

Jamey Verrilli, North Star Academy

📅 Thu, Feb 06, 2025 5:41PM 🕒 14:23

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

North Star Academy, charter school, Newark, community circle, rigorous academics, Norman Atkins, college preparatory, Robin Hood Foundation, KIPP Academy, De La Salle Academy, teacher development, curriculum design, student achievement, educational equity, replication.

SPEAKERS

Jamey Verrilli



Jamey Verrilli 00:01

I first came into Newark, New Jersey in 1985 I was in a program called the Jesuit volunteer corps. I'd spent the previous year in the Bronx doing the profession of our president, community organizing for a year. Then I came to Newark as a teacher in 1985 and I began teaching there. I was at a little private school for low income families, right in the heart of the central ward at the epicenter of the Newark riots back in the 60s. And I was working there as a teacher for a number of years, and I wanted our school to be able to serve the community really well, but we had to charge a really moderate tuition to families, and I didn't think that was right. I felt that students should be able to have this education for free as a civil right. So I began to research charter schools and get involved with creating charter schools. I wanted to first turn my school into a charter but that was not allowed in the legislation. So decided we would create a new charter school. We decided to create this charter school, and I started to look around to see if I could get some backers and funding and get models and design. And so I began to call one of my board members and gave them a call and said, Hey, I'm thinking of starting a charter school. Do you know anybody that I could talk to who might be interested in this project with me? I was hoping he would say, Oh, sure, I'll help you this house, looking for financial backing. However, what he said to me and said was, Oh, I just met this young man. His name is Norman Atkins, and I think he'd be interested to talk to you about this. So I wrote down on a piece of paper on my phone in the office, I was the principal of this small alternative school, and wrote down the name Norman Atkins. Hung up the phone, and it literally rang right then, and I picked it up. I said, Hello, Link Community School Principal verily speaking. And on the other end of the phone, I said, Oh, hello, this is Norman Atkins. I said, Oh, Norman Atkins, I've got your name on a piece of paper here. One of my board members said I should get in touch with you. And so he said, Oh, I was interested to come see your school. I'd heard good things about it. And so we began to talk, and as we talked, we found we both were interested in creating a charter school. Norman is a bit of a genius, and he was a journalist, and so he wanted to make sure that I was the right guy to partner with. So he took me out to lunch, and we talked for about three hours about everything in education, from standardized testing to school models, to what a great urban school could look like, and how can make a difference in the lives of children. And so we had this long conversation. He grilled me up and down, back and forth, and at the end of three hours, I guess, he decided that maybe we could work

together on this project. And so Norman and I wanted to design a charter school that would be high quality college preparatory in the city of Newark. I'd been in Newark 10 years as a teacher and a principal. I knew what Newark kids could do if we could create the right kind of school for them, and so together, we hatched North Star Academy Charter School of Newark in 1997 charter school legislation had just passed. We were one of the first charters in the state of New Jersey, and we created the school really, around two pillars. We wanted to have school be a place of community, a place that you belonged and you felt a part of something larger than yourself, and we wanted to be a place of rigorous college preparatory academics. And so we tried to design the school around those two pillars. So to do that, Norman had been connected through an organization called the Robin Hood Foundation. He'd seen lots of great mission driven schools around the country, and he wanted to replicate some of their best practices. So we went into New York City, and we visited Dave Levin at the KIPP Academy, which was just getting started in the Bronx, and studied what he was doing. We visited a man named brother Brian, who had De La Salle Academy on the Upper West Side in Harlem, and we saw what he did to build community. And we also learned valuable lessons from some other schools that were struggling and having problems. And we could see what struggles they faced, so we could try to be preemptive in our design and not fall into those same difficulties around curriculum or preparation for the students really knowing who your student body was coming in. After we studied those, we put together our proposal for the state around those two pillars of community and rigorous academics. We built out a program we would have on the community side. Our kids would wear uniforms they could all be part of the same team. We'd start every day with a ritual we call community circle. We would talk about core values of caring, respect, responsibility, justice, that would guide our community. We would hold each other accountable to the best behavior and being the most successful we could for our kids on the academic side, we had a longer day. We had a longer school year. We set really high standards and expectations for what the students would be learning at school. We were going to hire the very best teachers and build the most rigorous curriculum we could so our kids could be prepared to go to and through college. The community circle ritual is one that has kind of an interesting story. Norman, in his work through Robin Hood, had been to these mission driven schools all over the country, and seen different best practices. One he saw out in Milwaukee was the kids were mostly African American, so they would take out a set of Jim Bay drums, and to begin the day, they would play the drums to call the community together, a tradition of West Africa. So we took that element, and I had had a community meeting, community circle at my school where I was principal previously, and I had watched a bunch of things on the civil rights in particular, had watched some movies where the Black Panthers were organizing in Oakland, and they would bring people out into a big park, and they would do chants together to motivate people towards their mission. So we began to develop some chants that we called the call response, using the traditional West African ritual of the. And then the response comes back. And so we try to integrate our values and our purpose. So who are you? I am a star. I shine brightly for others, tying into the school's name, North Star. And why are you here to get an education? Why else to be the great person I am meant to be? And so we built out these traditions and rituals that would start the day, every day, the drums would call the circle. Together, we would stand in a big circle, and then together we would I would tell a folk tale, or Norman would tell a folk tale with a moral message. We'd let the kids interpret the message and how it was relevant to early 1990s turn of the century, Newark, and how they could apply the values of this folktale to their own situation. So that's how we did sort of character development and inculcated the values into our school community, we really learned a lot about who makes the best teacher. I kind of came in with the maverick mindset. The great teachers were Mavericks. And they would come in and they would, you know, they would be just a great teacher and that and we would just, it was kind of the if you build it, they will come mentality. We thought all these great teachers would flock to us in Newark, New Jersey, and

we'd have this great school of maverick teachers. But what we quickly found was that, one, they didn't flock to us. And two, we found that great teachers are actually made, not born. I think I was laboring a little bit under the delusion that great teachers were born, and we quickly discovered that great teachers are made. And so what we did is we had the good fortune of hiring two fantastic teachers in our second year, Julie Jackson and Michael Mann, and what we did was we saw their results, and Julie Jackson's results with our students were through the roof. The student achievement scores were unbelievable. And so we sat down and we began to study Julie, and began to watch what she did, and we studied Mike and watch what their best practices were. And then we started to codify that so we could teach all the other staff. Here's how you're going to set up your lesson. Here's how you're going to do it. And we learned from these great teachers, and we found that through coaching and observation and feedback, we could help to build the great teachers that we needed for our school. Great we built all of our own curriculum at North Star Academy from scratch, but in doing that, we had to constantly learn how to make it more rigorous. You know, there were all kinds of schools of thought out there about phonics and whole language and different kinds of reading instruction. And so what we did was we used student results to drive us. So we would test out a methodology and see what got the best results and then replicate that. So initially in math, our kids came in in fifth grade, usually on the second grade level in math, so we had to teach the fundamentals of your times tables and multiplication and long division, all these things that should have gotten in elementary school that they did not. And so we spent a lot of time in the early years just building up those fundamentals. But what we found was, and this is what I found oftentimes in education, it's never an either or. It's never fundamentals or conceptual math. It's a both and. And so one of the things we discovered in math is we have to get those fundamentals up quickly, but we also have to build deep conceptual understanding of math, because that's where math has gone and is now with the Common Core. And so we discovered that over the years with reading, we found that you have to both give kids independent reading books that are on their reading level, but also push them to grade level text so they can learn to deal with text that's on the grade level, even though they came in many years behind in fifth grade, we did both at the same time, book on their level and a book that pushed them and stretched them to get closer to grade level in reading. So we discovered both of those, but our biggest lessons in curriculum came when we sent our first cohorts off to college, and we found that they were not as well prepared as we had thought they were. We had our state test results where through the roof and one of the highest performing urban schools, but state tests were not enough to truly be truly college preparatory, and we discovered that when our kids got to college, and so we realized we had to raise the rigor back all the way down to fifth grade, and we had to do more in middle school to prepare them for a more rigorous high school that would be more aligned to the SATs and the APS and advanced placements. And so that really helped us to shift and adapt our curriculum all the way down to make it more rigorous, to raise the expectation level, and so we redesigned from fifth grade on up skin with that same both and idea catching kids up and remediating but also raising the high rigor bar to move them forward. We also noticed that our kids who went off to college struggled a bit with the adjustment. We had been a very structured program where we held children's hands tightly for eight years, grades five through 12, and then when they were totally let go and on their own, it was a big adjustment. They were adjusting because they were often in predominantly white institutions, and they were all children of color, and that was a big adjustment. They were adjusting because they were often with people much more affluent than themselves, and that was an adjustment. They were adjusting with an open window of time and all this flexibility and no structure, having come from a highly structured environment. So what we found is we had to build a team of folks who would actually go out and support them in college, and we found in high school, we had to actually prepare them for these elements. We had to build gradual release into independence so they could learn to manage their time and their program well. We

had to teach them what college would be like, teach them how they're going to adjust to an environment that might be very culturally different from culturally different from the one they're used to. And then we had a team who would go out and support and check in on them while they were in college to help that transition. And those things all have worked very well. We now our kids are over 70% retention rate in college, and so the goal is to and through college, and normally for kids in our demographic, it's only about 17 per. Percent will ever go through and finish college. In some places, it's only 10% so the fact that it's 70% we feel like it's working pretty well. We want to make sure we get to that 100% mark. One of the geniuses of Paul Baner, San Toyo and Doug Lemov is that they have figured out, let's take what's best, codify it so it can be replicated. So the idea of growth came for us that it was not iteration, but it was replication, that we'd find out what the best practices were, and then we could build multiple schools. So North Star began that very first year in 1997 with 72 students. There are now over 4000 students in 12 North Star campuses all across the city of Newark now. So what we found was, once a best practice was established, and we did this slowly and carefully, because we'd seen that growth coming too quickly could undermine you, could regress towards the mean. So we took all the best practices, from best classroom instruction to structures for discipline, to how you organize the finances and how you do all kinds of program elements throughout the school, codified those then we could replicate another school that would model them. And our first replication was really strong. Michael Mann, that great teacher I mentioned earlier, replicated our first middle school, and he took it to even a 2.0 level, having worked under me and seen my many mistakes, he was able to improve upon them as he replicated. And then we were able to take his model and replicate it again in multiple middle schools. And then the great Julie Jackson went off to create our elementary school, and she created an incredible model there. And she not only was able to replicate the North Star model, but she also was able to replicate herself and her teacher. She was able to train and her developed teachers to internalize all the best practices that she did as a teacher, her high energy, her high engagement, her high rigorous standards. And so the first Elementary was created, and then again, it was very easy to replicate multiple elementaries, because we have the model down on what it should look like. And so again, this whole idea of great teachers being made, not born, was integrated into the program, and teacher development and professional development and observation and feedback and training are so integral to the program so that these best practices can be replicated. We've had very, very many visitors have come. There's a real sense of purpose and mission at North center, a real sense of culture, and the community circles where that gets broadcast. And so in the community circles, where we really share our mission, our purpose, to close the achievement gap, to bring educational, social justice to the children of Newark. And so people come to see that and are touched with that, because the kids are very engaged in that. So we've had folks from all over the country and all over the world come to see us. In the early days, we were one of the earlier charter schools, so multiple other charter networks would come and study our model in order to replicate it's still happening now. Just met a guy yesterday in Colorado who said, Oh, I'd just been to North Star to study your model, to bring it back to my charter and one of the nice things in the charter movement has been this sharing and collaboration. You know, I always used to say for teachers, the highest form of flattery is theft. If you see a good idea and you steal it. And so in the charter school world, we've actually tried to encourage that best practices get shared across different charter networks. So we've had charter schools from all over the country. We've had public district schools come see us from our local district, Newark, to districts around the country. We've had sets of principals from London and the arc schools in London that are new reform movement in low income areas in England coming over to study around we have teachers from Thailand. We've had teachers from New Zealand who are coming to see the model and see it work. Because I think there's just a lot of people don't really believe that poor urban kids can and we always have believed that, and we've tried to build a school that can let the kids really

shine and show the world what they can do and how strong they can be academically. I think we're hoping to have a broader impact. We're about 10% of the city's student population now just at North Star alone. So we've hit that 10% mark. And the idea is that these best practices that we've learned and replicated, we're hoping can go out to other schools, can be used. There's a principal at a local district school who saw the results in one of our turnaround projects, where it was a Newark district school, we took it over, and then the results have come up significantly. So they have come and they've taken our model, and they're going to take our whole reading curriculum from K to two and our model, and they're going to try to replicate it in their public district school. So we've seen those kinds of ideas being shared and pushed down. So I think that's really hopeful that we can see it as a collaborative effort to help all newer kids be more successful. You.