

VETERANS MEMORIAL FAMILY SCHOOL: A CASE STUDY IN SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATION

OUTCOMES

At the time of publication the collaboration efforts at Veterans Memorial Family School (“Vets”) are only nine months old, but already the joint administration/educator teams have evaluated the school’s needs, set goals, and have started:

- An after-school tutoring program to raise student achievement
- Developing promotional videos and posters to help build enrollment
- A campus beautification event and community back-to-school barbeque to improve school culture
- Transitioning to becoming a trauma-informed school
- Using restorative practices, including peace circles
- Giving every student two books to take home twice yearly through Bridge of Books Foundation

Note: Vets has been part of NJEA’s Priority Schools initiative since August 2019. Through labor-management collaboration they’re building the relationships, structures, and processes to sustain and grow this work even after their Priority Schools support ends.

SCHOOL OVERVIEW:

- Urban elementary school (pre-K through 8th)
- Camden City Public School District, New Jersey
- Community school
- New Jersey Education Association Priority School Initiative School
- 369 students
- 73% eligible for free lunch

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Coming back from the brink of closure, Veterans Memorial Family School in Camden, New Jersey, was facing a crisis of maintaining enrollment, improving student achievement, and enhancing school climate and culture. As part of their efforts to keep the school open, staff from the Camden Education Association and New Jersey Education Association negotiated with the Commissioner of Education to include labor-management collaboration and shared decision making as an integral part of their work to improve the school. The labor-management collaboration framework supports their existing community school model in implementing a variety of programs to advance their three identified goals: to build their enrollment, improve math and language arts scores, and improve the school culture and climate. And, the relationships, structures, and processes developed through labor-management collaboration will be in place to sustain and grow this work into the future.

THE CHALLENGE

In the spring of 2019, the Camden School District announced that Veterans Memorial Family School, affectionately known as Vets, would close at the end of the school year, primarily due to lack of funds for building maintenance. Since Vets had become a community school as part of their Priority Schools initiative, its value to the community had only grown and response to the announcement was swift. An amazing fight was launched from the students, educators, administrators, the Camden Education Association (CEA), and the New Jersey Education Association (NJEA). The CEA president even undertook a three-day walk from Camden to the education commissioner's office in Trenton to raise awareness! By mid-June, their efforts were successful and the district was able to secure emergency funding to remain open. However, the closure had been announced and many Vets parents had already enrolled their children in other schools for the 2019-2020 school year. Vets had less than three months to prepare for the new school year.

JOURNEY TO SUCCESS

Everyone involved realized this required “all hands on deck,” so faculty and the administration got to work. Carolyn Schultz, Vets' NJEA Priority Schools consultant, had attended labor-management collaboration training through the New Jersey Public School Labor Management Collaborative. The Collaborative is a coalition of education groups and educator unions that train on and support labor-management collaboration to advance student-centered goals. Vets realized that implementing collaborative partnerships between educators and administration could help them launch a summer public relations campaign, and put the framework in place to support other school improvement issues.

Vets' journey was supported by a variety of resources and activities. A grant from NJEA and New Jersey Sustainability allowed Vets to bring in Dr. Saul Rubinstein, director of Rutgers' Collaborative School Leadership Initiative and co-founder of the New Jersey Public School Labor Management Collaborative (“NJ Collaborative”), to jointly train the two Vets leadership teams. Dr. Rubinstein and educator facilitators trained by the NJ Collaborative from a nearby district worked with the teams on using collaborative techniques and structures to advance student-centered goals.

Vets is somewhat unique in having two teams lead their school collaboration structure. The Labor-Management Collaborative team, formed in June 2019, focuses on Vets-specific goals that align with

IMPLEMENTING COLLABORATION:

Vets has begun putting the structures in place that will help sustain and grow their success:

- Commit to student-centered collaboration
- Start somewhere: build enrollment
- Create a standing Labor-Management Collaborative team
- Joint labor & management learning about collaboration
- Communicating efforts and successes within the school and to the community

district goals. The PSI team has broader goals such as cultivating a community of teacher leaders and supporting a thriving community. Both teams are made up of Vets educators, the principal and other administration staff, and a parent liaison. The teams have members in common, keep each other informed, and share a common vision of building the strongest community school they can.

At their second meeting, the PSI and Labor-Management Collaborative teams were able to jointly define three goals for Vets:

- Build enrollment
- Improve math and language arts scores
- Improve the culture and climate



The highest priority was growing their enrollment after so many families left when they heard the school was closing. They decided to develop promotional videos – in both English and Spanish-- to show Vets students and families talking about the school. They also sponsored a student-designed poster contest, with 7th and 8th grade poster designers mentored by members of the NJEA graphic design team. Winning posters appear all around Camden, and highlight what makes Vets a top-notch community school, including flu clinics, a food bank, free mobile dental care, spirit teams,

reading buddies, and the fact that Vets has multiple community partners and has received multiple grants for community and family engagement.

Through this process, Vets is building a framework to support and sustain their work. When the Priority Schools work ends in a few years, the labor-management principles and practices will be internalized, allowing the work to continue and grow beyond the Priority Schools term.

WHAT'S NEXT?

- Using a \$10,000 sustainability grant to develop an “edible schoolyard” and starting a garden club for students and community members. All vegetables, herbs, and fruits grown will be available to the Vets community.
- To support the goal of becoming a trauma responsive school, the PSI team will be writing grants in the 2020-2021 school year for social-emotional learning tools such as sensory walks, in English and in Spanish, and creating calming spaces throughout the school building.
- Vets will house the district's first Bilingual Welcome Center, which will serve as a “one stop shop” for bilingual families, with many resources available in one location.
- Branding all Vets’ flyers, handouts, and social media materials with the help of NJEA.