

From Faltering to Award-Winning

In 2003, it was with great angst that I grappled with the decision of whether to apply for an elementary principal position in Annandale, Minnesota. I was aware of the less appealing aspects of the position. The temporary classroom walls of the school I was to lead were riddled with mold, and the external bricks were crumbling. The physical building was analogous to what could be found inside the walls: a competitive, unhealthy school climate and under-educated students. The school had less than 4 percent diversity and a modest 21 percent poverty. Students' academic achievement fell well below the state average. It was a school with traditional signs of failure.

Upon accepting the position of principal at Annandale Elementary School, my reservations were solidified when the school board provided me with a list of items to fix or address. To characterize my first year as rocky would be an understatement. I internally struggled with the reality that I was the leader of an ineffective school. The staff were hurt and angry with my transparency that we needed to do better.

Fast forward 10 years. In 2013, Annandale Elementary School received the National Blue Ribbon Award in the category of Exemplary High Achieving. It was recognized as among Minnesota's highest performing schools, as measured by state assessments in math and reading.

On countless occasions, I've been asked how we went from a faltering school to a national award-winning school. I could give an honest, yet cliché, response that includes bridging research and practice, data-informed decision-making, and professional development. But after a great deal of reflection, I've concluded that the answer is not so standard and is much more authentic and human. I attribute the school's reform to humility, creativity, relentless perseverance, and celebration.

Humility

Early in my tenure, our staff identified high-performing schools in the area. We contacted these schools and

The physical building was analogous to what could be found inside the walls: a competitive, unhealthy school climate and under-educated students.

asked if we could learn from them. Thankfully, the schools agreed to be our learning labs. We observed their teachers instruct math and literacy lessons, had candid discussions with instruction providers, reviewed their instructional materials, met with principals, and asked many questions. Our conversations were frank.

We were immersed in practices that were not happening in our school, such as pre-testing to identify students' strengths, differentiated instruction, small-group instruction, and progress monitoring. These observations were the impetus for our elementary literacy committee to start the practice of developing year-long, schoolwide professional development plans that focused on one instructional practice that needed to be implemented in

each classroom. Each year, the plan included analyzing student data, identifying and providing interventions for students at risk of not meeting grade-level expectations, and participating in professional reading and discussion.

The foci of the school efforts for the decade were:

- Year one: guided reading;
- Year two: independent reading;
- Year three: literature circles;
- Year four: literacy framework review;
- Years five and six: writers' workshop;
- Year seven: response to intervention (RTI) overview;
- Year eight: progress monitoring; and
- Year nine: positive behavior interventions and supports.

Creativity

In teams of three to six, we participated in significant, multiday professional development experiences such as Ohio State's Literacy Collaborative, the national International Reading Association conference, and Solution Tree's RTI Conference. Throughout and following the training events, teams discussed the best practice frameworks, how the framework components fit with our practices and beliefs, and what curriculum and staffing resources would be needed to implement an improved practice.

Our mindset was never, "We can't do it," but instead was, "How are we going to make this happen?" Examples of creative solutions included having Title I instructors and parent volunteers supervise math and reading activities in classrooms while grade-level teachers met to discuss at-risk students and soliciting funds from community service organizations to purchase books for classroom libraries.

Relentless Perseverance

Our goal was that every child be proficient on the state assessments. Grade-level teams brainstormed interventions for students who performed below grade level. If grade-level interventions were not successful, the RTI team supported the implementation


of additional ones.

Parents served as partners in boosting learning experiences and monitoring student progress. The desire to provide myriad interventions with differing levels of intensity required additional staff. Title I programming shifted to a reading specialist who trained and supervised paraprofessionals using research-based interventions. Targeted services funds supported the cost of all-day kindergarten for our district's poorest and lowest achieving youngsters, six weeks of summer school, and after-school literacy programming. We applied for, and were granted, federal Alternative Delivery of Specialized Instructional Services funds that allowed us to provide tiered math and behavior interventions, and monitor progress of Tier III students.

Celebration

To maintain motivation for this intense work, our efforts needed to be recognized. Our local newspaper published information about our gains in student achievement. In 2008, Annandale Elementary received the Minnesota Academic Excellence Foundation Spotlight Award, and the school board served a catered lunch to the staff.

In 2010, the school was named a Minnesota School of Excellence, and we held an evening community celebration, complete with inflatables, face painting, and a pizza dinner. The school district was honored when Annandale Elementary School was named a 2013 National Blue Ribbon School.







Humility, creativity, relentless perseverance, and celebration are not typical factors identified in school transformation. But together, the desire to learn and improve, solve problems, work hard, and enjoy the results were the driving forces in significant school improvement. 

Tracy Reimer, a former elementary school principal, is assistant director of leadership K-12 administration at Bethel University.

Meeting the COMMON CORE CHALLENGE in Every Way!



Guarantee results on your campus!

-  Cover 100% of the Common Core Standards
-  Utilize Research-Based Strategies
-  Develop Critical Thinking Skills
-  Provide Flexibility and Ease-of-Use
-  Increase Achievement
-  Deliver in Print and Online Format

- ▶ Total Motivation Math
- ▶ Total Motivation Reading
- ▶ Motivation Math Benchmark Assessments
- ▶ Motivation Reading Benchmark Assessments
- ▶ Common Core Standards and Strategies Flip Charts

Call today!

800.585.5258 • mentoringminds.com •     

Critical Thinking for Life!
Mentoring Minds