Staff meeting celebrates success

Focus schools' Executive Director Kathy Williams kicked off an all staff meeting a few days before students returned for the new school year with words of encouragement and acknowledgement of the difference each and every member of the team can make in students' lives.

Celebrating success was a major theme, as Williams encouraged staff to support students who face significant challenges and have had too few successes in life to celebrate. She needed to look no further than her own team – which includes five Focus graduates who now play important roles at the dropout prevention and recovery schools – to provide real-life examples of student success.

She also encouraged staff to support one another, using the example of geese flying in formation to take advantage of the lifting power of the bird in front.

"If we have as much sense as a goose, we will stay in tune with those people who are headed the same way we are," Williams said. "Going at it alone can be the hardest thing we try to do."

Buckeye Community Hope Foundation's Accountability and School Improvement Department Lead Dr. Carol Young provided training on verbal de-escalation – a much needed skill for staff working with at-risk students, many of whom suffer from toxic stress.

"Most children or youth coming out of toxic environments will show signs of developmental deficits that can lead to behavior that looks 'bad' or 'negative,'" Young explained. "Attention to social-emotional learning skills can boost overall academic achievement 11-13 percentile points."

Young explained that verbal de-escalation is the use of positive language during an escalating or potentially dangerous, or threatening, situation in an attempt to prevent a person from causing harm to themselves or others. It consists of verbal tactics to help diffuse a potentially unsafe situation and to help a student regulate out-of-control behavior.

Focus staff left the meeting with a renewed sense of commitment, eager to begin another new school year.