

10 schools picked to pilot 'Vision' reform

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Posted Wednesday, August 15, 2007

Vision 2015 has selected four school districts and two charter schools to take part in a program to pilot educational reforms that group leaders hope will ripple throughout the state.

Each district picked two of its schools to participate, for 10 total schools involved in the program sponsored by Vision 2015, a coalition of education, community and business leaders that is looking to make Delaware's school system one of the best in the world by 2015.

The schools, announced Tuesday, are Kuumba Academy in Wilmington, MOT Charter in Middletown, Indian River and Sussex Central high schools in the Indian River School District, Howard and St. Georges technical high schools in the New Castle County Vocational Technical School District, William Henry and Central middle schools in the Capital School District, and Breck Mill and Silver Lake elementary schools in the Appoquinimink School District.

This school year will focus solely on training; next year on implementation. Administrators, teachers, school board members and other district and school leaders will take part in a series of training sessions this year to introduce them to some of the best educational practices Vision 2015 leaders have gleaned from school systems around the world. They then will be able to borrow from those practices as they develop instructional plans focused on boosting student achievement in their weakest areas.

In the next school year, the districts will implement those plans.

"It may seem small, but I think it's a big step," said Valerie Woodruff, the state's secretary of education. "I, for one, appreciate the willingness of the districts and the charter schools to participate."

The participants represent a wide variety of demographic differences.

The largest is Sussex Central High, which had 1,259 students and 79 teachers last year; the smallest is Kuumba Academy, with just 254 students and 20 teachers. At Kuumba, 98 percent of students are black and 61 percent are from low-income families, state data show, while at MOT Charter, only 10 percent are black and 6 percent are low-income.

Two schools -- Kuumba and William Henry Middle -- are under Academic Review for failing to make adequate progress toward state and federal performance goals on standardized tests, while three others -- Brick Mill, Silver Lake and MOT -- earned Superior ratings.

Robert W. Rescigno, a liaison between Vision 2015 and the Vision Network schools, said the participants were chosen not by how well or poorly they performed, but because each had a firm understanding of its strengths and weaknesses, and expressed a readiness to make changes to improve student achievement.

Six districts and four charters applied -- the Red Clay Consolidated and Christina schools districts, and Thomas A. Edison and the Charter School of Wilmington were not accepted.

"We were looking for those who were the most ready, willing and able to engage in a partnership," said Paul Herdman, president and chief executive of the Rodel Foundation of Delaware, a major Vision 2015 benefactor.

Indian River High Principal Mark Steele said relishes the opportunity to participate.

"It's going to make the schools in Delaware take a good look at themselves and see where they want to be in 2015," said Steele. "Some people don't like change, but I love it. There are times when you need a breath of fresh air."

Laying 'a pathway' to change

The first year of training -- phases one and two -- is expected to cost about \$2 million, Rescigno said. About \$500,000 is committed, with contributions coming from the Wallace Foundation, the University of Delaware and the Delaware Business Roundtable. The remaining funding is secured and will be announced later.

The first phase of training, starting in October and conducted by UD's Academy of School Leadership, will focus on introducing district-level leadership to Vision 2015 principles and best practices from school systems around the world.

School management often devotes too much time to routine duties, such as managing bus schedules, and the training will seek to help them work smarter and devote more time to education, Herdman said.

"Nobody's saying people aren't working hard, because they are," Rescigno said. "The important thing is to focus it on things that are going to make a difference."

The second phase of training, starting in January and conducted by consulting firm Focus on Results, will be for school-level leadership

and will focus on helping each school develop an instructional plan focused on addressing its specific need, whether it be reading, math or something else.

"We're not saying abandon the other things," Rescigno said. "But in order to make a gain, we need to focus on certain areas ... so we see those gains happening."

Because this year's work is focused on training and planning, those gains won't show up in test results for several years, once programs are in place and have a chance to work.

"The results might not be visible the first year, but it's going to set a pathway of what's possible," Sondra M. Shippen, head of Kuumba Academy said. "It's about the technical assistance available, the mentoring relationships. It's important to have those people you can bounce ideas off of and make sure you're on the right track."

Ideas will spread

Ultimately, Vision 2015 leaders want to have all schools involved in the reform effort by 2012, to meet the goal of transforming Delaware's school system by 2015.

The training that begins this year is designed to help ensure changes can spread beyond the initial Vision Network districts and schools. Administrators, school board members and teachers union representatives, for example, are the focus of the first phase of training for a reason:

"What's happened in the past in education is the focus has been on the school, and the district is a supporting entity," Rescigno said. "But unless a district has a chance to reflect on its practices, it's very hard to change."

To help schools with the change, Focus on Results is training about 10 retired superintendents and principals from Delaware to serve as local coaches to help with the training and aid the schools as they develop their plans, which themselves will involve practices and programs that can be sustained financially and shared among multiple schools.

And next school year, when it is time for the pilot schools to put reforms into place -- which could mean anything from new programs to reallocating resources to rewriting policies -- Vision 2015 will help them with about \$800,000 in mini-grants.

To receive that funding, Herdman said, the schools will have to demonstrate that their idea is consistent with Vision 2015 recommendations, is backed by research, is "scalable" from school level to state level, and is sustainable financially.

If those ideas work in Vision Network schools, the hope is that they'll spread outside of the network, helping the kind of statewide changes Vision 2015 leaders believe are necessary -- and helping to secure vital public backing for the reform effort.

"We're committed for the long haul to do this work, but if it's only private-sector funding, it would be difficult to impossible to take this [statewide]," Herdman said. "So we need to have the public sector buy-in for this to work."

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