

Hoping to Accelerate Student Achievement, Improve Culture, New Jersey’s Elizabeth Public Schools Turn to *Disney Institute*

SUMMARY

Changing the culture of a school district that with more than 4,000 employees and an annual budget of more than \$400 million is a massive undertaking, but Elizabeth Public Schools showed it’s possible. With help from *Disney Institute*, school administrators finalized an action plan to accelerate student achievement and improve the district’s organizational culture. Today, the New Jersey school district has made impressive strides in pushing its “Keys to Excellence” program ever closer to its goals.

GOOD TO BETTER TO GREAT

Like many urban school districts across the nation, Elizabeth Public Schools recently found itself buffeted by budget cuts, pressures to raise student performance levels, and the need to energize its staff.

“We decided we had to take a page from some of the best thinkers out there and strive for excellence. We needed to change our culture,” remembers Don Goncalves, assistant board secretary. “So we invited *Disney Institute* to show us how we could go from being good, to being better, to being great.”

After conferring with Goncalves and Rachel Goldberg, supervisor of staff development, *Disney Institute* Consultant Susan Pearsall designed a series of three-hour programs that included classic Disney practices and principles ranging from Leadership Excellence to People Management to Quality Service and more. She also incorporated some of the school system’s existing programs, such as its “Keys to Excellence” program into her presentations.

Pearsall went to New Jersey and presented the series of tailored programs over a six-month period to more than 200 of the school system’s employees, from teachers to supervisors to administrators to security managers. “It was important that we included all our operational and instructional leaders in these sessions,” explains Goldberg. “We believe that everything rises and falls with leadership so we wanted everyone on board.”

“WHY ARE WE HERE?”

Presenting her first strategic plan, Pearsall knew that some members of her audience were invariably wondering, “Why are we here? What does Disney have in common with us?” She quickly began ticking off similarities: “People entrust their children to us. Like you do, we also deal with unions. And children—and their parents—play a key role in our success.”

She then explained that she hadn’t come to New Jersey to tell the school system staffers what to do. “Rather, I am going to show you some of the things we do well and I want you to think how you can adapt them,” explained Pearsall.

After leading the group through a few Disney best practices and showing a video that detailed how Disney anticipates every Guest’s needs, down to exactly where to place garbage cans or position toilets in the Magic Kingdom, the audience “began to get it,” says Goldberg.

“We realized we had to provide a seamless experience for our students and their parents just as Disney does for its Guests,” she explains. “We need to make our schools a welcoming environment where learning is important and a place where parents will happily bring their children.”

Disney’s “Guest Expectations” resonated strongly with the school system audience. They are:

- Make me feel special.
- Treat me as an individual.
- Respect me and my children.
- Be knowledgeable.

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CASE STUDY: ELIZABETH PUBLIC SCHOOLS

“It was so helpful to see how Disney’s philosophy was so close to what we need to be doing,” says Goncalves. “It is helping to make us much more market-oriented in our approach.”

After each of the three-hour sessions, a group of Elizabeth Public School staffers, dubbed the “Disney Excellence Team,” met to draw up action plans that incorporated the best ideas and practices from each session.

“This team keeps the ball rolling,” says Goncalves. “Changing our culture is a long process and needs continual oversight.”

“ACHIEVING EXCELLENCE”

Thanks to help from *Disney Institute* and other initiatives, the school system is well on its way to meeting its goal of “achieving excellence.” Highlights include:

- New handbooks for teachers and principals to show both exactly what is expected of them as they lead their students to excellence.
- A video that will be shown to all potential new hires, detailing the history of the school system and the new culture.
- A revamped, system-wide “Keys to Excellence” action plan that has as its vision: “Elizabeth Public Schools will be one of the best school systems in the State of New Jersey.”
- Student proficiency levels and teacher retention rates
- “Stars of Excellence,” a Disney-inspired employee recognition program, is now system wide.

Goncalves notes there are improvements almost everywhere one looks. As an example, he points to the changes he has seen among the school system’s security guards who, like some other support staff, did not always feel they were part of the solution.

“Now they realize that as the first person a student, parent or visitor sees when coming to a school, the impression they make is vitally important,” says Goncalves. “They now feel, and act, like they are part of the team. That’s a huge difference since we implemented the Disney practices.”

Goncalves, Goldberg and others have noted that changing the culture of the school system takes time. It is not an overnight process.

As Pearsall told the school system attendees, “To change a culture you need to do everything right. You can’t just get leadership right and treat your employees poorly. You can’t treat employees great but neglect your customers. It’s a total package.”

Adds Goncalves, “We are striving for excellence, every day and one day a time. We are on our way.”