

Influencer Helps KIPP Schools Increase School Leader Retention

KIPP®

ABOUT KIPP

KIPP's mission is to create a respected, influential, and national network of public schools that are successful in helping students from educationally underserved communities develop the knowledge, skills, character, and habits needed to succeed in college and the competitive world beyond.

CHALLENGE

The Knowledge Is Power Program, or KIPP, has experienced remarkable success in getting kids from underserved communities to college. However, the network of 162 charter schools simultaneously struggled with school principal retention, particularly among its founding principals, or "school leaders." In 2006, four-year retention rates hovered around 50 percent, and KIPP cofounder Dave Levin wanted to know why.

After Dave Levin was introduced to VitalSmarts, he and the VitalSmarts research team developed a plan to identify what was causing low retention and, more importantly, reverse the trend.

SOLUTION

The first step was interviewing principals. Philonda Johnson, founding school leader of the 330-student KIPP DC Discover Academy charter school for Pre-K through Kindergarten, was one of those who provided feedback. She had been leading her school since 2009, and by 2011 was already experiencing burnout from the long days and heavy workload.

"In my early years as a principal, I had to do everything," said Johnson, who said she gained a significant amount of weight during this stressful period. "I wasn't able to delegate and share the workload. It was kind of a badge of honor to be the overworked principal who had her hands in all the pots."

This sentiment was shared by many of the 102 others interviewed. David Maxfield, Vice President of Research at VitalSmarts, used the Influencer model from Influencer Training to help Levin sort through this and other information collected during the interviews. Results were first organized into failure modes and success modes, which helped explain why principals felt they couldn't be successful in their roles. A team of forty principals from across KIPP then helped identify the crucial moments that led to the failure or success, followed by the vital behaviors needed in those moments.

After six months of careful analysis and collaboration, the team came up with four vital behaviors that were incorporated throughout the entire school network:

Teach and Insist. Principals should build and empower their leadership team to make decisions and implement them, delegate responsibilities and hold people accountable for agreed-upon outcomes, and create a culture that embraces mistakes as building capacity.



Prioritize and Execute. Principals, along with their leadership teams, need to map out short-term and long-term goals and align them for all team members and the school as a whole, so they can prioritize and remain focused.

Engage Your Lifelines. Every principal should have at least three lifelines—go-to people who honor, encourage and push them. They should also offer themselves as a lifeline to others.

Renew to Get Stronger. To maximize organizational and personal effectiveness, principals make time for activities that re-energize them, and encourage others to do the same.

When the vital behaviors were introduced, no one needed to be convinced. Principals welcomed the chance to diffuse their stress and simply needed to be trained on how to live the behaviors. Johnson was among those excited and relieved.

“I was at the stage in my career where I was trying to figure out how to increase my effectiveness as an educator while also figuring out how to take care of myself. The challenge for me was changing my belief that everything had to be sourced back to me—to a culture where teachers produce the same level of high-quality work that I do or even better, and I don’t get in their way.”

Johnson found her answer in the four vital behaviors. Behavior No. 1 allowed her to build capacity in others and insist on accountability. She and other principals did this by implementing real-time feedback, regular reviews, and mentoring for the people they managed, along with providing emerging leaders within KIPP DC with opportunities to tackle important tasks.

Particularly useful in incorporating this vital behavior was the dimmer-switch analogy shared by the VitalSmarts team. “They taught us that you have to turn up some things and turn down other things,” said Levin. “That insight is a really big deal because the inclination for leaders—

who were often outstanding teachers—is to handle all this stuff themselves. Turning the dimmer switch down a bit is really hard.”

Behavior No. 2 provided specific ways to establish short- and long-term goals both individually and as a team, including “Thinking in 2’s”: identifying the two most important priorities that must be accomplished in the next two minutes, two hours, two days, two weeks, two months, and two years. Principals found this helpful in prioritizing strategic as well as tactical tasks, and refocusing the team after short-term distractions.

The third vital behavior encourages leaders to lean on each other and take advantage of existing resources to get through challenging times. Principals appreciated that they were given permission to share their challenges and have a reliable support system.

The fourth vital behavior was perhaps one of the best received. No longer was it a badge of honor to respond to an e-mail at 10 p.m.; principals were now encouraged—even expected—to stay off-line at night and find a work-life balance that allowed them time for re-energizing activities outside of work.

RESULTS

For founding school leaders who opened schools in 2006, four-year retention rates hovered around 50 percent. For those who opened schools in 2009, that number was up to 78 percent. Now, it has reached 82 percent for those who opened schools in 2011. In fact, many founding leaders are now thriving through year six and beyond.

“It is now an incredible source of pride for folks to make six years in the job,” says Levin. “To be honest, it’s come to be viewed as the minimum target. We would never have accomplished this without VitalSmarts’ Influencer program.”

Other ways KIPP is using its four vital behaviors include:

- Using an updated competency model in the school leader-development program

and other teacher trainings that maps to the vital behaviors. Aspects of the previous model that didn’t support the behaviors were left behind.

- Turning the “dimmer switch” down on celebrating first-year successes and instead recognizing those who continue to have outstanding results beyond year four.
- Keeping the behaviors top of mind. School leaders constantly refer to and live the principles.

As both Levin and Johnson attest, KIPP’s success would not have been possible without the Influencer program.

“Someone was finally naming for me the things that would help me be successful,” said Johnson, who lost sixty pounds within the year after implementing Behavior No. 4. “I appreciate how clear and specific it is, how simple yet powerful it is.”

“VitalSmarts brought an intentionality, clarity, and simplicity to the way we think about developing and retaining our remarkable leaders,” Levin said. “Everything we’ve done has now become a line to the vital behaviors and trying to help school leaders live those on a daily basis. It is a huge change in our organizational culture and hugely positive thing for our students and families.”

RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Since beginning to use the four vital behaviors, the number of KIPP school founders who make it to year four increased from 50 percent for those who opened schools in 2006, to 82 percent for those who opened schools in 2011.

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