



A School Turnaround Success Story: How This Kentucky HS Just Sent Its First Graduate to the Ivy League

By **BRAD WESTON** | *November 26, 2017*

Fairdale High School is a public school in Louisville, Kentucky. About three-quarters of its students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. In 2011, just 20 percent were deemed college- or career-ready.

This fall, Fairdale High School sent its first student to an Ivy League university. She was raised by a single mom in Louisville's west end and, like many of Fairdale's kids, grew up with numerous barriers to education. Now, she's attending Harvard, studying political science. She's going to be a lawyer. The best part: She's not alone in showing what Fairdale students are capable of if they're given the right kind of help — and expectations.

I was Fairdale's principal until I became an assistant superintendent for Jefferson County Public Schools in November 2016. In the half-decade I led Fairdale, we improved our college- and career-readiness rate by 38 percentage points and increased our graduation rate to 89.4 percent. Adopting a rigorous, college-level curriculum has been a key part of our turnaround.

When we talk about supporting low-income, low-performing students, the conversation is often about remedial education. This is an important piece in closing the achievement gap, but over the past six years at Fairdale, we've learned that raising standards for all students can be even more important.

One of the most crucial factors in deeper learning is exposing students to a wide variety of experiences and ways to apply the



Radcliffe Quad undergrad housing at Harvard University.

knowledge they are acquiring. We also know that an important part of growth is stretching students beyond their comfort zone. If students learn that they can successfully engage in high-level application and analysis, it improves their confidence and helps them envision themselves in college, continuing to use those higher-order skills.

Students learn more when they have to “do” something with their newfound knowledge. Many curricula give students the “what” and ask them to recall and regurgitate information; we needed a curriculum that also asks “what next,” “how,” and “why.”

To create such a curriculum, we turned to Cambridge International Examinations, a department of the University of Cambridge in England, which had developed a program that gives students the opportunity to earn an Advanced International Certificate of Education. The certificate is a widely recognized international diploma. But it wasn't the fancy certificate that most impressed us about their approach.

Cambridge shared our commitment to engaging students by providing them with an opportunity to discover important

information, making learning an active, not passive, activity. The curriculum is accessible to many different types of learners, including all Fairdale students, and asks them to apply their knowledge in a practical way — to come to conclusions, and to explain ideas and concepts. It asks students to use information, not just store it.

There is also a practical component for learning, and all students have an opportunity to pursue advanced coursework. Each year, our students have improved their achievement numbers on state assessments and college/career readiness measures. Every one of our Cambridge graduates from the classes of 2016 and 2017 graduated college-ready and transitioned successfully to post-secondary institutions.

Fairdale's first Ivy League student completed the Cambridge program. So did a shy Iraqi immigrant student whose family was unsure how much they wanted her to participate in Western culture. She enrolled in the program and before long found herself presenting to 1,000 people at a districtwide forum.

Raising our standards and adopting a rigorous, internationally benchmarked curriculum has had an incredible impact on all our students and the school's academic culture. Our students see their peers reaching higher than ever before, achieving bigger and better things each year. They see that they, too, can achieve at high levels.

They see possibilities.

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