

NINA MOINI: It's graduation season across Minnesota, and for many students, walking across the stage represents years of hard work, support and perseverance. At North High School in Minneapolis, this Friday's commencement comes with another reason to celebrate. Just a few years ago, the school's graduation rate lagged more than 20 points behind the state average.

Today, according to Minneapolis Public Schools, North is on track to meet or may even exceed state benchmarks. It's a dramatic turnaround that school leaders say reflects years of investment in students and staff. Joining me now is the school's principal, Mauri Friestleben. Principal Friestleben, thank you so much for your time today.

MAURI Thank you for having me.

FRIESTLEBEN:

NINA MOINI: I'm sure it's an exciting week with commencement coming up. I'm sure you're busy, so we appreciate you making time. It's really important for us to highlight when good things are happening, when solutions are being implemented, and when good work is coming to fruition. So we really appreciate it.

A few years ago, again, North's graduation rate was significantly below the state average. It's probably a ton of things. But if you gave us the overhead view, how would you describe what's driven this more recent progress?

MAURI I would say the dedication and determination of the staff is the first thing that comes to my mind. And then

FRIESTLEBEN: obviously, the resilience of the students and their families and the community in which they live in.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, I read in North News that the staff really credited these rates with just stronger support and even closer relationships between staff and students. What do you think that looks like, day to day, building trust and maybe fun time, too, just to relate?

MAURI I would just say that it looks amazing, Nina. And it's difficult to articulate exactly what we can see every day here

FRIESTLEBEN: at North, but the dedication and determination of the staff definitely sticks out. We've had very low turnover in staff. A lot of times when you see that trend across the country where, sometimes in harder spaces and places, it's difficult to get traction because you're regularly turning over in your staff, both in the classroom and outside of the classroom.

So we've benefited from the last two summers of having a 0% vacancy rate, which means that the staff that are here are staying here. So just their level of commitment is through the roof. The things that I see them do on such a regular basis-- so they make home visits every summer. They're regularly meeting kids where they're at.

They hold the standard very high. So a lot of them are members of national organizations, teaching organizations. They make sure that not only are they in tune with the state standards, but national standards as well, and that they're holding students to that.

They're finding out all of their honors opportunities, advanced placement opportunities, any type of PSEO or college in the schools, concurrent enrollment-- I mean, just the group of teachers that serve the community here at North High-- they're second to none. My youngest daughter graduated from North two years ago, and I still find myself forever in their debt for the willingness that they bring to the table every single day to hold that line and push the kids to it.

NINA MOINI: Do you ever talk with other principals or schools or districts about some of the more successful strategies? I know it's like people, and every person's an individual, but do you share ideas with other schools?

MAURI Yes.

FRIESTLEBEN:

NINA MOINI: What do you do when you share ideas?

MAURI Oh, well, my high school colleagues here in Minneapolis-- we have a spicy group chat that we've had--

FRIESTLEBEN:

[LAUGHTER]

--for a number of years now, as I'm sure you can imagine. Since 2020, we definitely-- it's been a threadline for us. We talk. So the things that we talk about the most frequently with North High School is data.

And for us, keeping the data at the center of every conversation that we have-- so the teachers meet biweekly. They meet in grade-level teams, and they meet in department teams. So in their grade-level teams, they're looking at their kids together, Nina. So that's where everybody who sees all the 10th-graders is at the table.

And they're looking at how all of the 10th-graders are doing, which ones are surpassing our wildest dreams and which ones are struggling. And then, when they're getting together with their departments, that's where the whole content is getting together. So the whole math team is getting together.

And that's where the data that they're looking at is more about the standards that the kids are nailing, and OK, they've completely got these algebraic equations but here's where we're really falling short. And so it's just this constant keeping the data at the center. How are the kids doing?

And then we also use that data to reflect how we're doing. So we could tell everybody that we're doing a good job. But if the data doesn't show it, it doesn't mean anything.

NINA MOINI: And can you tell me just a little specifics about what is the data? Sometimes when we look at data, it's like it's from last year. Or we could only get-- it seems like this is more on a micro level, tracking really manageable things that you could manage in real time.

MAURI Yes, so I completely credit our assistant principal Steve White with how he codes. So a lot of times, this is where
FRIESTLEBEN: we have to come into this new century, right? And so the data that we're looking at here at North on a regular basis, we call it the snapshot data. And it's where we have an amazing assistant principal that knows how to code really, really well. And he's able to take the teachers' grade books.

And so the grade books has, who's here that day, who's on time, who's late, and then what work completion and what standards are we showing mastery of. He's able to take all of that data, and then he codes it for us so that we can see-- every single week, we can see a snapshot of how every single student is doing. It's amazing.

NINA MOINI: Wow, that is amazing. I also, though, want to talk about-- this looked amazing to me, too, in this day and age, is that you've all been able to maintain some relatively small class sizes, like in the mid-20s. A lot of other high school principals and superintendents I talk with across the metro, across-- in the suburbs are talking about classes within the mid-30s. So I'm wondering, is that sustainable for you all?

MAURI No.

FRIESTLEBEN:

NINA MOINI: And what are you-- OK, what are you kind of doing to work through that?

MAURI We're so sad. So the reason why a lot of times you can afford things like that is if you get some additional
FRIESTLEBEN: compensation. And so even though it's hard to sometimes have challenging demographics, sometimes those demographics will bring additional income into your building. So for us, that has to do with things like poverty lines.

How many of your kids fall at or below poverty lines? That can sometimes increase your compensation. Or if you have some unique exceptionalities, like students that are learning English as a new language, or they have maybe some unique disabilities. And so we have a number of challenges here at North High School that bring some additional income.

That additional income, we have been using historically, for the last few years, to reduce class size. And we have been sitting in the mid-20s for class size. And in Minneapolis Public Schools, we just couldn't afford that anymore.

And so this last allocation that I got for this upcoming school year was less, significantly less. And we had to let that lowered class size go. And it very much makes us nervous, because we believe that a lot of the success that we've had could be definitely contributing-- or those class sizes could be contributing to that. So one way to find out-- and that'll be next year-- we'll have class sizes in the mid-30s, just like a lot of our counterparts.

NINA MOINI: OK. Well, I wish you, obviously, all the best with that. You'll have to see what happens.

MAURI Yeah.

FRIESTLEBEN:

NINA MOINI: You know, when-- I know it's hard to describe what you see when you walk into North High, and then you see those interactions. A lot of it is stuff that can't necessarily be measured or explained. But when you watch students cross that stage this Friday, what do you hope they really take with them from their time at North High?

MAURI Yeah, I end the announcements every morning with just a reminder of where we see them, where I see them in
FRIESTLEBEN: particular as their principal, and I include the staff in that as well. And I remind them that they're loved more than they know. They're braver than they can imagine. They're stronger than they sometimes feel.

And I want them to know that regardless of where life takes them from here, whether they want to go to an Ivy League school and close out their education with a doctorate, or whether they want to leave here and go open up their own nail salon, they have been given every opportunity to be equipped to do that. And so it is there. It is there.

The world is their oyster, regardless of what they brought into it, regardless of the odds that may or may not have been stacked against them. And then we played our part in their little corner of the world to make sure they're ready to take it on.

NINA MOINI: Absolutely. Thank you so much, Principal Friestleben, for coming by and giving us a peek into the hard work that is ongoing on behalf of these students. Really appreciate your time.

MAURI Yes. Thank you so much.

FRIESTLEBEN:

NINA MOINI: That was Mauri Friestleben, principal of North High School in Minneapolis.