
National Blue Ribbon Schools Program

EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION SINCE 1982

White Street School
Springfield Public Schools
Springfield, Massachusetts

Transcript: Game Changer: Educators Turn Around a “Failing” School

Narrator: When LaTonia Monnroe Naylor was looking for a school for her young son, an educator friend recommended White Street, Naylor’s neighborhood school.

LaTonia Monroe Naylor, Parent: I said, “Oh no! My oldest went there, she had a bad experience; I will NOT send my kids to White Street!”

Narrator: Massachusetts identified White Street as a Level 4, chronically underperforming, school in 2010. Kristen Hughes had led a previous Level 3 Springfield school to Level 1 and was named to White Street in 2013.

Kristen Hughes, Principal: So the first thing I did was to look at the data. I looked at student achievement data. I looked at SEEDS data so teacher evaluations, I looked at attendance data, I looked at suspension data. One of the things that really jumped out at me, I had 5th grade students that in the previous year, only 4% of them were proficient on the MCAS in any subject area. And I told the staff, I said, I cannot send children to middle school not being able to read, write, and do math at a 5th grade level. We started looking at other schools with the same populations of kids that were performing and trying to let them know that I'm going to ask you to do all these things differently from what you have been doing and I'm telling you it's going to have an impact.

Narrator: Within two years, the state named White Street a Level 1 school. LaTonia Naylor was persuaded to take a second look.

LaTonia Naylor: It was quiet, the kids were learning, the doors were open ... We were amazed at the difference. My son started out in second grade and now he’s in fourth grade.

Kristen Hughes: So the practices that we put in place were instructional, social emotional, systems around how we were going to walk in the hallways, how we were going to talk to students in the common language that we were going to use. We have an instructional leadership team where we really look at schoolwide practices, schoolwide data and make school wide decisions and then we have subgroups of that team that are led by other members of the school community, ILSs or teacher leaders.

But when I think about what's the one thing that has really moved this school, it’s really the culture of collaboration that we've built here, because there was support across the entire building and I was lucky enough to bring a successful team with me because I never could have done it by myself.

Narrator: Math Instructional Leadership Specialist Margaret Assad came with Hughes from their previous turnaround school.

Margaret Assad, Math Instructional Leadership Specialist: It's hard to come in and be that person that's going to change everything. And at the same time have people accept you and want to work with you. And there were some tough conversation at first. There were some hard conversations. But we hung in there and then soon, we had common planning time—and what that ensured was that every single teacher in every single classroom was teaching from a unit planning guide that was based on the standards and we had common objectives and we had already talked about and planned out how we were going to teach it.

Sound on Tape: Math teacher to student: "Think about it as you are drawing your groups. What do those groups represent?"

Narrator: ELA Instructional Leadership Specialist Michelle Grilli also accompanied Hughes from their previous turnaround school.

Michelle Grilli, ELA Instructional Specialist: We had a professional development right off the bat about what standards were at grade level. I showed them how to plan with an authentic text starting with the standard and then creating a rigorous lesson. And teaching teachers how to explicitly teach and model a skill that they were trying to teach students, but also how you would enlist students We had a lot of conversation about getting students to talk to one another and building discourse within the classroom.

Narrator: Fourth grade ELA teacher Margaret Tabb describes a literacy block.

Margaret Tabb, Grade 4 ELA Teacher: I usually do some poetry, I read it, model it, then students read it with me then they read it together as a group. From there we move into our crafting, which is that explicit instruction on a reading strategy where I'm showing them how—how to do it. And then they are working with a partner with the end goal being able to do it independently.

Sound on Tape: Student to student: "I think that the Mom is trying to tell the son not to turn back to all the hard stuff because he's going to keep on going even though life is difficult." "Yeah."

Margaret Tabb: During that time myself and support teachers are taking small groups and that's where that targeted instruction at their reading level happens. At the end of our block we come together as a group, share out the thinking that we've done together: Why is it important for us to be able to do this as a reader?

Margaret Assad: And so slowly but surely, after our first year, those relationships started to—they were solid and I believe they were cemented. And now we were looking to have these teachers become the leaders themselves

Kristen Hughes: We were named level 1 after two years of our turnaround work in the building. It was kind of like you know, what now? You know, we're—we've made it. And that's not my philosophy. We still have to constantly reflect on what's happening in the classroom. Reflect on our routines, our procedures, our school-wide expectations. We're getting new students every day and so we have to look at data, figure out what they need, and continue to make changes on a daily basis.

Narrator: LaTonia Naylor was recently elected an at-large member of the Springfield School Board.

LaTonia Naylor: The turnaround that I experienced here at White Street is what motivated me to run for public office. We really need to look at models like White Street, and people need to stop making excuses for different communities that are in distress and say that our kids can't learn, because they can learn, and they can be proficient. And we can get teachers to stay and be inspired to work with the families, and the families can work with the teachers. Because it is imperative that our kids are not suffering because of bad choices that other people have made before them.