

Superintendent Brings Financial Stability and Educational Improvement

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Superintendent Sheila Harrison-Williams

By Jennifer Chase Esposito

December 2008

When two of five schools in the Hazel Crest (Ill.) School District 152.5 had closed after years of bad decisions Shelia Harrison-Williams was hired to try to revive the almost bankrupt district. The three remaining schools had been placed "In Status" for not making AYP the previous four years, and the district was under review by the state's School Finance Authority and had petitioned for placement under a Voluntary Financial Oversight Panel. Harrison-Williams had the task of repaying an estimated \$1.4 million in accounts payable.



Located 30 miles south of Chicago, the district was nearly subsumed by neighboring districts at the end of the 2002- 2003 school year, but in 2004 the community passed a referendum to increase the tax rate for education, and the district received a loan from the state to help stabilize finances. "In the beginning, the community was very skeptical and took a 'wait-and-see' approach," says Harrison-Williams. But at that point more than money had to be made up: Hardest hit by the crisis were Hazel Crest's students.

Digging from an Educational Hole

With a demographic of 90 percent black, 8 percent Hispanic, and 2 percent white, students' overall academic performance on the Illinois State Assessment Test (ISAT) was a meager 34 percent. "Morale of all of the district's employees was very low," says Harrison-Williams. Teachers were worried whether they'd get paid, or if their school was going to fold. But Harrison-Williams was hopeful. "I viewed it as an opportunity to help a larger number of students and a community that took a stand regarding the education of its children."

Teacher Turnaround

Having observed in some teachers a lack of understanding for school standards and for classroom objectives and goals, Harrison-Williams approved hiring 15 new teachers for the start of the 2004-2005 school year. She implemented "team teaching" practices and a review of instructional practices and became personally involved in the hiring process for the 2008-2009 school year. "Our focus continues to be on empowering our teachers with strategies for teaching the hard or more difficult concepts of a particular subject matter."

Direct Path to Improvement

Hazel Crest's overall ISAT student performance is now at 61 percent, which Harrison-Williams credits to improved teaching thanks to the Target Teach Process. Developed by Evans Newton Incorporated, a group that partners with K12 schools to align individualized curricula with district and state standards, Target Teach helped Hazel Crest teachers learn to assess progress throughout the year so that their instruction could be adjusted when necessary. They also filled in the gaps where the curriculum was weak, and developed "pacing schedules," which are guidelines that are broken up so as to give teachers clear directions on what standards they are supposed to

Sheila Harrison-Williams
 Superintendent, Hazel Crest (Ill.)
 School District 152.5
Age: 47
Salary: \$156,844
Tenure: 5 years
Students: 1,200
Staff and faculty: 120
Schools: 5
Per-child expenditure: \$9,300
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teach during a given period of time. Says Harrison-Williams, "The result ... has led to a better understanding of specific learning standards and objectives as [teachers have] related to individual grade levels."

Jennifer Chase Esposito is a contributing writer to District Administration.