

KEEPING SCHOOLS OPEN: WHAT DOES IT TAKE?

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Most would agree that 2021-22 has been a rough year for schools. COVID outbreaks, teacher shortages, behavioral issues, and a lack of substitutes are among the challenges. Despite these odds, though, schools in the BCHF portfolio have risen above it all, kept schools open, and shown progress. I reached out to three of our resilient charter school leaders and asked them to share their secrets!

During his five years of tenure at Horizon Science Academy Middle School, Mr. Hasan Akkaya, School Leader, has intentionally emphasized high quality relationships and clear goals. The school earned its second Bronze PBIS award in 2021-22. Plans for formal STEM designation as well as new facilities have also remained in the forefront. “I check on and talk about these goals all of the time,” reports Mr. Akkaya, “They were not forgotten with COVID.” On its STAR learning data, the school recently saw Fall to Winter growth of 1% in reading and 9.6% in math. Over 40% of the faculty have been with the school five to ten years. Mr. Akkaya’s conversations start with “How can I help?” All teachers have two planning periods and a lunch period during the school day. “This helps them plan at school, not at home,” he said.



Mr. Akkaya (center right) is proud of Horizon Middle’s award-winning robotics team. “We keep school goals in the forefront always,” he says.

“Listening to understand, not judge” has helped Mr. Akkaya and his “tireless team” navigate the teacher shortage. Listening helps identify solutions to problems of students, families, and teachers. This may lead to resource re-allocation. Horizon Middle School has added a counselor at every grade level this year. Recently its management raised class coverage pay. The school also certified paraprofessionals as substitutes and trained them in how to cover classes effectively. Years ago, the school went to 1:1 laptop availability for students, and teachers earned incentives if they completed Google certification. Having lessons on Google Classroom, whether in person or remote during the early pandemic, has given the school continuity in planning and technology integration. Horizon Middle also has a structured program of Tier 1 and 2 interventions, of which Lexia and ALEKs are core. “Teachers can use other resources, but we stress everyone using Lexia.” Mr. Akkaya added, “We are seeing the results, especially in math. Results are important,” Mr. Akkaya emphasized, “but in education, we build relationships first.”

Mr. Scott Will is an experienced school administrator, but he began this year, midst a pandemic, as new Superintendent for The Richland School of Academic Arts. When asked his secrets for keeping school open, Supt. Will is quick to say, “The mindset going into the year!” He recalled, “The staff came together, and all of them bought into the mindset of staying open. We knew the impact of the pandemic on students, and we set out with the determination that kids needed to be in school. COVID is not the focus,” he emphasized, “Kids are.” This determination helped tremendously when absences spiked. “We realized that we could worry about the percentage who were absent, or we could focus on the 250 or so students who were present to be educated.” Careful protocols for masking and safety nearly eliminated outbreaks from school. In terms of student behavior, Supt. Will says, “We took a developmental approach. K-1 students had not been in school; they needed to ‘learn school.’ Older kids had missed peer interactions. They needed to re-orient. The staff focused on supports and we have had very few problems.”



Performances have gone on at the Richland School of Academic Arts during 2021-22. “Everyone has a place in our mission,” states Superintendent Scott. Will.

The Richland School has a unique focus on arts integration and Supt. Will is quick to point out the importance of compelling school mission. “Our school’s mission is centered on creativity and self-expression. Everyone has a purpose and place in the mission; even the custodian here has an integral role in seeing that the lighting and spaces are ready for performances. And, it has meant so much to our students, families, and staff that those productions could go on despite COVID. Sometimes we had to get creative and, yes, sometimes there were moments of stress or anxiety. But we kept going.” The artistic atmosphere and creativity spill over into all aspects of schooling, including an environment where teachers can experiment with approaches like Flipped Classroom, Brain-based Learning, and interdisciplinary studies. “Teacher autonomy is

valued,” said Supt. Will. The school provides high-quality curricular resources for teachers and attractive classroom spaces. About 60% of the schools’ teachers have been at that school for more than five years. “It’s all intentional and purposeful,” said Supt. Will. Results speak for themselves. The school’s COVID learning slide in Spring, 2021 was around 5%, well below the statewide average learning loss. In addition, the school’s norm referenced testing data indicate recovery of that loss from Fall to Winter 2021. And the “shows **have** gone on” for all students with performances, arts events, and even musicals in 2021-22.

Mr. Kadir Parlar is the 6-year veteran School Leader of Noble Academy Columbus. While juggling his own doctoral studies at The Ohio State University, Mr. Parlar is keeping a laser-like focus on social-emotional learning (SEL) supports at Noble. “We knew if students were well supported, we would see academic growth. But first we had to make their social-emotional needs

a priority.” Mr. Parlar believes you must translate caring into collective efficacy. “We decided to measure what we found most important,” he said. “We use Panorama as a social emotional tracking tool, and we identify students who need to be ‘on the radar.’ Someone needs to be checking in with them; someone needs to be spending time with them.” Mr. Parlar recalls when he made the bold move of eliminating the position of Assistant Principal of School Culture. “School is not jail,” he emphasized. “We hired three social workers and the results are simply amazing!” Mr. Parlar told the story of a student who spent hours with a social worker because she came to school with unkempt hair. “Her attitude going back to class after a chance to groom and a chance to talk was so different. She was ready to learn.” Mr. Parlar is a true believer in time spent with students and their families. He rotates his own personal interviews with students. These are two-way conversations with students about “what happened” in the student’s life. “You begin to understand when you hear their stories,” Mr. Parlar says. “A student may be sleeping in class, but he is also a fifth grader who is waking up early to catch the bus and trying to deal with the limited resources in his home (water, food, clothing, etc.).”

The SEL focus has paid off. On recent Fall to Winter STAR testing, Noble students showed 3% growth in English Language Arts and 10.7% growth in mathematics. In addition, SEL, attendance, and behavior indicators are all headed in a positive direction. Progress has encouraged faculty and families as well. “Our staff are a team of true believers,” says Mr. Parlar. No teaching positions have turned over this year at Noble Academy. “We have an attitude of service to our teachers--- if you need to, take a break! We are all teachers and even I can fill in for you!” Mr. Parlar and his staff are working toward challenging goals for their school, one of which to become a Blue-Ribbon School. “I don’t want it for the name recognition,” says Mr. Parlar. “I want it to see the pride in our students’ faces. Our students and our parents deserve a great school. They deserve a school that is caring and embracing. This is my passion.”



Mr. Parlar shares a lunch with students at Noble Academy Columbus. “I want to see the pride on their faces,” he affirms.

BCHF applauds these school leaders for their deep commitment to their students, and thanks them for their willingness to share their stories. We know there are other stories to share, and we are immensely proud of our schools and their efforts to “keep school going” in challenging times!