

Respect and Freedom

The language that students and teachers use to describe what they like best about M. O. Ramay Junior High School is strikingly similar. Both groups talk at length about how they are treated with respect and given freedom. Teachers describe the freedom to teach and students describe the freedom to be an individual. Both groups quickly add that with this freedom comes the responsibility for academic success.

Students come to Ramay from multiple Fayetteville, AR, middle schools and matriculate with students from the district's other junior high school into a single grades 10–12 high school. Over 50% of the students come from low-income homes, and almost 15% of the students receive special education services. State accountability assessments are given in 8th-grade English and math, Algebra 1 and 2, and geometry classes.

The challenges inherent in this structure necessitate a high degree of collaboration as well as significant attention given to the needs of every student. For academic growth to be

demonstrated in this setting, instruction must begin before the students reach the building. Teams of counselors and teachers work on articulation so they can design appropriate instruction for each student. Use of multiple types of data is ingrained in this process.

In 2006, Ramay was placed on the “school improvement” list because of its failure to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) for the previous two years. Led by the principal, the staff thoroughly examined the data on an individual-student level and discovered that the school did not meet its goals because of small numbers of students who missed only a few questions on the state tests. Faculty meetings were restructured to enable staff members to focus on instructional implications across content areas. Technology was used to facilitate this process. Online faculty meetings—videos accessed through the school's Web site—are now used to disseminate essential information in a flexible, convenient format. All “real-time” faculty meetings are devoted almost





exclusively to instruction and professional development.

Specifically, the master schedule was modified to give all English and math teachers a common departmental planning time. The math department's common time extends across the lunch periods so that every student has daily access to his or her math teacher for support. Social studies and science teachers also share a common lunch. Such collaboration has resulted in knowledge maps that detail what students should know and be able to do in all content areas as well as interdisciplinary vocabulary, strategies, and rubrics that are posted for all to see and use.

Students proudly point to the

knowledge maps and the mastery graphs in the halls while describing classroom expectations. This evidence of a unified approach to instruction underscores the school's philosophy that the cochair of the math department articulated when he said, "We all teach for mastery, so we teach, test, and reteach. It's what we do. It may not be easy, but it's our job to give the kids what they need. It shouldn't be a mystery." The same hands-on instructional strategies are used with special education students and English language learners who are included in regular classrooms with special educator support.

Academic improvements were quick and have continued expo-

nentially. The school has made AYP (schoolwide and in all subgroups) the last four years, and Ramay students outperformed their peers at other schools throughout the state. More impressive is that gaps in student achievement across all groups have been dramatically reduced or eliminated and performance levels have increased.

Principal Matt Saferite attributes this rapid improvement in academic achievement to the collaborative atmosphere in the school. He feels that it is his job to give teachers and students the tools and time necessary to do the work. It is important to him that students and staff members are satisfied with what they are doing.



Ramay's student center replaces the traditional guidance office—the goal is to make school a safe place for every student intellectually, emotionally, and physically.

He's convinced that satisfaction leads to greater reflection and collaboration.

To gauge the level of satisfaction in the school, surveys are given each semester to staff and students so that adjustments can be made to maintain a highly reflective, collaborative environment. In addition to the satisfaction surveys, students, in their advisories, take a needs assessment that focuses on career goals and social development. The results from this assessment inform the guidance program.

Counselor-led group discussions with full student participation are the norm at the school. The student center, a nontraditional guidance office, supports this emphasis on personalization and developmental counseling activities. National standards for guidance counseling programs are fully implemented. This emphasis on collaboration and continual feedback extends to parents and district staff members. Everyone in the school community accepts the responsibility for maintaining a safe learning environment.

To support their individual growth needs, faculty members design professional development activities, participate in professional learning teams (PLTs), and report back to the entire staff. PLTs are currently studying several topics, including the neurodevelopment of adolescents and the basics of strengths-based leadership. Teachers are encouraged to try new strategies and techniques. PLT members then help evaluate the success of these efforts. The goal is always improved student achievement. Taken together, these strategies foster personalization and collaboration.

School improvement can be elusive. Leaders often wonder where to begin and how to sustain growth. Stereotypes about school context and demographics also figure in the mix. The staff at Ramay embraced the challenges they faced by looking inward, finding strengths, building upon those strengths, and moving forward. Relying on the tenets of collaboration, personalization and curriculum, and assessment strategies from *Breaking Ranks*, the staff has created an atmosphere of mutual respect and learning.

NO DISTRACTIONS
Matt Saferite believes that a principal's role is to be an influential leader who facilitates the creation of an environment that enables teachers to teach and students to learn without distraction. He identified three areas where he has focused his energy.

Hiring practices. The success of Ramay depends on one thing: the individual and collective strength of the faculty and staff. My hiring practice is one of the most significant areas to which I could point as the



reason for the success Ramay has had the last few years. Newly hired staff members support the culture that the current staff and my predecessor Nick Tschepikow have established.

I am consistently told by applicants and new hires, that my interview is the most rigorous of any they have experienced. My interviews consistently center on five or six major themes that are woven together, as opposed to a laundry list of questions. I include as many teachers as are willing in my interviews to get multiple perspectives of an applicant and to gauge an applicant's fit.

I have the luxury at Ramay—due to my predecessor, the reputation of the school, and the district pay scale—of having a significant number of applicants for nearly every position. Almost without exception, I will interview someone multiple times before they are hired. Tschepikow was the most rigorous reference checker I've ever known or heard of. He helped me develop that ability.

I actively recruit applicants. I never approach a potential applicant who is on contract with another district, but once someone applies to our district and I think they might be a good fit for Ramay, they are fair game, and I am active and pretty relentless in pursuing them.

The attributes that I want in a teacher include (in order):

- Excellent personal character
- The desire and ability to work with other faculty members and all kids
- Proven understanding (not necessarily experience) of the relationships among curriculum, instruction, and assessment and excellent content knowledge.

Master schedule. The master schedule is one of the biggest determi-

nants of the success of the school year. When students are given the opportunity to take the classes they want and need and when teachers are given the opportunity to teach the classes in a constantly improving structure, the intangible human factor that leads to high levels of motivation and satisfaction is increased.

Professional development. Facultywide professional development is ongoing throughout the year through our live faculty meetings. Although there is room to improve in this area, generally our staff is satisfied with our professional development activities and these activities are a benefit to their practice. We also allow for small groups of faculty to work together in collaborative practice to study specific topics, models, or books.

We also encourage teachers to pursue certification through the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. We currently have five National Board certified teachers, and several teachers are working through the process.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

Departments work together closely and meet regularly at Ramay. The department chairpeople meet as a leadership team. When the team was asked what other schools can learn from Ramay, team members went to the teachers in their departments for answers.

WORLD LANGUAGES DEPARTMENT

- We work together to do what is best for our kids. We've analyzed data and worked on the areas of testing that were our low points. But what is more important, every

M. O. Ramay Junior High School

FAYETTEVILLE, ARKANSAS

Principal

Matt Saferite

Grades

8–9

Enrollment

592

Community

Rural

Demographics

White.....	64%
Black/African American	19%
Hispanic	14%
Asian/Pacific Islander.....	2%
American Indian.....	1%
Free or reduced-price meals eligible	51%
Special education	13%
English language learners.....	10%

Note: Demographic data are from spring 2010.



What Teachers Want From a Principal

Matt Saferite proudly points to a tattered piece of chart paper tacked to his office wall. The chart paper captures the discussion that he had at his first faculty meeting as principal in 2006. Saferite asked his staff what they wanted from him. Here's what the staff said:

- Be supportive
- Be fair
- Be empathetic, approachable, honest, and respectful of everyone
- Be interested in my life
- Communicate clear expectations
- Provide guidance, then let me do my job
- Work together; facilitate our work
- Use my strengths
- Help me see what to do so I can improve
- Move me out of my comfort zone

- Provide constructive criticism
- Recognize that one size doesn't fit all for students and adults
- Ask for feedback
- Listen to the feedback
- Use the feedback.

Saferite uses this list to guide decisions and set direction for the building. He routinely touches base with staff members through various means, including using anonymous surveys, to be sure that he's meeting these expectations. In turn, he wants every adult in the school to adhere to these same tenets when working with their students. He believes there is no real difference in how an administrator and teacher should work together and how a teacher and student should work together.

teacher at Ramay is willing to work with every other teacher to move our students forward in their education. Even though we're a junior high and so many kids are taking high school-level courses, we have the kind of close-knit faculty that you see in most elementary schools. It's a nurturing, caring environment that lets kids be who they are and succeed academically at the same time.

MATH DEPARTMENT

■ As a first-year teacher, there is a sense of nervousness about how well you will fit in with the teachers who have already established themselves in the school. The staff, regardless of the department, is welcoming and eager to lend a helping hand. Aside from the welcoming nature of the staff, the

freedom that teachers have to develop their own strategies, assessments, and teaching techniques is one of the top reasons why Ramay has been successful in challenging students to push their minds to a whole new level.

- We have a fourth-period lunch/prep for math teachers so that they can get extra help.
- We have creative teachers who teach logic, concepts, thinking skills, and presentation skills, and we use the idea of peer teaching to maximize student learning.
- If we don't have the answers, we look to our department, colleagues, building leaders, and neighboring schools to find the solution.
- We understand that learning doesn't always occur in our 50 minutes of class time. We allow

time for learning and we don't force it for the sake of the 50-minute period. It takes time for learning to transfer.

- We don't focus on test prep, but on thinking skills and problem solving.
- We allow time for students to wrestle with their learning (even if it is difficult). It is important to teach perseverance by giving students multiple opportunities for learning to occur and to show their learning through journals, formative assessment, and tests.
- We manage our classrooms as facilitators of learning, not just deliverers of learning.
- One very positive aspect of Ramay is the excellent relationship that students have with their teachers. The kids know that their teachers are willing to go an extra mile



with them. That may mean being available for tutoring before and after school or at lunch or just being there to talk about whatever is on their minds. The second thing that makes Ramay outstanding is the trust between faculty members and administrators to carry out duties beyond basic expectations.

SCIENCE DEPARTMENT

- We have a great special education/inclusion program. Meetings are held regularly with several teachers, examiners, specialists, and parents to make sure that students' needs are being met.
- Our staff has a commitment to making assessments rigorous and relevant to students. We are working across departments to make assessments that are interdisciplinary and applicable in the real world.
- We have fair and consistent management systems in place.
- Incorporating multiple disciplines into activities helps students understand better.
- We use feedback from teachers and students to make decisions.
- Our teachers search for summer-time professional development to motivate and upgrade their teaching. Many teachers have advanced degrees or are currently working on obtaining those degrees to improve their teaching.

ENGLISH DEPARTMENT

- By having small class sizes, we get to know our students very well. We know what their individual needs and struggles are and can help them with those. Even so, we don't excuse any student from meeting the same expectations as the others. We just help them dis-

cover the personal tools that they need to meet those expectations.

- We try to focus on teaching the students applicable, practical skills. We are always trying to connect what we are learning in class to how it can be used outside of class. We don't focus as much on the names of grammar rules as we do on their correct use. We focus on the thought process involved in writing more than just the end product. We connect this process to thinking processes that people must use when communicating with others. We also don't teach something just because we like it. Every lesson and unit is aligned with state frameworks and now national standards.
- Teachers in this school are committed to seeing learning take place every day. This is not a school where students have a "free day" in their classes.
- We engage students in hands-on, active assignments.
- We do not teach to the test; we teach our students to read and write effectively.
- We also believe that our school is successful because of our principal's leadership. Mr. Saferite has a vision for Ramay that began five years ago. We have a strong faculty spirit, and Mr. Saferite is very mindful of this when hiring new teachers.

THE SCHOOL OVERALL

- One of the main strengths and unique attributes of Ramay is that teachers, staff and faculty members, and administrators know that if a student is living in a car, has had no food, cannot shower, or has no money for supplies, those needs



must be met before any sort of true lasting learning can take place. The basic needs of a person have to come first. That includes the need to feel safe, appreciated, and valued.

- Programs that provide school supplies, free and reduced-price lunches, locker snack bags, and the like help students get what they need. If necessary, teachers provide paper and pencils so that students can work. Some teachers even have snacks for kids who have gone without lunch or breakfast or will go home to no dinner. It is this kind of compassion that breeds success.
- Parents are shown genuine respect and are included as team players in their children's education. Ramay strives to make parents aware of how important they are in helping their children get the best education possible through phone calls, letters home, meetings in person, etc. Parents are contacted regularly! **PL**