



Raising Student Achievement: Practices that Work

A bi-monthly broadcast fax dedicated to sharing success stories

Published by North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement

March 2004

Volume 2, Number 4

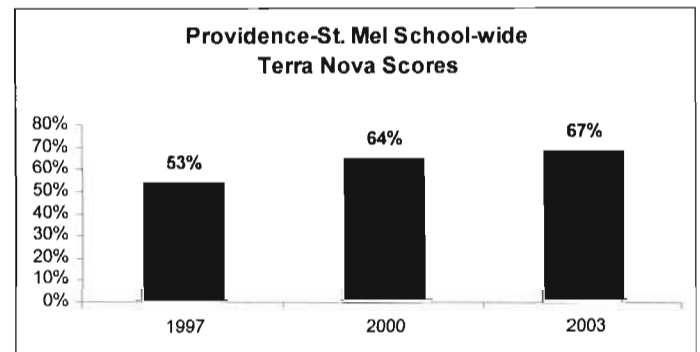
“Producing Better Life options for Graduates” – Providence-St. Mel, Chicago, IL Accredited since 1931

Providence St. Mel (PSM) “does more than increase standardized test scores; it produces better life outcomes for graduates,” states Dr. Michael Pressley, Michigan State University researcher who recently conducted an exhaustive study of the successes at PSM. This statement aptly captures the work of PSM.

Located in one of the poorest sections of Chicago, PSM is an independent, K-12 college preparatory school serving approximately 700 students. The student body is African American, with 60% of the students from families with incomes of less than \$30,000 per year. In the past six years alone, the school has increased its school-wide Terra Nova scores 14 percentage points. Even more impressive, for the past 25 years, 100% of PSM’s high school graduates have been accepted at four-year colleges, with 52% of the Class of 2003 being accepted at Tier I colleges (compared to 8% in 1991). 72% of PSM’s alumni graduate from college (compared to the 52% national norm).

Many factors contribute to the impressive achievements of PSM. Arguably the most striking is the school’s ability to live its mission, which is centered on the statement, “We believe in the creation of inspired lives produced by the miracle of hard work.”

Inspired Lives through High Expectations. The school provides college prep curriculum to its students, inspiring them to think beyond the poverty and despair that they see daily outside the school’s doors. The faculty enforces a “no foolishness” policy with strong consequences for misbehavior. Principal Jeanette DiBella states, “If you set the bar, students will work to jump to the level of expectations. Then, if you push it up higher, they will reach higher.”



Miracle of Hard Work. The students at PSM work hard, attending eight class periods from 7:45 a.m. 3:10 p.m. The majority of the day is devoted to academics. Students participate in after-school tutoring available until 5:00 p.m. and Saturday tutoring (both are required for students below a 2.0 GPA). An intensive summer school session is also available to help students improve their achievement. There is a shared philosophy that you earn your way at PSM and in life. The work ethic is shared by the administration and faculty. Employing the NCA improvement process, the faculty use data to drive decisions, ensuring responsive instruction aligned to the students’ curricular needs.

Accountability. The school holds the entire school community accountable. Faculty members are evaluated three times a year, with an observation by the principal. Their compensation is based on their demonstrated contribution to increased student performance. Parents are required to participate in all conferences, and students must perform academically to remain at PSM. Graduation from the 8th and 12th grades depends on passing the Terra Nova at grade level.

Praise and Rewards. “The psychological implications of the learning process are powerful,” states Principal DiBella. Ms. DiBella works with her faculty to ensure they are regularly reinforcing appropriate behavior and giving students positive statements. Tangible rewards for performance are prevalent throughout the school with the honor roll visibly posted, test results posted in every classroom, announcements recognizing students, frequent celebrations of achievement, and a graduation ceremony marked by deafening applause that would rival any athletic gathering.

When asked to provide advice to other schools faced with the negative stereotypes and expectations that surround the education of students in high poverty areas, Ms. DiBella states, “The principal must be the instructional leader in the school. If the principal understands instruction, has a good model in place, and holds the entire school community accountable for that model, most of the negativity can be eliminated.”

If you would like to be removed from this fax list, please contact us at (303) 722-6019.