

Colonel Richardson High School: Creating an Environment for Academic Excellence and Social Acceptance

Caroline County, Maryland

Colonel Richardson High School is one of ten schools in the Caroline County Public Schools district, a mostly rural area in Maryland. Superintendent Patricia Saelens identified an urgent, district-wide issue affecting her students. High school graduates were entering the workforce without the skills they needed to thrive. In a local newspaper, Saelens was quoted as saying that businesses, “weren’t getting kids who could come to work on time, look people in the eye when speaking to them...Anyone who has a cell phone can pull up information, but that won’t help them interact, think critically and solve problems.” In 2016, Saelens brought the idea of student-led academic teaming to her school board, who agreed that all ten schools in the district would benefit from the Schools for Rigor partnership.

The principal of Colonel Richardson High School, Christal Harkowa, was cautious at first. She said, “High school is a different animal. Change is hard for anybody, but I think when you have teachers that teach high-level content, changing practice is that much harder.” However, as Harkowa and her teachers began to embrace student-led academic teaming, Colonel Richardson High School students experienced positive changes.

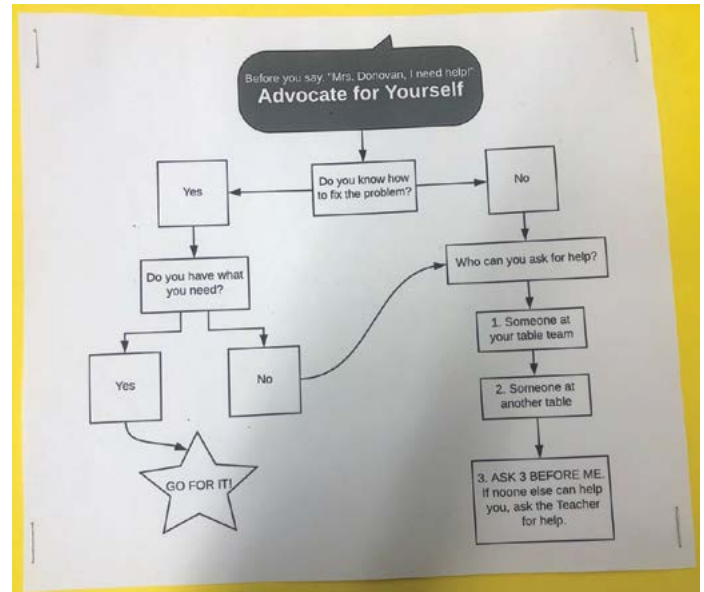
Reading proficiency at Colonel Richardson increased 2% in both 9th and 10th grades. Colonel Richardson students gained 6% in their proficiency in the PARCC algebra I assessment from 2016-17 to 2017-18, after one year of implementing academic teaming as part of Schools for Rigor. Harkowa said, “63% of the students met or exceeded expectations—that is the best that our algebra scores have ever been.”

Harkowa also reported that minority populations were steadily closing the achievement gap. According to Harkowa, before Colonel Richardson started Schools for Rigor, “All of our students were on the lower end; as many as 40% were failing to meet expectations on the PARCC assessment.” After one year of Schools for Rigor, Harkowa says the PARCC data showed especially promising gains for subgroup students. “Our African American students went from about 25% meeting expectations or exceeding expectations, to right under 30%. We went up from none of our Special Ed students meeting or exceeding expectations to having 10% meet or exceed expectations.”

Harkowa related a story of how student-led academic teaming is having an incredible impact for one of these special education students:

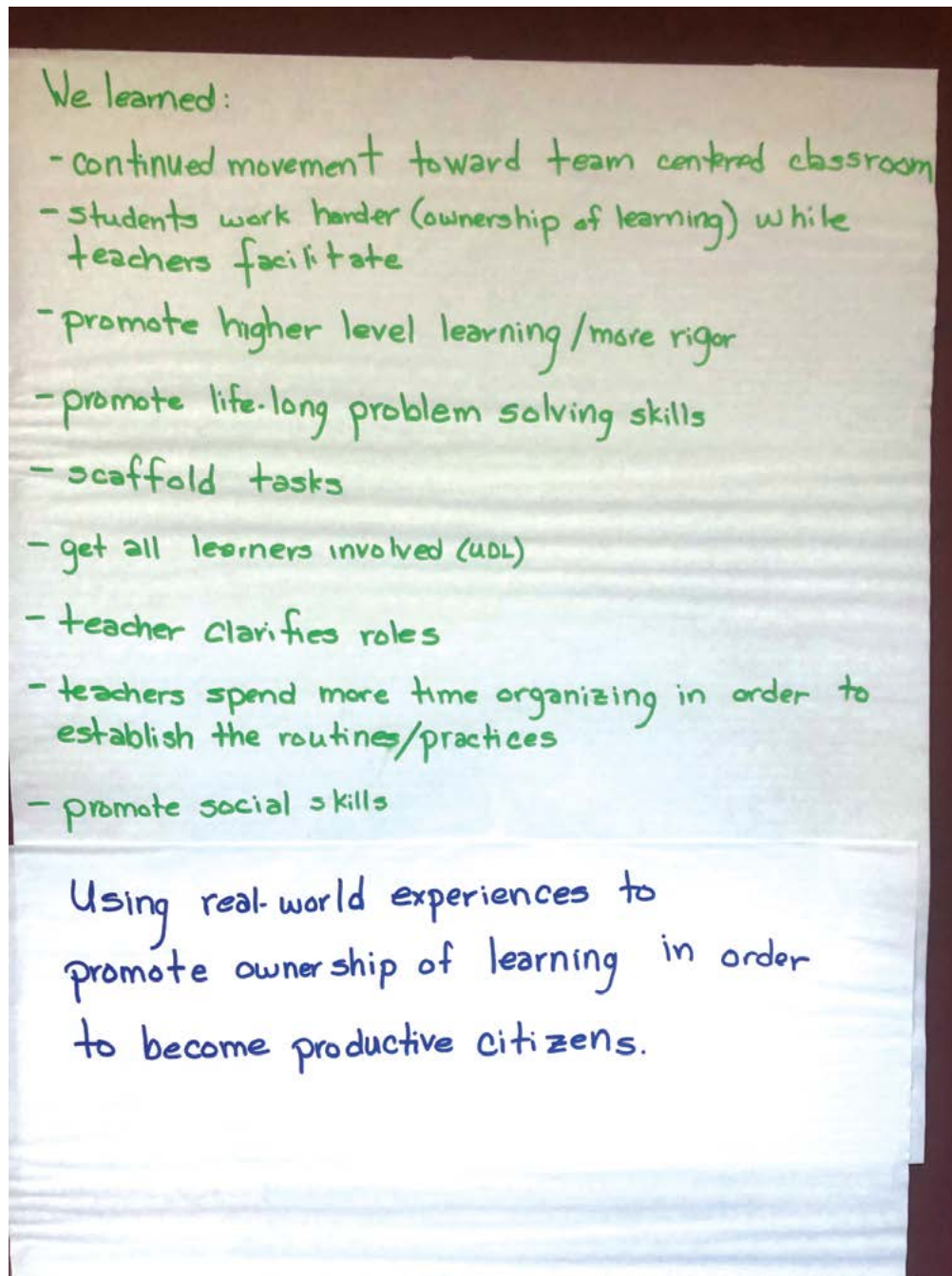
This student was very shy and more introverted than some of her peers, and she wasn’t always good at advocating for herself. She struggled in math. Her mom said that she felt that teaming was very beneficial for her daughter. It was wonderful to hear her perspective; she felt that teaming really worked for her daughter because she might not be open to communicating in front of the whole class. It can be very intimidating for a kid who is shy, or an EL student, or a student with a disability. But when you’re putting the kids into teams, it takes some of that fear away. Teaming gives students the opportunity to share with a smaller group, and they feel safe.

Honestly, I think that is the key with high school kids, for their social-emotional health and wellbeing—they just want to feel safe. They want to feel accepted. They want to feel like whatever they say, it’s going to be safe and they can take academic and social risks and not have negative consequences. Kids worry about being made fun of or being different. Teaming definitely has a positive effect for these students.



Mrs. Donovan, a ninth – twelfth grade art teacher at Colonel Richardson High School, uses this chart to help her students self-advocate, which builds their self-efficacy and ability to solve their own problems.

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After one year of implementing academic teaming through Schools for Rigor, Colonel Richardson High School staff reflected on what they've learned through the process and noted some of the changes they are seeing in their students.