



Woodbridge Middle School

Getting Better Together

Today's Woodbridge (VA) Middle School in no way resembles the school that existed in 2005. Then, the students were mostly White and few qualified for the free and reduced-price meals program; today, there is no majority group among the 1,038 students and almost 50% of the students qualify for such support. Then, student achievement was average; now, it is significantly above average as measured by the Virginia state assessments. The story of the school's breakthrough success is the story of a strong leader who works collaboratively with an entire school staff to teach each student.

Because of district boundary shifts in 2004, Woodbridge experienced a rapid demographic change but the entire staff felt passionately that stereotypes about poverty and expectations would not enter their building. To support their beliefs, the staff members and administrators knew that they would need to modify their instructional practices to meet a broader range of student needs. Working together, they scoured the research for what would work best for their students. As a group, they decided that all changes would be research-based and purposeful.

After a year of study, the faculty decided to restructure the school's teams to offer a single-sex option along with traditional coed teams at each grade level in core courses. Their study of brain research convinced them that all instructional activities had to be differentiated, and that if they were, student engagement would increase and would be followed by improved achievement. Parents also were involved in the process and participated in the decision making, believing that single-sex classes would be appropriate for some students. Six years after the implementation, Woodbridge parents remain staunch defenders of having that option.

The whole leadership team presented its change proposal to Steven Walts, the superintendent of Prince William County (VA) Schools, who supported the program because it was research-based and highly collaborative to ensure sustainability. To support the plan, he and

Woodbridge Principal Sky-les Calhoun committed to providing ongoing professional development that would enhance teachers' instructional delivery skills and build instructional leadership throughout the school. Today the single-sex classes are fully subscribed and all teams are performing at high levels.

A collaborative philosophy permeates the school. Teams rule the building. There are grade-level teams and content-specific teams as well as a literacy team and a motivation team. The faculty members meet regularly, and the principal's advisory council meets monthly. The schedule supports teacher collaboration and joint planning. Instruction is designed to meet the diverse learning styles of the students. The purpose—the overarching focus—of all of the meetings is to improve students' academic and social-emotional growth.

The relationships that are forged by the adults working together are reflected in the relationships that the adults have with the students and that the students have with one another. The students are acutely aware of how their teachers treat them; especially how Woodbridge is different than their previous school experiences. Calhoun proudly points out that the positive school climate is reflected in his students' happy faces. Everyone associated with the school feels that these relationships have changed student outcomes—all students are fully engaged in their instruction. The results make Woodbridge one of the highest-performing middle schools in the state of Virginia.



Learn and Earn, Woodbridge Middle School's interest-based advisory program, meets twice a month for students to set academic goals and earn time in special interest clubs or activities by meeting those goals.



Leading in Transition

Being a leader through transitions requires sensitivity and skill. Principal Calhoun reflects on how his leadership style evolved over time.

Woodbridge Middle School has always celebrated a tradition of excellence. When I became principal in 2005, I was not given the task of turning around a failing school, but there was a major boundary change that affected the school's demographics because of the opening of a new middle school. There was concern from the school community that that change would end Woodbridge's history of academic excellence. Our job—the staff members' and my job—was to reinvent the way we would educate our

students. First and foremost, we built the belief that all students could learn at high levels. We focused on building relationships with students by motivating them to learn, using collaboration to analyze data that would drive instruction, differentiating instruction, and looking at each student as an individual to determine what they needed to be successful.

When my leadership role began at Woodbridge, it was more of a transformational leader role. As an instructional



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WOODBRIDGE, VA

PRINCIPAL

Skyles A. Calhoun Jr.

GRADES

6–8

ENROLLMENT

1,038

COMMUNITY

Suburban

DEMOGRAPHICS

Hispanic	33%
Black/African American	26%
White	25%
Asian/Pacific Islander	8%
Other	8%
Free or reduced-price meals eligible	48%
Special education ...	12%
English language learners	25%

Note: Demographic data provided by school in spring 2011.

leader, I focused on managing the school by establishing roles, focusing on teams, and supervising teachers. As a school community, we faced challenges in the areas of math and literacy, but the real key to our success was in my ability to change—transform—the way we went about the business of teaching our students. We had to change the culture in the building, and we also knew that doing so would probably mean some staff turnover, which it did. Our lens needed to narrow to allow us to focus on the individual child. We needed to revise our school’s mission, and I needed to build a support team to help create our new vision and push it forward.

My focus on collaborative leadership could begin only after I had a support structure in place to help me move forward. Personalizing the school environment was the first step. Today, our vision remains: we believe in an inclusive environment where all are respected and achievement is expected.

As the principal, one major role I played was to support staff members by providing common planning times so that they could work in professional learning communities that would focus on the big ideas, data analysis, and the development of rigorous academic activities for the 90-minute block schedule. Teachers develop lesson plans and units using differentiated instructional strategies to maximize the learning process and standards-based instruction for a diverse student population. Technology is integrated into all lessons through interactive whiteboards in all core classes; document cameras, computers on wheels, and iPad carts are all available to enhance instruction. Content and language objectives are written in student-friendly terms and posted each day. Students are encouraged to participate, and teachers understand that building on background knowledge increases participation and achievement. Staff members write formative and summative assessments in advance to



Principal
Skyles Calhoun

assess student mastery at each stage of the learning process.

I believe that students need to be a part of the decision-making process. Two years ago, I asked the students to respond to a one-question survey: “What do you wish that your teachers knew and understood about middle school students?” The student responses were insightful, and one response kept surfacing. Students were telling me that

although they understood that they were in school to learn and that academic success was their goal, they wished the teachers would understand that they were still kids and that every once in a while, they needed to just have some fun. With staff consensus, we started our version of Learn and Earn, which was designed to allow students and teachers to have fun together and to provide a vehicle to further build relationships between students and adults.

It is my job as an instructional leader to introduce, promote, and provide resources to achieve our school goals. Continued professional development opportunities are happening at Woodbridge. The most recent development is the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP), an instructional model that provides strategies to students who are in need of differentiated instruction because of cultural and linguistic needs. Coaching and advanced professional development is offered to staff members throughout the year.

As a collaborative leader, I encourage other school leaders to continue creating 21st century schools that focus more on student-centered and personalized programs. By providing support services and offering academic rigor in classrooms, the educators at Woodbridge are preparing students in the middle for high school graduation. And finally, I suggest that you believe in your students and make sure that they know that you care about them. Many of our students simply needed to learn to believe in themselves!

Leadership Teams in Sync

Successful teams develop a rhythm for working together. Members of Woodbridge's leadership team articulate their recipe for success.

Although many ideas and programs exist and are attempted in schools, only those that have been carefully examined and applied will achieve positive educational outcomes. As with any innovative idea, three major components must be implemented with fidelity for any possibility of success: collective collaboration and commitment from the school; attention to planning, including professional staff development opportunities; and plans for growth with ongoing professional development to continue to best meet the needs of all students.

One example of how this approach was put into practice at Woodbridge was with the decision to institute our single-sex program. After much reading, research, and discussion with the Woodbridge staff members about the possibilities of implementing a single-sex program, a vote was taken as to whether or not to move forward. Without the staff support, we would not have moved forward. Staff members voted 100% in favor of providing a single-sex option for our school community. We then took the idea to the school community, holding several evening information sessions for parents and students. The community's favorable response allowed us to move on to planning and professional development.

Wanting to have the best possible training, we went directly to the source that we had used for most of our research, Leonard Sax, a family doctor, founder of the National Association for Same Sex Public Education; and author of *Why Gender Matters*, *Boys Adrift*, and *Girls on the Edge*. Sax presented to the parents and also conducted the initial professional development training sessions for staff members. We implemented the program



for grade 6 and added grades 7 and 8 in two subsequent years. Throughout the process, we continued to provide ongoing high-quality professional development and invited Abigail James, author of *Teaching the Male Brain* and *Teaching the Female Brain* to present. After just two short years, Woodbridge was being praised as having one of the most successful single-sex programs in a coed school in the nation, and staff members were asked to present at national conferences.

For any school to begin a new program, there must be an identified need for the program and a common cultural belief and commitment established to support the tenets of the program. Communication and collaboration are essential to establishing the commitment of the staff. Questions and concerns from all stakeholders must be addressed in a transparent, practical manner to provide a sense of comfort and support. From that point, a common culture and “buy-in” will begin to be established. As a result of the first step of commitment, Woodbridge faculty and staff members came to a common belief: children first.

In 2012, Woodbridge teachers are being trained in the SIOP methods of teaching and are participating in Teachers as Readers. Those two programs are being implemented because staff members identified a need for improvement in two areas: English language





Differentiation for Improved Achievement

When Woodbridge created teams to teach single-sex core content classes using the same state standards as the coed teams, it changed the way Woodbridge teachers approach the curriculum for all students. These teachers have found that single-sex engagement strategies work in all classrooms.

The research that the staff at Woodbridge has studied sets the stage for the types of instructional strategies used in single-sex classes. Some brain research suggests that in girls the language areas of the brain develop before the areas used for spatial relations; the reverse is said to be true for boys. With that knowledge, teachers develop lessons to accommodate this difference. For example, use of verbal and written language in a girl's classroom helps to ease the potential stress of the math concepts. Finding reading materials that appeal to the boys help get them interested and comfortable with the reading and writing curricula.

Some of the known differences between the sexes help to create conducive environments for learning. Girls have better auditory acuity and more sensitive hearing. Teachers of girls use a softer voice and often play soft background music. Conversely, boys have better visual acuity, are more tactile learners, and are more physical in nature. Teachers of boys typically will use a louder, more direct voice and implement movement in their lessons.

Creating an appropriate classroom environment is part of implementing instructional strategies that are specific to each sex. Research suggests that girls learn better in warm lighting; therefore, the use of lamps instead of overhead lights meets this need. Boys tend to learn better in brighter lighting, so their classrooms will be quite a bit more illuminated than the girls'. As verbal learners, girls have a need to discuss and share their work. Desks in groups allow for the girls to do just that. The physical movement boys need dictates a different type of desk, one with a swinging foot rest that allows the boys a choice to move their feet or stand rather than sit if they choose.

Instructional strategies are selected on the basis of brain research and the differences between the sexes. An example of this is that girls are more apt to remember material when it is tied to memory through language. Incorporating a deliberate time for the girls to discuss and share their learning with their peers is a part of every lesson in a girls' classroom. Boys are more likely to remember information when it is presented visually.

Girls and boys approach risk differently, and teachers of each take this into consideration when planning instruction. Boys tend to enjoy taking risks and may overestimate their abilities. This leads to their belief that they are successful because they are smart. They think uncertainty is a game or a challenge. Teachers of boys may do extra team-building activities to teach the boys how to work together. Girls tend not to like risks and may underestimate their abilities. They believe success is from hard work. They think uncertainty is unsafe. Providing daily experiences that allow the girls to feel safe is of utmost importance in a girls' classroom. Although these are generalizations, they have allowed us to customize instruction to maximize learning for each student.



learners and professional learning community structures. The teachers are committed to the programs because they identified those areas as being in need of improvement; plans have been established to offer the professional development; and the professional development will be ongoing, not just a one-workshop attempt for improvement. Common planning time enables teachers to discuss common benchmark and other assessments; to meet with parents and students; and to modify and adjust instruction that is data-driven and specific to the needs of students, both those in single-sex and those in coed classes.

Beyond the process, programs do not make successful schools. Successful schools are schools in which there are healthy relationships, teacher-to-teacher and teacher-to-student. Successful schools are schools where the kids know that you care about them as people before thinking about their needs as students. Successful schools are schools where students excel because of their teachers, because they do not want to let the teachers down. The students know that we believe in them, and in turn, they believe in us. We do not lower the expectations; we raise the floor of support.

The backbone and foundation for Woodbridge's success lies in the common culture that the faculty, the administrators, the community, and the students have built together. Faculty members are able to cultivate that culture through our common planning time and professional learning community structures; common benchmark assessments and the discussions that follow to guide and inform future planning; and finally, planned intervention, remediation, and enrichment for each student. **PL**