



ROBERT M. FINLEY MIDDLE SCHOOL

Building Community, Respect, and Achievement

The entire Glen Cove, NY, community has embraced Robert M. Finley Middle School. Everyone—the mayor, small business owners, clergy, parents, teachers, and students—feels that the school is important and successful. Gaps in student achievement have decreased significantly and all student achievement has improved over the last five years in this school, where nearly half of the 652 students are from families that are considered economically in need. Everyone agrees that the school works hard to celebrate its diversity and prevent any student from feeling disenfranchised.

Today's strong positive community ties were not present five years ago. Although the teachers were liked and respected, the school ranked in the bottom quartile of Long Island districts on standardized achievement exams, and parents did not feel that their children were safe. A new superintendent hired Anael Alston as principal and gave him the directive to

improve student achievement to keep the school from being taken over by the state. The staff remained the same, and Alston promoted two longtime teachers to assistant principals.

Alston began his tenure by restoring order. He felt that until students were in school and in class, every period of every day, teachers couldn't get to the heart of the matter—classroom instruction. He and his assistant principals began community outreach by visiting and holding programs in churches and community centers with the goal of building relationships. Another strategy was designed to involve disengaged students—again, to build relationships. Alston and the guidance staff members established weekly group meetings with some of the most disruptive students in the school, many of whom were regularly suspended for inappropriate behavior. The purpose of the meetings was for the students to get to know caring adults and for the adults to get to know the students. A sense of



accountability to the group was built. The students' reengagement with the schooling process included a focus on long-term goals and aspirations and short-term steps toward success. To build momentum toward attaining those goals, each student created a three-year plan to take them to grade 12. An outgrowth of that program today is that each student creates a 10-year plan in sixth-grade Home and Careers class and adjusts it yearly with the help of guidance counselors and teachers. As a result of those efforts, parents see the school as a nurturing

haven for their young teens—and they see Alston and the staff as student advocates. As Pastor Roger Williams said, "The school has come a long way—looking at the whole child [and] building a sense of community and respect."

Next came getting to the heart of the matter. Alston believed that the key to Finley's turnaround was in his and the school district's commitment to investing in the human capital already in the building. To do that, student data was analyzed and high-quality professional development was

According to Jackie, a seventh grader, "Math is easy. It's thinking that's hard."



developed to focus on classroom practices around four strategic concepts: differentiation of instruction, teaching for understanding, understanding by design, and inquiry-based instruction. Classroom supervision became evidence based according to what was commonly agreed on as best instructional practices. The staff, according to Assistant Principal Lawrence Carroll, “works now to sustain what we’ve accomplished and build on that growth. We like feeling successful—we won’t go back.”

Another significant marker in the school’s makeover was the process used to move to a standardized schoolwide notebook and study skills system. The whole faculty engaged in honest dialogue about the things that were inhibiting student achievement that they had direct control over. They agreed that a schoolwide study skills system would benefit all students and help minimize the impact that socioeconomics was playing in student achievement. After looking at various models of study skills and notebook

systems, the faculty selected a one-notebook system that incorporated monthly notebook checks. In addition, every teacher agreed to help students cull their notebooks after each unit of study. To assist parents and students, each teacher has a section on the Web site about the school’s study skills system.

A by-product of the professional development activities is a strong sense of professionalism, teamwork, and collegiality among the staff. The goal was to make the curriculum come alive by creating project-based outcomes that would engage students and include differentiated instruction and assessment. What started as formal two-hour workshops in faculty meetings has now become ongoing discussions in the hallways and during teacher planning sessions and team meetings. Even students talk about how differentiated instruction affects them. Teacher conversations center on what’s best for students, how teachers know what students are learning, and how that learning can be measured in multiple ways.

Students at Finley now want to do well in school. The cumulative effect of the school’s approach to engaging every student with hands-on, focused instruction has helped produce overwhelming academic gains on state assessments in English language arts and mathematics—gains that are even more striking when looking at performance over time by each student group. By closing academic achievement gaps, the school has become, according to Joseph Laria, the interim superintendent, “a beacon of hope for every student.”

OPPORTUNITIES IN A SAFE HAVEN

Anael Alston is passionate about the significance of education for his students, and his comments illustrate how that passion affects school success.

Personally, I grew up with limited means and lived in a community where violence and dysfunction was the norm. Fortunately, school was



a safe haven for me and I was able to excel and take advantage of the opportunities that were afforded me. I have witnessed and believe in the transformative power of a quality education. I take that belief to work with me daily. As a consequence, I am always looking for ways to enhance the schooling experience for my students, which has led to an affordable eighth-grade trip to Washington, DC; an annual talent show; and a school-wide study system.

In addition, I was a competitive athlete and had great coaches, which influenced who I strive to be as a school leader. I believe that our students can succeed and compete with the most-advantaged students in the region and that I have the ability to coach the best out of our faculty. These beliefs have affected the daily work that we do and has helped us sustain continued success in academic achievement and community support for our endeavors.

Professionally, I have benefited from the mentoring and experiences of my former superintendent and others who gave me both knowledge and research that helped put our school on the right track to success. Finley benefited because we were able to avoid many of the pitfalls that other schools have encountered when trying to turn themselves around. For example, because of the mentoring I received, I knew what kind of staff developer to bring to the school, and the quality staff development has greatly empowered teaching and learning and, of course, student achievement. For 10 years, I have been in the Department of Curriculum and Teaching at Columbia University. I've done workshops, trainings, and demonstrations with some of the best educators in the

field, and my skill as a staff developer has helped teachers create lessons that differentiate content in a variety of ways. At Finley, we clearly articulate that instruction is our delivery system for curriculum. It is all tied together with a level of accountability and clear expectations about supervision, evaluation, and ongoing assessment. As staff members become more comfortable with the strategies, the quality of instruction improves. Administrators must be managers and staff developers and must model what we are asking teachers to do in the classroom.

One of the skills I have developed as a leader is human bridge building. We have met with success because we have reached out to and forged relationships with parents, local businesses, city government, and houses of worship. Those relationships have helped us hold outstanding career days, given us support in passing our budgets, and convinced parents to take their students out of private and parochial schools and return to Finley. Also, the relationships with teachers and the union have changed. We have learned to work together to meet the needs of the students. In effect, we've realized that our successes are inextricably bound.

Here are some practical steps that school leaders can take to help them move a school forward or turn it around:

- Be proactive—meet with struggling students before problems begin and build relationships with them.
- Establish clear outcomes and acceptable evidence of those outcomes with students and faculty members.
- Reflect on your professional practice and make adjustments

Robert M. Finley Middle School

GLEN COVE, NY

Principal
Anael Alston

Grades
6–8

Enrollment
652

Community
Suburban

Demographics

White.....	42%
Hispanic	39%
Black/African American	15%
Asian/Pacific Islander.....	4%
Free or reduced-price meals eligible	45%
Special education	16%
English language learners.....	7%

Note: Demographic data are from spring 2010.



Practical Steps for Reflection

After five years of academic growth, Principal Anael Alston and his administrative team decided that it was time for reflection. The data indicated that maintaining the status quo in the face of changing state standards would not lead to future growth. To begin the process, Alston and his team held a conversation with each grade-level team during their common time. Alston chose a strategic planning tool that would stimulate discussion: a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis method. By completing the analysis, staff members looked at what they could and could not do to move forward. All of the information generated by the small groups was shared with the entire faculty. That analysis was the beginning of a yearlong self-study that would maintain the school's forward momentum. An example from one team's conversation illustrates how the process works at the team level.

Strengths

- We are a team of teachers who work well together.
- Our professional development has improved classroom practices.
- We're flexible and willing to change and tweak programs to fit students' needs.
- We have a positive environment for teachers and students.
- Technology is effectively used.
- We are treated as professionals.

Weaknesses

- There is limited time for reader and writer workshop.
- There may not be alignment for ninth grade.

- Support for English language learners is not comprehensive—some students are struggling. We need more differentiation; we need more materials in Spanish.
- With all students in Regents algebra, we need additional supports.
- The schedule requires some cross-teaming, which hampers our ability to create interdisciplinary units.

Opportunities

- Self-reflection can chart our path for the next five years.
- Professional development will keep us fresh.
- Numerous clubs, extracurricular activities, after-school programs, and sports are here to engage students.
- Every student has the opportunity to take the algebra Regents exam as an eighth grader.

Threats

- Budget cuts for professional development and staff are likely.
- Frequent changes in compliance requirements create confusion and uncertainty.
- Complacency will lead to a failure to continue to improve.

When the exercise was finished, the staff members recognized that they still had work to do. They summarized their discussion by reiterating the importance of collaboration and their feelings of hope for the future of their students and the school.

By completing the analysis, staff members looked at what they could and could not do to move forward.

- as necessary.
- Hire the best staff developers and stay in the workshops the entire time. Learn with the teachers.
- Insist that students walk on the right sides of hallways. This makes hallway passing much easier for everyone and can

- minimize tardiness.
- Require all adults to be in the hallway during student passing times.
- Reach out and work with the people and resources in and out of the community. Many people want to help—just ask.
- Continue to be a learner.

REFLECTIVE LEARNING

Reflection is an integral part of life at Finley. Each team has undertaken a self-study as part of a schoolwide initiative. Eighth-grade teachers share the changes they have observed over the last five years.

Judi Geraghty, grade 8 math and team leader. Over these last five years, I have seen growth in student achievement in mathematics. I believe that teachers have had a great impact on this. Contributing factors have been the alignment of our curriculum to the New York state standards and the implementation of the workshop period so that all students now receive a period and a half of math each day. The math department has also had some valuable professional development workshops in lesson planning. Grade-level math teachers have a common planning time, which allows us to meet at least once a week to discuss topics, activities, assessments, and other aspects of our daily lesson plans. One of the biggest factors of our growth has been the use of Smart Boards, which enable us to differentiate instruction in many ways, make lessons more interactive, and increase student engagement.

Jennifer Beauchamp, grade 8 English as a second language. I have been teaching at Finley for 10 years, and I have seen tremendous growth over the last 5 years. No longer is the status quo good enough. We have received excellent staff development. By adopting the Understanding by Design method of lesson planning, we were challenged to get students think-

ing as well as learning. We became facilitators in the students' education and created a more student-centered environment. Gone are the days of the teacher lecturing for the period and students taking notes, and our assessment practices were totally revamped. We learned myriad ways to constantly assess student comprehension and achievement as well as our own effectiveness. We adopted a master notebook that allowed students to be more organized and responsible for their work. What's more is that we are not finished. Weekly teams meetings with our principal are an integral part of moving forward as we discuss as a staff ways to improve our instruction and the education of our students.

Claudia Marra, grade 8 English language arts. I have been an English teacher at Finley for over 13 years. Within the last 5 years, I have seen a dramatic increase in student achievement. One of the reasons is because our staff has received intense professional development. I was fortunate enough to have been trained by Nancy Doda. Her practices and ideologies are exemplary, and I implement a lot of her ideas. During this training, I have been taught that students achieve more when learning becomes more visible to them. For example, "think alouds" and "sort its" have been highly successful in my classroom. As a result of these high-interest activities, I have seen an increase in participation and student engagement. As a district, we have also implemented a Reader and Writer Workshop. This allows the teachers to differentiate instruction. Each student reads at his or her own level, whereas

in past years we were set on reading whole-class novels. Students are much more motivated now, and we are producing not only competent readers but also avid readers. This program is so successful because it allows personal choice for our students and this has helped students connect and relate better to our curriculum.

Valerie Amilicia, Grade 8 English language arts and Reader and Writer Workshop. Differentiated instruction is essential to the growth of every student. Students come into the classroom with different backgrounds and disparity of prior knowledge, experience, and academic skills. I have had tremendous success in my classroom because I make the social-emotional aspects of learning a priority. It is extremely important to get to know students' interests to build a community of learning and develop a safe environment within the classroom. Early assessment is necessary to achieve dramatic growth in student achievement. I start every year by asking the students to complete a reading and writing survey as well as a self-reflection writing sample of how they view themselves as a reader and writer. This metacognitive approach gives me vital information and allows each student to reflect on his or her own strengths and weaknesses as well as set goals. For example, using the reader and writer workshop approach, I break down my class into subdivisions: a mini-lesson on skill or literary analysis, independent or guided reading, and an assessment. Once the students have a general grasp on the content, they practice the skills and strategies in their independent reading books. **PL**