

From Average to Great!

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“Good is the enemy of great.

And that is one of the key reasons why we have so little that becomes great.

We don't have great schools, principally because we have good schools. We don't have great government, principally because we have good government. Few people attain great lives, in large part because it is just so easy to settle for a good life. The vast majorities of companies never become great, precisely because the vast majority become quite good – and that is their main problem.” Collins (2001)

Let's explore a true Good to Great story.

Tropic Isles Elementary, a Title I school in North Fort Myers, FL, has a student population that would be considered “challenging” by many educators. Over the past 10 years the minority population of the school has hovered between 40 and 50 percent, with a free and reduced lunch rate of 60 to 75 percent. The mobility rate has varied from 45 to 60 percent, due to the number of families who are forced to move in and out of the neighborhood when they can't afford to pay their bills.

When Don Bryant became principal in 1999, he often heard teachers comment, “We're doing pretty well for the kind of students we have.” In a good to great world, that was unacceptable to Don. Using school data, he began asking teachers to evaluate students' performance levels against the expected standard. Believing that the teachers should concentrate on things within their control, he put the focus on instructional processes, rather than on the student demographics.

Two key approaches to learning helped teachers to maintain that focus on improvement. In 2001, Choice Theory and Reality Therapy were introduced to the staff at Tropic Isles. In 2003, The School District of Lee County adopted the use of the Sterling Quality Model, which is Florida's version of the National Malcolm Baldrige Quality Program.

These two continuous improvement models helped Tropic Isles accomplish three primary goals:

1. To improve student achievement
2. To improve student behavior
3. To have an enjoyable place to work and learn

Change, even positive change, is hard work. Dr. Deming has been quoted as saying, "It is not enough to do your best. You must first know what to do and then do your best." The Glasser Quality School Model and the Sterling Model both teach "what to do", so that everyone has the knowledge and skills to do their best. Once you know what to do, and have the knowledge and skills to do it, you can take actions to meet your goals.

What progress has Tropic Isles made toward those goals?

1. To improve student achievement.
 - a. They are the only school in Lee County (112 total schools) that has made AYP for four straight years.
 - b. The school has earned an "A" grade from the State for the past five years.
 - c. All subgroups are exceeding state and district averages on the FCAT.
 - d. They are one of only two schools to raise their School Grade Points for seven consecutive years. The other elementary school that has accomplished this has also had Glasser Quality School Training.
2. To improve student behavior.
 - a. Referrals to the Refocus Room dropped by half in the last two years.
 - b. Zero SESIR (Serious Incidents) incidents in 2006-2007.
3. To have an enjoyable place to work and learn.
 - a. Zero employee grievances in the past four years through either the District or Teacher Association process.
 - b. Teacher mobility is currently at 0%. Last year, the rate was 1.5%.

In May, 2009 Tropic Isles was awarded the prestigious Governor's Sterling Award. They are only the eighth Florida School to earn the honor in the 17 years it has been awarded. Last year, Tropic Isles scored more State School Grade points than any of the previous recipients.

Based on the success of Tropic Isles and Tanglewood Elementary, in 2007-08, The School District of Lee County committed to training 24 people from every school over a five year period.

In the first year, eight schools were included in the training. Data indicate that schools that participated in the Choosing Excellence training increased their Florida School Grade by 15 points, as compared to 7 points for the schools that had not participated in *Choosing Excellence*.

Dr. Glasser believes that fun or enjoyment is the physiological payoff of learning and success. The improvement that Tropic Isles has made illustrates that success feels good, and supports the rationale for moving any organization "From Good to Great".

Collins (2001) "Indeed, the real question is not, 'Why greatness?' but, 'What work makes you feel compelled to try to create your greatness?' If you have to ask the questions, 'Why should we try to make it great? Isn't success enough?' then you're probably engaged in the wrong line of work."

References:

Collins, J (2001). Good to Great. New York: Harper Business.

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