

From Deficit to Distinguished

The community of Tillicum covers 10 square miles divided by Washington State's I-5 corridor. Each side is geographically isolated with only two roads in and out. The community does not have a grocery store, post office, or movie theater. It does, however, host a lone elementary school.



Much of the community finds itself in a cycle of generational poverty. Federal free and reduced-price lunch counts consistently reach above 90 percent. For years, Tillicum Elementary's achievement scores were reported as being the lowest in the school district and state. The underperformance went unnoticed until four years ago, when under new direction, building leadership set the intention to successfully transform and turn around the school. Fast forward to 2016, Tillicum Elementary was honored with numerous awards, including the State Achievement Award, National Title I Distinguished School, and Elementary Principal of the Year. Now that the award case is filled, we are often asked by other struggling schools, "What can we do to transform our school?"

Some serious reflection of these important questions led us to identify three major shifts: strong leadership, healthy systems and structures, and effective instruction.

1. Strong Leadership

As a leadership team, we joined forces to establish an unwavering belief that all our students could and would achieve at high levels. In the beginning, few staff members shared our belief, which was no secret to us. Push-back against changing practice and focus was obvious. We knew we had to show them evidence in the way of growth data that would begin to shift their thinking.

Indeed, this was the case, when a taste of success during the second year of the process opened the door of possibility for many staff members. The literacy coach and I worked to emphasize the importance of forming and maintaining strong relationships with our students. We asked teachers to intentionally speak positive presuppositions to students and one another. Through ongoing, intentional professional development and discussion, we supported the staff in discontinuing their projection

of white, middle-class values onto our students and their families. We asked them to stop their feelings of pity and increase their awareness of cultural competencies.

With fierce determination, we advocated for ways to leverage student learning in our school. When roadblocks appeared in the form of funding or program requirements, our collective determination led us to find a way around, over, under, or through those roadblocks. We began to repeat: "There are no excuses for failure." Eventually, this notion of "no excuses" became a schoolwide mantra spoken by students and staff alike.

2. Healthy Systems and Structures

Prior to the turnaround process, we suffered from the classic "too much to do, too little time" adage. We juggled multiple initiatives, managed by broken systems and weak accountability.

Our first step was to prioritize our focus. Our data showed that current core instruction in reading and math was ineffective. We decided to start by narrowing our school focus to reading improvement. We built screen and diagnostic assessment systems that supported our ability to accurately identify specific gaps in reading skill and understanding. We wrote and administered common formative assessments at each grade level, allowing us to monitor progress toward standards by student and student cohort. We formalized our data team structures, holding instructional staff accountable for tracking common assessment data by reading standard, analyzing that data for strengths and weaknesses, and setting SMART goals for individual student growth. Our pull-out reading intervention systems were redesigned to meet specific instructional needs identified through our diagnostic and progress monitor assessments.

We created structures to recognize and celebrate student growth. During monthly assemblies, we highlight student achievement toward standards. Instead of naming "students of the

month,” you hear students recognized for specific, targeted growth in “identifying main idea with supporting evidence” or “justifying inferences based on the author’s point of view.” Classroom walls post daily progress toward clear learning targets.

3. Effective Instruction

An integral part of our data teaming is requiring teachers to identify instructional strategies that lead to growth. We learned early on that some teachers confused classroom activities with instructional strategies. Through professional development and coaching, our teachers began to separate the two and implement research-based, highly effective instructional strategies.

Teaching staff have learned to effectively leverage daily learning targets tied to Common Core State Standards to guide their lessons. They measure student acquisition of the targets with daily exit tasks that immediately inform their intervention and instruction for the next day’s learning.

Two years into the turnaround process, the leadership team determined our staff were ready to advance the rigor of their reading instruction. We set in place routines to model, instruct, and measure visible thinking in core reading classes. Our students responded, with 85 percent to 95 percent meeting standard on the state summative reading tests. The same intentional instruction that students were receiving in reading transferred to math. State math scores from the same year rivaled the impressive reading scores.

Rise to the Top

Like all journeys, ours was bumpy along the way. We began with student achievement scores below 20 percent in reading and math. Our successful turnaround efforts led our students to achieve in the top 5 percent of the state.

Can our success be replicated? Our recommendations are straightforward: Identify a core leadership team with a shared belief that turnaround is possible and the drive to

accomplish such a transformation. Narrow your building focus to one content area. Redesign your building schedules, staffing, assessments, and instruction to support this focus. Support teaching staff in the successful implementation of a select few instructional strategies that have been identified as high-yield. Hold teaching staff accountable for formal data collection and analysis. When upward shifts are observed in student achievement, build on those successes. Keep a careful watch for entry points in which you can encourage teaching staff and students to rise to the next level of learning. Believe all students can achieve at high levels. And recognize and celebrate students when they do.

In 2014, we moved to Tye Park Elementary School, which had been designated a Priority School (in the lowest 5 percent of student proficiency rate). By following the strategy we implemented at Tillicum Elementary, we were able to replicate our success by the second year. In 2016 Tye Park Elementary was awarded a School of Distinction Honor. We have since then moved to Mann Elementary School where we will once again do what we do best: Take schools from deficit to distinction. 

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