

Allenbrook Elementary School

Allenbrook Elementary School Improves Performance with Collaborative Literacy and Caring School Community

PROFILE

Allenbrook Elementary is a neighborhood PK–5 school that serves approximately 300 students in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools in Charlotte, North Carolina. Over 90% of Allenbrook students are from families with low socioeconomic status. Allenbrook leadership wanted to improve overall student performance and address school climate and culture. Allenbrook implemented Collaborative Literacy and all its modules (*Being a Writer™*, *Making Meaning®*, *Being a Reader™*, and the intervention program *SIPPS®: Systematic Instruction in Phonological Awareness, Phonics, and Sight Words*), as well as *Caring School Community®*.

CHALLENGES

A year ago, Allenbrook was a different place. Student conflicts started at bus stops, continued on school buses, and escalated when students entered school. Classroom cultures were not conducive to learning. Teachers struggled to create warm, safe, and disciplined classroom environments where students could develop the skills and learning dispositions they needed to interact constructively with one another. The climate and culture of Allenbrook led to frustrated and burnt-out teachers, who spent a disproportionate amount of time managing ongoing conflicts. Staff attendance was a regular problem, and mid-year resignations reached an all-time high. During the 2017–18 school year, there were 1,288 office referrals for 500 students. As a result, academic progress declined, causing Allenbrook’s school letter grade to drop from D to F.

Principal Katharine Bonasera knew Allenbrook could not continue on the trajectory it was on. She believed that the roots of Allenbrook’s challenges were school culture and the lack of a cohesive, consistent, high-quality literacy curriculum that teachers could both teach and learn from. “Experience told me that our academic outcomes would not be impacted until we considered the whole school climate, including both students and adults. We also needed to consider ways to integrate SEL throughout the academic day. We were not going to be able to test-prep our way out of the problem,” says Principal Bonasera. “Because many of the students’ academic struggles manifested in negative behaviors, I was drawn to the idea that we needed to provide my teachers and students with research-based literacy lessons that simultaneously developed SEL skills that would foster a calm, orderly, and disciplined learning environment.”

(continues inside)

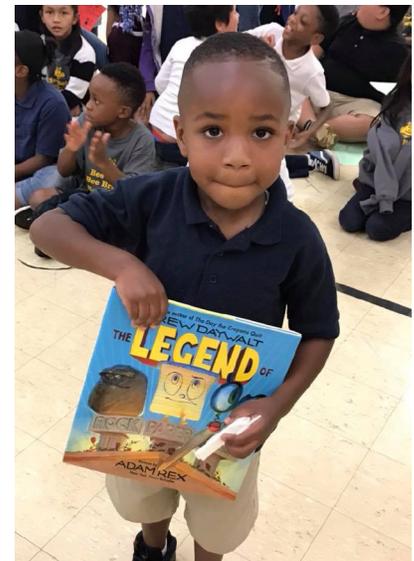
IMPLEMENTATION

In the spring of 2018, the Allenbrook Elementary leadership team identified Center for the Collaborative Classroom as an organization to partner with to help address the root causes of their challenges. Together, Collaborative Classroom and Allenbrook decided that the *Caring School Community* social-emotional learning program and the Collaborative Literacy curriculum (including *Being a Reader*, *Being a Writer*, and *Making Meaning*) would be implemented as a way to raise academic performance, increase positive classroom behavior, reduce misconduct, and bolster student and teacher engagement. Collaborative Literacy would provide teachers with a cohesive, integrated ELA/SEL curriculum that met the core reading, writing, speaking, and listening standards. Alongside the curriculum, a comprehensive, intentional professional learning plan was created to support teachers in developing an understanding of the rationales behind literacy and SEL integration. Principal Bonasera valued the educative nature of the curriculum, especially the explicit support for teacher learning within the context of each lesson.

Allenbrook took a phased approach to the first year of program implementation. The leadership team and a Collaborative Classroom consultant created the professional learning plan together. The plan looked like this:

Phase I – Planning/Pre-Implementation Phase

- Introduce Collaborative Literacy and *Caring School Community* program components to the leadership team.
- Create and share suggested schedules and pacing guides that ensure adequate time to implement Collaborative Literacy and *Caring School Community*.
- Craft and share the year 1 implementation plan.
- Review implementation resource tools (such as a lesson planning tool) that align with the curriculum and standards.
- Distribute program materials to teachers.
- Allocate time for teachers to review these materials.
- Define and communicate clear expectations for program implementation.
- Identify best practices in reading and writing workshops to lay the foundation for the Collaborative Literacy program.



Phase II – Fall and Winter Implementation

- Schedule intentionally timed, program-specific professional learning sessions (virtual and in-person) throughout the year.
- Create lesson study experiences for grade-band cohorts.
- Select and prioritize Anytime Topics based on student data and teachers' goals.
- Monitor implementation by visiting classrooms, working with the leadership team, meeting with teachers, conducting surveys, and analyzing student data.

Phase III – Spring Implementation: Reflect on Year 1 Implementation

- Conduct needs assessment using the Collaborative Literacy “Teacher Self-Survey.”
- Gather data on year 1 implementation using the “Year-End Reflection Meeting” agenda.
- Prepare for year 2 implementation.

IMPLEMENTATION TESTIMONIALS

Fourth-grade teacher Audrianna Green began the implementation of Collaborative Literacy and *Caring School Community* at the start of the school year. Her class was comprised of students she taught as third graders the previous year. Within the first month of school, Audrianna noticed a shift in her students' abilities to hear, think, and discuss texts in a deeper way. “I believe the open-ended discussion questions coupled with the Turn To Your Partner cooperative structure led my students to a level of engagement and participation that had been historically challenging for them. My students were not only answering and asking questions but also beginning to build on the ideas or perspectives of their classmates.” In the past, says Green, “we were unintentionally creating conditions where the kids were not expected to think, but to perform on tests. It's their natural tendency to be curious, and in our classes, the imagination and curiosity were not always encouraged.”

Principal Bonasera believes that Collaborative Literacy's integrated, student-centered model of instruction supports all of her students at every level of literacy acquisition. “Every day our students are learning the social skills needed to confidently engage in high-level discussions throughout the ELA block and have multiple opportunities to engage in grade-level text whether it be through a read-aloud, guided reading, or independent reading. Not only are our teachers growing more confident with the facilitative discussion techniques embedded in the Collaborative Literacy lessons, but they are transferring them into other content areas such as social studies and science as well.”

Including *SIPPS* intervention has also played a key role in helping Allenbrook teachers identify and teach the precise foundational skills that struggling readers have lacked. “While we still have readers and writers who are struggling, they are demonstrating growth we have not seen before,” says Principal Bonasera. “For the first time, we have fourth graders who are achieving at a level where International Baccalaureate middle school programs are within their reach. This is a level of access to academic rigor that has been historically inaccessible to the vast majority of our students. It is a game changer for many of their educational journeys.” The synergy between an intentional social-emotional learning focus, an engaging, rigorous, and student-centered literacy curriculum, and systematic intervention has resulted in the kind of growth Allenbrook Elementary educators have always wanted for their students.

(continues on back)

Following is a summary of Allenbrook's 2018–19 key shifts in improving schoolwide culture and student achievement:

- The schoolwide community created a living school vision statement.
- The schoolwide community created a living discipline policy that reflected their beliefs about the ways students learn.
- Systems and structures that reflected schoolwide vision and norms were created, including a master schedule that integrated time for social-emotional learning, teacher collaboration, and academic interventions.
- A schoolwide (adult and student) social-emotional learning program, *Caring School Community*, was implemented to lay the foundation for a warm, safe, and disciplined learning environment.
- A cohesive, high-quality, standards-aligned core literacy curriculum that authentically integrated social-emotional learning was implemented.
- A systematic intervention that focused on phonological awareness, phonics, and sight words for students who were reading below grade level was implemented.
- An intentional professional learning plan to support the first year of implementation was created.

RESULTS

Following are the mid-year results of the Allenbrook implementation:

- Based on Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools' Fall 2018 TNTP Insight Survey, the Instructional Culture Index increased from the 11th percentile to the 89th percentile. In the Fall of 2018 Allenbrook was a top quartile school in the areas of Work Load and Professional Development.
- 100% mid-year staff retention and decreased staff absences
- Decrease in office referrals: 7.4% of students had 6 or more office referrals compared to 34% during the 2017–2018 school year.
- Decreased out-of-school suspensions (down 81%)
- Decreased in-school suspensions (down 97%)
- Decreased number of students in grades 2–5 (60% to 46%) reading far below proficient (TRC)
- Increased number of students in grade 1 (37% to 52%) performing at and above proficient (DIBELS)
- Increased number of students in kindergarten (40% to 45%) performing at and above proficient (DIBELS)

Allenbrook Elementary is in a continual process of growth and development. In less than one year, the committed efforts to integrate social-emotional learning throughout the whole school day and community have improved both the school climate and academic performance across all grade levels. With a great deal of hard work from students, staff, and leadership, the teaching and learning environment is palpable, the number of referrals and conflicts have dropped, students' academic achievement scores have increased, and teachers are demonstrating stronger job satisfaction.