

DOUGLASS STREET SCHOOL:

IS THERE PROGRESS WITHIN THE STRUGGLE?

A Case Study for New Leaders for New Schools

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OVERVIEW

Starting in 2008, the Newark District began to launch new district schools as part of a nationwide movement to make smaller schools. In 2010, with support from the District superintendent, Krista Brown was tapped to lead the Douglass Street Middle School, which had just opened one year earlier. Brown had just graduated from New Leaders for New Schools, and she had spent three years as an assistant principal in a mediocre school in the city. She was excited to have the opportunity to create a high-achieving school from the ground up. She was also quite aware of the challenges facing her: the Newark School District was one of the lowest performing districts in New Jersey and the state had just given control back to the district superintendent after a four-year takeover. The district superintendent had received millions of extra dollars of federal and state aid to tackle the problems, but she had achieved only minor gains in student achievement.

Brown was also aware of the challenges she would face because of her regular conversations with her good friend, Marc Jones. Jones graduated from NLNS one year earlier. Although Jones had left the district to run Springsteen Charter School, he discovered many of the same underlying challenges: changing teachers' beliefs around efficacy, improving teaching practice, etc. Moreover, he had failed in making a successful data-driven instructional plan in his school.

Nonetheless, Brown remained convinced that data-driven instruction would be the key to her success. She listened carefully to Jones' mistakes and took copious notes during her data-driven instruction workshop within the principal training program. As she and Jones talked about the 2010-11 school year, they noted the many similarities between their two schools: having almost exactly the same student achievement results (70% proficient in Language Arts, 45% proficient in Math), similar student demographics, etc. In fact, Jones offered a friendly motivational challenge to Brown: if she could increase the percentage of her students who were proficient by 15 points or higher by year-end (i.e., 55% proficient or better in Language Arts and/or 40% proficient in Math), he would treat her and her husband to an elegant dinner of their choice. "And if you succeed as well?" she asked.

"You can likewise treat me—consider it two dinners for the price of one!" he responded. Brown laughed, and she accepted the challenge.

Here is the information Brown received from various sources about the school:

- 200 students expected, grades 6-8
- 50% African-American, 40% Latino
- 60% free/reduced lunch

- Founding principal was removed after one year due to continued clashes with the teachers' union representative and inability to motivate handpicked teachers
- No formal leadership in the school other than the principal: no AP, no department chairs, no lead teachers
- Shares school building with existing district school whose principal resents having to cut his own enrollment and having to share space; in fact, several heated arguments had occurred between faculty members from the two schools
- Despite glowing Year 1 reviews from the District's supervision team for creating a nurturing learning environment, Douglass Street had performed no better than the neighboring schools who were serving the same student population
- Teaching staff as a whole were highly independent and excited about the creativity offered in a new school; most had left their district schools for the freedom to develop new curriculum

In May of 2010, Krista Brown was formally named the leader of Douglass Street School for the 2010-11 school year. The district superintendent allowed her to visit the school for only one day in the Spring to make plans for the following year (the superintendent didn't want to create more tension with the departing principal). During that visit, Brown did a brief walkthrough and then interviewed the principal, the union representative, the finest teacher she saw, and three other teachers selected by the principal. During the interviews, she asked each person about the strengths and weaknesses of the school, which colleagues they turned to for support and/or guidance, and whom they considered the leaders/strongest teachers in the school. From what she could gather, there seemed to be three teacher "camps" within the school: one that gathered around the union rep., Bret Adams, one gathered around a dynamic veteran teacher, Eunice Moore, who was widely considered the most creative teacher in the school, and one group (if it could be called that) that was rather unconnected to each other or other faculty members. There were also two teachers (Sara Navarro and Nikki Smith) that were highly admired by all groups for the work they did with the students. One of these two teachers, Sara Navarro, was the one that Brown had considered the strongest teacher during her brief walk-through.

Armed with this information (as limited as it was), Brown began to map out her plan for the 2010-2011 school year.

BROWN'S PERFORMANCE, 2010-11

Brown started working on the Monday after the end of Spring session. She called a meeting for the following day with the following teachers: Adams, Moore, Navarro and Smith. Together they read a brief passage from Jim Collins' Good to Great, and Brown named them the Good to Great Council and charged them with moving Douglass Street school to greater performance. They heartily agreed with that mission. She asked if they recommended any other teachers to join the council, and Adams vociferously recommended a Math teacher (his closest friend). Brown immediately accepted.

Brown knew that three of the four of them had already signed up to teacher summer school (Adams was the only exception). She offered them an idea: she would reduce their summer teaching responsibilities in half if they would be willing to spend the other

half of the time creating interim assessments that they could use to measure student performance. Adams proposed that he be added to the summer teachers list, but without any classes so that he could coordinate the creation of the interim assessments for all of them. Brown said she would accept his proposal if the other teachers accepted (they seemed to reluctantly and nonverbally say yes). She also required that he promise to help lead professional development workshops during the school year around interim assessments, and that he visit one high-achieving school that was already using such assessments to use them as a model. Adams readily agreed.

That summer, the team started by working backwards from the best approximation they had of a state test: a 2000 version of the state 8th grade exam. She read the tediously dull test specifications that were produced by the state (all 300 pages) and discovered in the fine print that CTB McGraw Hill was awarded the contract of creating the exam. Based on that information, and her friend Marc Jones' own practice, she immediately acquired the 6th-8th grade TerraNova exams published by CTB McGraw Hill and decided to use those as her year-end goals. The Good to Great Council went through the exam and labeled every question according to which quarter it was most easily covered in the curriculum. Adams and Moore started collecting reading passages to use for the English-Language Arts assessments, and Navarro and Smith started looking for similar Math questions from other practice test materials they had acquired. At the end of the summer session, Adams and Moore had collected reading passages for all the assessments and had written about 15 total questions for those passages. They had completely skipped all writing and grammar standards, and claimed "there just wasn't enough time." (Adams seemed to spend more time chatting with Moore than getting something accomplished). Navarro and Smith finished the first Math interim assessment for each grade level and added many questions from the exams they had made for their students. Brown quickly realized that those questions had little alignment with the format or difficulty of TerraNova questions.

With summer session coming to a close, Brown was very concerned with what the team had accomplished – only about 20% of the interim assessment material she needed to launch the data-driven instructional plan for the following year. She immediately changed her plans for her own focus over the summer and devoted time to revising and completing the half-made assessments left from the council's work. She hired two college students who were friends of her family to help her finish at least the first two assessments for each subject and grade level. She tried to make sure to cover all the important standards, but when she was pressed for time, she made sure that at least the standards measured on the TerraNova were being covered. She figured she could complete the 3rd and 4th interim assessments during the year.

When faculty returned to school in the fall for two days of professional development, Brown presented the Good to Great Council, and those teachers presented the plan for the use of interim assessments. The plan included a formal assessment calendar and specific weeks for "re-teach" after each assessment (a few teachers laughed at that idea—where would they find the time to re-teach with such a loaded curriculum?). Some teachers complained that a common assessment was taking away their creativity. Moore assured them that she was going to be as creative as always, and that she had made sure

to choose reading passages that fit well with the important themes of each grade level (friendship, peace, etc.). Moore's observations seemed to pacify their concerns. At the end of the second day, Brown presented each teacher with the first interim assessment that would be administered in the middle of October (six weeks into the school year). She asked the teachers to make a key for the exam and to highlight every question on the exam with one of three choices: Confident (that their students will get it right), Not Sure, or No Way. Few teachers labeled any questions "No Way" and most had few "Not Sure" as well. Brown also asked the teachers for any changes they would like to make, including cutting or adding certain questions. All but two of the teachers accepted the assessments without comment (Brown couldn't tell how many were motivated by apathy not to recommend a change). The only two teachers to approach Brown were Navarro and Smith. They both argued that they doubted they would reach certain standards by October and asked that those questions be postponed to the following exam. They also highlighted a few questions that were vague. Brown agreed to all the changes.

As the first interim assessment date approached, Brown gave motivational speeches to the students about proving what they know. In contrast, most of the teachers seemed relaxed, nonchalant, and confident that their students would do fine. A week after the assessment, Brown asked teachers to bring the graded exams to a half-day professional development workshop. At the workshop, she gave them a worksheet to fill out, where they had to write the initials of every student that got each problem wrong. At the bottom of the worksheet, they had to write the overall percentage of questions correct for each student and for the class as a whole. Then they filled out a Teacher Analysis sheet that she had received from a school she had visited. At the end of the meeting, she and Adams role-played a teacher-principal conversation about the results on that assessment.

As the results of the first assessment became apparent, teachers were shocked: the students did poorly across the board (the lowest performing class has 53% correct, the highest had 66% correct), far lower than teachers' original predictions. As Brown had meetings with each of them to discuss their results, many of the teachers were defensive: the test was too hard, some questions were too tricky, there wasn't enough time, etc. Brown listened to the complaints and asked each one to focus in on the reasons why the students might not have learned certain standards—specifically reasons within a teacher's control. She also targeted questions that teachers had been confident they would get right. She also asked the teachers to consider the first results like a pre-test: this is the starting point.

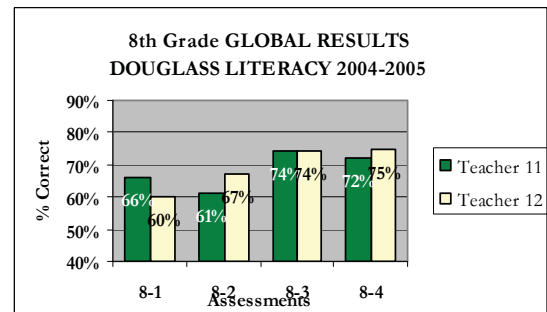
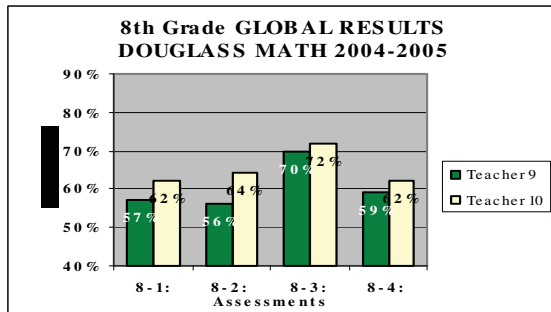
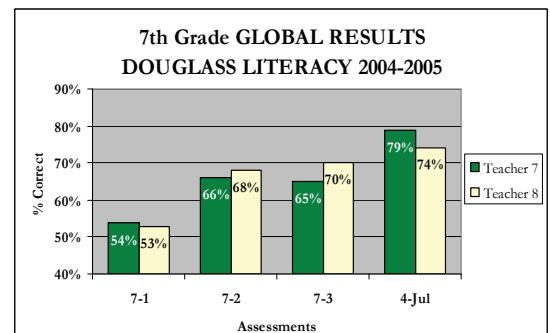
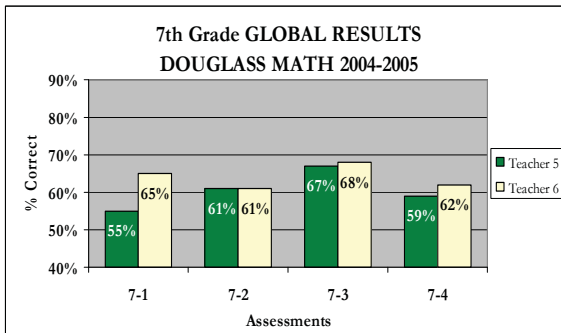
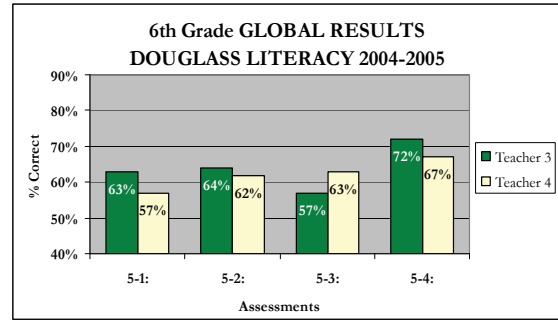
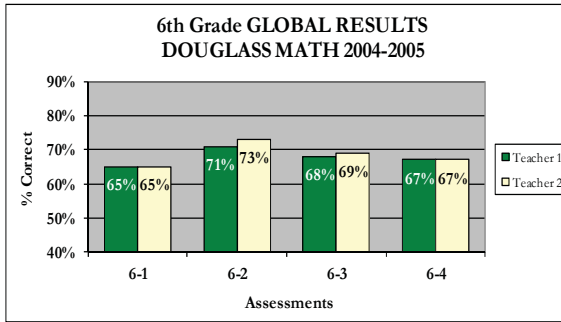
When Brown passed out the second interim assessment at the subsequent professional development meeting, teachers pored over the exam with much more energy. Many teachers even stayed beyond the meeting end time (completely unheard of at Douglass Street) to make sure they had checked every question. Teachers asked for far more changes to the exam: cut questions, make certain questions easier, etc. Brown politely accepted most requests but only when teachers agreed that harder questions would simply be postponed to the next assessment (not eliminated altogether).

When the results of the second assessment came in, 50% of the teachers saw significant gains from the first assessment. Navarro and Smith led the way, but Adams' and Moore's results showed no improvement. Adams ran the beginning of the next professional development meeting and gave awards to every teacher for the standards they did well on (including himself).

After the meeting, Moore approached Brown with major concerns. She felt that teachers were receiving too much pressure from these interim assessments and that students were not being able to learn in a supporting environment. She thought students "were tired" during the assessments because they were too long. She also argued that she was going to have to reduce her Friendship Unit in order to "teach to the test" over the next few weeks. She worried that the interim assessments would undermine the supportive, caring environment that had been the school's reputation. After all, weren't they about developing character and mind? Brown responded that she felt friendship and writing could be taught at the same time, and if they couldn't, then the friendship unit definitely needed to be reduced. Moore left the meeting furious.

By the end of the third assessment, two strong camps were forming among the teachers: those that were buying into the system and enjoyed seeing the improvement their students were making, and those that thought true learning was being sacrificed. Because Adams and Moore formed part of the Good to Great Council, they didn't feel comfortable publicly voicing their concerns (they were still being touted by Brown as the lead teachers in the school), but they made sure other friends spread their discontent. In their own assessment, Adams and Moore felt that at least half the teachers were opposed to the process. In her own personal meetings with teachers, Brown had sensed resistance from only two other teachers: Adams' and Moore's close friends. She was worried that teachers might not be willing to talk to her about their concerns.

At the end of the 4th assessment, Brown graphed the results for all six teams in the school:



As she looked over the results, she reminded herself that each interim assessment was cumulative, which meant they were progressively harder. Since the Math teachers kept postponing the hardest questions to later assessments, the 4th assessment was heavily weighted with the most challenging questions, and every class in the school saw a dip in their performance. Literacy, on the other hand, seemed to show growth over time. What would these results mean in the end? Brown did not know the answer.

Three months later, late in June, Brown saw sitting on her desk the distinctive box that held the results for the 6th-8th grade state tests. She took out her scissors and opened the box to see Douglass Street school's results....

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS:

1. Do you think Krista Brown met the challenge originally proposed by Marc Jones: 15-point gains in percentage of students proficient or higher? Why? Justify your answer citing specific evidence from the text.
2. If your answer is “partial,” of the teachers specifically mentioned in the case study, which ones do you think met the target? Which ones did not? Why do you say so?
3. Based on your answers to questions 1 & 2, what are the most important factors contributing to a school’s success in dramatically improving school improvement? What are the biggest stumbling blocks that can undermine the process?

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