The Power of Relationships

At Kensington Health Sciences Academy (KHSA), no student is anonymous. KHSA’s commitment to every student is evident in its mission to “prepare every student academically and holistically to be responsible, caring community members, ready for college or career upon graduation.”¹

Staff from KHSA and partnering organizations are committed to being allies for students and meeting each student’s needs within and beyond the classroom. KHSA’s whole student approach involves “building our community together, learning through inquiry, valuing integrity, and celebrating learning.”²
In the fall of 2016, the School District of Philadelphia targeted KHSA for turnaround. For this work, the district selected ISA’s whole school reform model: the only high school-specific, propriety reform model chosen by the US Department of Education for inclusion in the What Works Clearinghouse.

Seven principles underpin ISA’s whole school reform model, and these principles aligned closely with the values of the newly selected principal, Dr. Nimet Eren, and her staff. This alignment fueled remarkable and significant change. In less than three years, KHSA achieved a sharp pivot and new trajectory. In 2018, the Penn Futures Project named KHSA “One of Philly’s Best and Most Promising Schools.” Dr. Eren was also selected as one of only seven principals, from over 200 in the district, to earn the 2019 Lindback Distinguished Principal award.

Even in the 2019–2020 school year, which was cut short by the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic, evidence of continued growth demonstrated the newly ingrained culture. While many schools struggled to stay in contact with students for distanced learning, KHSA online attendance and participation sustained engagement at or above 85 percent.
Additionally, the percentage of students designated “off-track to graduation” who earned the required credits for grade promotion increased dramatically during the school’s partnership with ISA. The percentage rose by 29 points (i.e., 34 to 63 percent) between school years 2016–2017 and 2017–2018.
Dr. Eren shares credit for the school’s progress with ISA. As part of the reformation model’s collaborative design, ISA matched leadership coaches and core content teacher coaches with KHSA educators. ISA coaches are experienced educators who possess both insight into difficult conditions and an ability to develop the capacity of others who work in that same context. Over time, perceptions of the coaching team at KHSA shifted from “outsiders who are here to judge our work” to “colleagues who are part of our team.”

ISA leadership coaches guided KHSA’s creation and implementation of a student advisory program. Most every KHSA staff member facilitates a small group advisory, thereby establishing close bonds with students. Additionally, the safe space of advisory allows for staff to address student needs beyond content standards and skill acquisition.

As staff learned more about their students through advisory, they also learned more about each other. Unlike typical department or grade-level meetings, staff sought solace and support from each other in addressing issues of trauma revealed during advisory periods. This collective learning and support fostered a caring school culture evident throughout the building and reflected among both students and staff.
The Pandemic

When in-person learning halted in the spring of 2020 and moved online seemingly overnight, it was advisory leaders who reached out to help families navigate the school’s virtual platform. Dr. Eren notes that “teachers had built such strong relationships with their advisory students that the transition to virtual learning was so much more successful than [at] other schools.”

Even with the pandemic, KHSA was only one of two schools that achieved 100 percent student FAFSA completion in the school district’s FAFSA Challenge. This was a strong testament to the advisory structure, staff collaborative culture, and depth of relationships established between staff and students.

Students Come First

On any given day, a visitor to KHSA will find administrators serving as substitutes. Teachers stay late and arrive early for student support. Partnerships with organizations such as City Year build the wrap-around resources necessary to address students’ non-academic barriers to learning. The staff see to it that students come first.

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With the combined effort of the KHSA and ISA family, more and more KHSA students shift their tassels from right to left. In that gesture, they demonstrate to educators and community alike that KHSA graduates are prepared for the path ahead.

Next Steps

Project-based learning and capstone projects at KHSA continue to evolve. The ownership of literacy instruction continues to stretch into every classroom regardless of content area. ISA teacher coaches guide student learning to include more inquiry and to shift the responsibility for learning toward the student—which creates a greater shared endeavor. This shift in turn builds the student academic mindset into one of perseverance and persistence. Leadership coaches and administrators spread KHSA values into new career pathways and share them with new staff joining what has become a movement embedded throughout KHSA.
Endnotes

1 https://khsa.philasd.org/
2 https://khsa.philasd.org/
3 https://thenotebook.org/articles/2017/02/16/students-parents-upset-over-transfer-of-kensington-health-sciences-principal/
5 https://www.inquirer.com/education/lindback-award-principal-winner-kensington-20190423.html

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