Learning With Joy

Hilca Thomas, the 2008 Assistant Principal of the Year, is working to fulfill her vision of school as a place where students are having so much fun learning, they never want to leave.

Upon entering Howard A. Doolin Middle School in Miami, FL, one might expect to see a bright yellow and black sign that reads: Community at Work. That’s because at Doolin, students, staff members, parents, and the entire community have a say in how the school runs and operates: students and other stakeholders serve on an advisory council, leadership teams review data and collaborate on instruction, and teams of teachers work to win grants that enhance the curriculum.

Everyone works together in the best interest of students and learning. And the driving force behind that common vision of collaboration is Assistant Principal Hilca Thomas, who was named the 2008 Assistant Principal of the Year by NASSP and Virco Inc. Eduardo Tillet, the principal at Doolin, credits Thomas with inspiring and modeling lifelong learning among faculty and staff members.

In her eight years as curriculum assistant principal at Doolin, Thomas has made raising student achievement a community effort, illustrated by a parent writing in her nomination letter that she inspires students and parents “to dream beyond the norm and believe that our children truly don’t have limitations.” In fact, her collaborative efforts combined with data-driven leadership have contributed to Doolin’s dramatic gains in academic achievement from a Florida school grade designation of a C in 2000 to an A in 2006.

Thomas has drawn from her diverse background in the private sector—where she was an aviation administrator in Jamaica and had a career in the insurance industry before entering education—to break out of the pigeonholed roles assistant principals are often placed in, such as dealing primarily with discipline or scheduling. Her philosophy is to educate herself and to ask for and accept new challenges.

Although routine responsibilities and tasks are a part of her everyday work, Thomas has been in constant pursuit of innovative ways to raise student achievement. To that end, she emphasizes relationships with students and parents, innovative curriculum, data analysis, and professional development.

**Relationships**

Her experiences have also fueled her belief that “the customer is the most important person, and in this case our customers are our students and our parents. I want to make sure that I am meeting the needs of my students at the level the parents expect.”

She was instrumental in forming the Educational Excellence School Advisory Council (EESAC), which consists of parents, students, teachers, support staff members, and other community stakeholders. EESAC nominates and elects members of the various school leadership teams that formulate policies and programs and develop and implement a yearly school improvement plan. Thomas also meets with local businesses and community members each year to facilitate a needs analysis for the school. Described by one of her peers as “a woman with vision,” Thomas empowers faculty members to develop their own leadership roles.

Thomas’s vision for the future of public education is a school where students are learning so much and having so much fun that they don’t want to leave. She envisions a school that’s not about “the arts or the sciences, but students are well grounded in all areas, learning is fun, and teachers enjoy being there…. [Learning] is going to be a joy; you can hear it in their voices, see it on their faces.”

**Enhancing the Curriculum**

One of the achievements Thomas is most proud of is directly aligned with her vision of a perfect school. A former science teacher and a passionate
Advocate for science education, she led a team of teachers in a successful grant application that resulted in Doolin becoming a NASA Explorer School. The program supports students as they build mathematics, science, geography, and technical skills using NASA lessons and enrichment programs. Teachers are trained by NASA and the National Science Teachers Association (NSTA). In grade 6, students are introduced to aeronautics and astronautics in an interdisciplinary approach that is aligned with state standards. In grade 7, students learn basic engineering, robotics, and computer programming skills. Students in grade 8 build on what they have learned in advanced robotics, conduct long-term science experiments, and help teachers prepare laboratory activities for other classes. Students participate in more than 190 labs each year, science FCAT scores improved by 3% in 2007, and a Girls in Engineering group is in place.

Thomas’s efforts are not limited to science. She created a reading department to ensure that Doolin met the requirements of the Comprehensive Research-Based Reading Plan and established a literacy reading council to review progress. The Algebraic Thinking Mathematics and Writing Across the Curriculum programs have also contributed to improved scores and a jump from 81% to 90% on the FCAT writing test.

Driving With Data

Data drives instruction and informs priorities at Doolin. Thomas established a data analysis team to disaggregate the results from various assessments to identify instructional weaknesses and strengths. But data is only useful if it is accessible, understood, and used to inform practice, so Thomas also implemented a summer staff development workshop during which teachers learn to evaluate FCAT data and scores from various other assessments and use them to plan differentiated instruction and build curriculum maps. Students, too, use a three-year longitudinal chart to track their scores and set goals, thereby taking ownership of their achievement.

In addition, Thomas developed a before- and after-school tutorial program for students at FCAT levels one and two that increased enrollment of English language learners and special education students in tutorial services. In addition, an All Student All Schools Inclusion Grant provided additional resources to increase the number of special education students in general education from 22% to 67%. Both subgroups had increases in FCAT scores.

Continued Professional Development

“My philosophy is that knowledge is a continuum, meaning that everyone should continuously seek opportunities to learn, grow, and expand their horizons,” Thomas said. She takes her own advice to heart, earning a master’s degree in science to bolster her curricular expertise and attending monthly district professional activities as well as attending conferences whenever possible. She also encourages staff members in their ongoing learning.

Recognizing that many new teachers are hired with degrees in disciplines other than education, she started a program to help them adjust and to improve retention. She meets with beginning teachers monthly to provide training on all aspects of teaching and established a professional growth team that mentors new teachers. All teachers receive school-based professional development and are encouraged to work collaboratively to explore issues and find solutions to problems and challenges in the classroom.

A Vision of the Future

Thomas has made progress toward making Doolin look like her vision of what school should be, but she emphasizes that it requires resources to achieve such a vision. More than 75% of her students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches, so Thomas understands how to stretch resources. But she also knows the limits that schools face when large numbers of students live in poverty, are learning English, or haven’t been expected to achieve. Chief among her suggestions for improving education in the United States is more-adequate funding from the government to cover the basic needs of students. Even better would be enough resources that all schools can offer students and adults an education that excites them and makes them want to learn.

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