

**North Star Academy Charter School of Newark
North Star Academy School District
Newark, New Jersey**



“Quick Hits and Actionable Feedback”: Training Olympic-Level Teachers

Julie Jackson, Principal, Vailsburg Elementary School

To us every day is a big game. Why? Because I truly believe that urban education is in a crisis and we are responding to the crisis in laser-like fashion.

James Verilli, Co-founder, North Star Academy Charter School of Newark

A good metaphor to think about is the Olympic athletics. An Olympic athlete comes in with a certain amount of talent but through intense coaching they are able to shave a hundredth of a second off their time or become a champion in that level. We took the same approach to teaching. We look for people who come in with some strong talent with a very strong sense of mission and then we hone their skills through our instructional leadership models. Every teacher has instructional leader; it might be the principal, might be a veteran teacher on staff who will observe them every single week and give them feedback, who will meet with them every single week to go over that feedback and help them plan the next week, and every weekend that instructional leader will read their lesson plans and give them written feedback. Every teacher gets three touches a week to improve their craft. And it happens all year, every year, whether you have been teaching here one year or been teaching here 10 years, that support is still there because to us the most important element is the teacher in the classroom and we want to support them in their growth.

Eric Diamon, Fifth Grade Literature Teacher and Instructional Leader, Vailsburg Middle School

When I first came here I had an instructional leader who was in my classroom 2-3 times a week. She would give me really specific feedback based on whatever my goals were at that time. So they may be management based, they may be curricular or instructional and really bite-sized actionable goals that I would focus on until I had achieved them and then move on. In addition to that we also would sit down and have a planning meeting where we would talk about what I was going to teach the next week and talk about the observations and any feedback that she needed to give me. So it's a very much of coaching process and now I'm in that position where I have three teachers that I support: same thing, where we sit down and talk about what you are teaching; we check in on your goals; we give actionable bite-sized feedback that focuses on goals so it's all about the development in the summer and then the every week, every day feedback that the coaches give to help their teachers to improve.

Arjun Natarajan, Fifth Grade Science Teacher, Vailsburg Middle School

This feedback system is invaluable. I wouldn't be nearly as good a teacher without it. Whenever I get feedback from my instructional leader it's broken into three categories. One is what I'm doing well; the second category is quick hits, which are just small things that this person noticed that I can take care of within a day, and so later in the day that lesson will go better if I change these one or two things. And then the last category is one, maybe two major action steps, like I need to restructure my lesson so that more thinking is put on students, or I need to restructure my lesson so that after key points students have to write out the key points as another touch with the material and so they learn better. I have to reply to any feedback that I get with just my thoughts and what I have worked on and how I'm working towards these goals and then every week I have a meeting with my instructional leader where we again follow up on how my progress is going.

Art Worrell, History Department Chair, College Preparatory High School

It all starts with the lesson planning. The amount of time and energy and thought that you pour into your lesson plans will directly dictate the quality of your class and ultimately how much students learn. We have about two weeks of professional development for new teachers over the summer where that process kind of starts where they learn how to write a really rigorous objective for a lesson; how to break out a lesson using the North Star components and template for lesson planning. So it all starts over the summer but we have planning meetings every week where we kind of go into detail about the next week in your class is going to look like so we talk about topics; we talk about objective; we make sure it is aligned to our assessments and we try to brainstorm and problem solve and build the next week's worth of plans in that planning meeting.

James Verilli

And then on top of that we develop a data-driven system where we would create assessments with a very high rigorous bar that students would take every six weeks. Then we would train our teachers to be really data savvy and analyze that data to see what kids have learned and what they haven't and what they haven't learned we would require that teachers to go back and re-teach. Then the next test would be cumulative so it would have the new things they learned and it would have the old things they learned, both in the same test, so that we can continue to see if the learning is sticking and if the students have mastered those objectives.

Art Worrell

One thing that I think all of our school leaders have in common is this incredible vigilance about what their school is going to look like, what students are going to look like, in terms of the way they carry themselves and interact with one another, and with adults and professionals – incredible vigilance about what the classrooms are going to look like; how teachers are going to interact with one another. There is no magic to it. It is just paying attention to all those little pieces, those 100 solutions to this problem and not compromise on any of them.