had worked for 10 years in Newark public schools before jumping at the opportunity to lead his own school. He knew the challenges facing Newark public schools:

- The Newark School District was one of the lowest performing districts in New Jersey on the four mandated state tests (assessments of Math and Literacy in grades 3, 4, 8, and 11). In 2003, while approximately 80% of the students statewide scored proficient or higher in Literacy and 65% scored proficient or higher in Math, in the Newark School District only 53% were proficient in Literacy and 36% were proficient in Math.
- The Newark District was overtaken by the state in 2000 due to its repeated failures to improve student achievement. The district received millions of extra dollars of federal and state aid to tackle the problem (at one point, the District was spending more money per pupil that 95% of the districts across the state). Little to no change occurred in student achievement.
- According to US Census data, Newark was the 2nd poorest city in the country. Moreover, state department analysts estimated that only 7% of Newark students attended four-year colleges, and fewer than half of that number actually graduated.

Jones was undaunted. His prior school had been considered one of the higher achieving schools in Newark, yet it was also located in the only middle class section of the city. Jones was looking for a greater challenge, and he was thrilled when Springsteen Charter School decided to locate itself in the Central Ward. In fact, as he perused the list of incoming students each year, he noted that they came in large part from some of the lowest performing schools in the lowest performing ward in the district. If he could make an impact here, he thought, he could prove that any child could truly succeed.

Here is a brief list of the Springsteen Charter School's key characteristics:

- 190 students, grades K-4 (as of 2004)
- 85% African-American, 15% Latino (Latino contingent is growing; all 2nd/3rd generation)
- 90% free/reduced lunch
- 95% of the parents did not graduate from college
- Built on an academic focus of improving math instruction and greater parental involvement (all students participate in an 1½ hour math blocks every day);
- Financially struggling: the school is $20,000 in the red because four students left mid-year and were not replaced (thus losing $32,000 in revenue); and

- Holds to a philosophy of not classifying SPED or ESL unless extreme cases (their 3rd grade class had no classified students)
- During a school evaluation visit, the Department of Education noted that Jones had developed a fairly good discipline/classroom management system throughout the school; especially commendable given the notoriety of many of the neighborhood elementary schools for having little control over student behavior
- Teaching staff was young and eager to succeed. However, the youth of the staff also caused high turnover (returning to grad school, starting a family, etc.)

CURRENT SITUATION

It is 2003, and Springsteen Charter Elementary School has now been open for five years. Jones' original group of students had entered the 4th grade and were the first group to take the state test—New Jersey 3rd grade Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJASK3). Given the fact that New Jersey had no assessment in grades K-2, Jones decided to use the DRA, a leveled reading assessment, and the Stanford Nine, a national standardized achievement test, to measure student progress in those interim years. He was fairly pleased with the growth over the first three years, especially the work of a phenomenal Kindergarten teacher who was particularly strong in Math. When Jones opened the test results for the NJASK3, he expected to see similar results to the Stanford Nine and DRA. Unfortunately, he was greatly disappointed: his 3rd graders performed moderately better than the District in Literacy (60% proficient or higher), and at almost the same level in Math--35% of his students scored proficient or higher (see attachment, "NJASK3 Results").

Jones and his faculty couldn't understand what went wrong. Although they had data for all the classes in the school, Jones felt the best approach would be a cohort analysis focusing in on the current 4th graders, specifically focused on Mathematics. Jones dug up the results and compiled them into one table (see attachment, "SAT Nine Scores"). He then pulled the most important information from the 3rd grade exam (see attachment, "NJASK3 Results"). After a thorough analysis, he and came to the following conclusions:

- Math results showed disconnect between performance on Stanford Nine and State tests. The state test was much more rigorous: many open-ended questions; much critical thinking required. In fact, as Mr. Jones glanced at a 2000 version of the state exam (all state exams in New Jersey are kept secret; no other information was available other than this one practice exam), he felt that the test was a good measure of Mathematics, albeit very difficult. He could see how his students would have difficulties with the intense problem-solving required.
- Jones decided to switch exams to find one more aligned to his state test. After listening to presentations from sale representatives for Stanford Nine, ITBS, and TerraNova, he concluded that TerraNova was the best match.
- Jones also called the company that made the Math program they were using and asked them to confirm that they were aligned to the New Jersey 3rd grade state tests and standards. The textbook company immediately provided an extensive spreadsheet that detailed every New Jersey standard and where it appeared in their textbook. Jones was satisfied and stayed with the same Math program.

Jones felt he had the beginning of a data-driven decision making plan, so he set forward to implement his plan:

- Springsteen School implemented a TerraNova pre-test in September 2003. In the interest of time, they chose a pre-test version that had no open-ended writing questions included
- One month later, teachers received a detailed report that broke down the results question by question, standard by standard.
- Teachers looked through results and filled out the following analysis sheet:

Skills/Questions to be Taught:	**Timeline (when I will teach this):**	**Assessment Type:**	**Approximate Date for Assessment:**
Priority 1 (most important skills I will teach & assess):			
Priority 2 (second set of skills I will teach and assess):			
Priority 3 (skills that I might not be able to get to):	**Reason why I might not get to it:**		
Moving Forward: What key lesson plans do you need to add/change based on the information you analyzed today? What types of assessment do you need to add/improve based on the information you analyzed today? Pick one area (e.g., a particular assessment piece, set of skills, unit, etc.) where you might want assistance in improving student learning:			

- Teachers filled out sheet with varying levels of thoroughness (newer teachers and some of high-achieving teachers worked most diligently), and they all agreed that certain TerraNova questions were simply unattainable at each grade level; so they focused on the rest of the questions

From that point forward, Jones devoted much of his energy and limited professional development time to implement this data-driven process. He scheduled four follow-up workshops/meetings throughout the year, each 3 hours in length. In the first, teachers met in groups and brainstormed ideas for performance assessments based on the priority ("power") standards. Each teacher then implemented a performance assessment for each quarter. At the second meeting, teachers reported how well their students were doing on meeting those standards. In subsequent professional development workshops, teachers created mini-TerraNova-like assessments to measure progress, and they shared the areas in which they thought they were being successful. They plastered the walls in the teacher room with the priority standards and marked down the progress from quarter to quarter ("Look!" proclaimed one teacher proudly. "See how all my students have moved from novice to proficient on the priority standard of subtraction? I knew the "key words" strategy was the key to improvement!"). Teachers completed detailed standards-based report cards by filling in how well each student had mastered each priority standard (exceeds proficient, proficient, developing or novice). It was a very time-intensive process, and Jones even devoted multiple teacher meetings/workshops to

the task to give teachers more time. Teachers also proudly reported how many levels their students had progressed on the DRAs—"Almost all of my 2nd graders are reading on the 3rd grade level!" When Jones asked them about the students who weren't making as much progress, the teachers reassured him that they had different developmental paces and that they would be fine over time.

Jones implemented every strategy he had learned in his leadership training. He did daily walkthroughs and occasionally asked kids how they felt they were doing with their learning. He was so proud when one student commented, "I've learned more this year than ever before." One month before the year-end TerraNova and NJASK3 exams, teachers stopped any additional formal teaching and focused intensely on test preparation strategies.

Late in June, Jones saw sitting on his desk the distinctive box that held the results on the TerraNova assessments. He had already reviewed that year's NJASK3 results, which revealed the worst Math scores in the school's history. However, Jones was confident that his work in the K-2 grades would yield results. He opened the box, and to his disappointment, the scores had not improved. In fact, in some case the percentage of students proficient had declined. None of his rookie teachers showed growth, and two of his well-respected teachers actually went backwards.

Jones put his head in his hands and sighed. Back to the drawing board.

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS:

1. What are the key issues facing Springsteen Charter School in its goal to improve Math instruction?
2. Analyze Jones' analysis, decisions and actions:
    a. What did he do well?
    b. What went wrong in his attempt to do data-driven decision making?
3. Specifically in the area of Math instruction, what should Jones be doing in the upcoming school year? What are the key assessment/data decisions he needs to make?

PERFORMANCE DATA

Attached are three sets of data that are designed to help your group assess the school's performance to date. Obviously providing you with all possible data on the school over the past four years would be impossible to review given our time constraints. Therefore, the attached are meant to provide you with some key data in the hope that they will be helpful in identifying possible trends and generating some thoughtful questions.

Attachment 1: NJASK3 (NJ Assessment of Skills and Knowledge 3rd Grade) Math Results 2004. (Note that this is the second class from Springsteen Charter School to take the NJASK3)

Attachment 2: Stanford 9 & TerraNova results, 2000-2003, for cohort that took 2004 NJASK3 exam. (Note: remember that this cohort took the Stanford 9 for three years and switched to TerraNova in the 3rd grade as Mr. Jones changed the whole school to TerraNova that year.)