

Four keys to a smooth flight

*Madison, Wis., project looks beyond programs
and designs to the deeper principles*

By JAN O'NEILL and ANNE CONZEMIUS

FOCUS

REFLECTION

COLLABORATION

LEADERSHIP

At the beginning of the school year, Luke, a 7-year-old 1st grader at Franklin Elementary School in Madison, Wis., received a letter from the parents of a Japanese friend:

Dear Mr. Luke,

How are you getting along? We've appreciated your kindness during our stay at Madison last year. Our daughter, Kimiko, has had a great time at Franklin School. She goes to 1st grade in Japan now, and she is enjoying there. But she still miss Madison, we also. We'll be going on a trip to U.S.A. visiting Madison soon. We'd very much like to see you if it's OK with you ...

Kimiko attended Franklin after it eliminated its pull-out English Language Learners (ELL) program in favor of additional classroom staffing. Kimiko was a shy, non-English-speaking little girl who cried at the beginning of every day the first week. Luke took Kimiko under his wing, staying by her side throughout each day. By the end of Kimiko's first month, she was a giggling, happy little girl communicating in words and phrases to her friends and teachers.

Using the funding for the pull-out program, Franklin School restructured to reduce class sizes and add ELL-certified teachers with the goal of building community and sustaining academic growth. A grant from the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSRD) project was used to support professional

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development. Since then, Franklin's ESL, minority, and majority students have all maintained their achievement levels, but Luke's and Kimiko's friendship — typical of bonds forged between English and non-English speaking children in this school — is one of the intangible positive outcomes you won't find measured on any test.

Across town, teachers sit in Lowell Elementary School's former auditorium, now converted to a teacher-family resource center, scoring their students' primary language arts and math assessments. One teacher reads student scores to another, who records them on a teacher-developed, grade-level summary sheet. Another group of teachers looks at individual student work. One comments, "I could tell when I was working with him that he guessed on that one." The others nod. "But look a little further on where he was able to remember that word again. ..."

Lowell's achievement scores have risen each of the past three years, ever since the school used CSRD money for comprehensive staff development aimed at improving student achievement. In addition, students, parents, teachers, and the community feel the camaraderie and trust evident throughout the school every day.

At Mendota School, on Madison's north side, teams of K-1, 2-3, and 4-5 teachers meet during weekly early release time to review the alignment of their curriculum with the district's standards and their school improvement goals. Attending the K-1 classroom teachers' meeting this afternoon are the principal, the Title I facilitator, and the technology specialist. The principal and Title I facilitator share the K-1 language arts test results from last year, asking the teachers, "What do you notice? Which questions are the kids having trouble with?" The teachers look for commonalities among the classes.

"I remember I rushed the kids through this assessment. My kids can do better than this! I need to rethink how I'm

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approaching my testing," said one teacher.

The principal and Title I facilitator leave to join another cadre, while the teachers and technology coordinator begin planning a writing unit to reinforce and extend the skills these students need.

Five years ago, Mendota Elementary School was in crisis. Many parents sent their children elsewhere. But last year's headlines in the local paper trumpeted, "Mendota School does a 180! Turnaround draws bravos!" (*Capital Times*, Jan. 19, 2000). The school's focus on results, along with its work with community partnerships, curriculum alignment, and building a safe school climate, is drawing parents back.

LEARNING BY EXAMPLE

Recently some clients asked us to point out successful schools they could visit to see which programs or school designs were being used. While encouraging them to visit the schools above, we cautioned that they wouldn't see programs or specific school designs, but the best organizational and instructional practices. Nonetheless, the clients visited and came away frustrated, saying, "They aren't using anything in particular! They've incorporated lots of bits and pieces and come up with their own approaches!"

This ability to learn, adopt, modify, and innovate is what makes these schools successful — not specific programs or designs. The need for instant answers via programs and designs is the root of the problem with benchmarking as it is implemented by many educators: get the most recent "best" program, train staff in

an inservice or two ... and then wonder why we're not getting the same results as the benchmarked school. In looking for individual trees, we continue to miss the forest — the underlying and universal principles, processes, and practices that drive sustained, continuous improvement of student results.

Since 1998, the federal CSRD project has provided millions of dollars in incentive grants to Title I schools for undertaking "proven comprehensive reforms." CSRD has endorsed a number of reform programs and designs, although a school can receive money by outlining an approach to systemic, schoolwide improvement without identifying a specific program or design.

To evaluate the CSRD's impact, RAND Corp. researchers studied a sample of 40 schools in seven districts. After a two-year evaluation, according to Susan Bodilly (1998), one of the RAND researchers, "In general, reform has failed to get to implementation." She cautioned, "There is no magic bullet. ... No one can promise a school that design-based assistance can transform the classroom through the design team's efforts alone"

4 KEYS TO SUCCESS

What is the difference between schools that are learning and making progress and those that aren't? In reviewing the research (Newmann & King, 2000; Cawelti, 2000; Wasley & Clark, 1997; Darling-Hammond, 1999) and examining our clients' practices, four principles and processes are universal. Schools showing continuous improvement in student results are those whose cultures are permeated by:

- Shared focus;
- Reflective practices;
- Collaboration and partnerships;
- Ever increasing leadership capacity.

FOCUS

You see the power of focus in schools where everyone shares goals and the goals are focused on student learning. This focus drives every conversation, transaction, and process at the school.

At Franklin, Lowell, and Mendota

schools, significant resources have gone toward giving teachers time to work together to develop curriculum and instructional approaches that are aligned with state standards. In each school, teachers regularly meet together to review their curricular units for thematic integrity, look at their students' progress on district-developed assessments, develop skills-based, flexible groupings, and share their instructional approaches and strategies. At the end of each year, the full faculty meets to review state test results, summarize what has been learned, and celebrate progress toward schoolwide goals. Then, at the beginning of each year, the full faculty meets again to review results and examine instructional strategies and programmatic results to develop/refine schoolwide goals.

As a result of this continuing discussion of student learning, each school implemented a different approach to improvement.

Mendota has a “teachers-helping-teachers” philosophy, so the technology specialist models standards-based, integrated curricular units for the teachers and students, then provides guidance and support. The students build electronic portfolios each year demonstrating their growing competencies in both technology and content.

At Franklin, it used to be the norm, according to the principal, that African-American kids went to Title I and Hmong kids went to ESL. With the elimination of these pull-out programs, there are fewer interruptions, the schoolwide teacher-student ratio is 15:1, and students stay with their classroom teachers to receive the focused, continuous instruction they need.

At Lowell, the single focus on staff development resulted in teachers sharing a common language around math, reading, and writing literacy. This increased students' confidence and they now relate what they're learning across classrooms and grade levels. One student recently commented to his teacher, “Oh, I know all about word chunks! We were

LOWELL ELEMENTARY SCHOOL Madison, Wis.

Enrollment: 353

Staff: 21 classroom teachers

Racial/ethnic mix:

White:	54%
Black:	25%
Hispanic:	10%
Asian/Pacific Islander:	10%
Native American:	0.3%
Other:	0%

Limited English proficient: 50%

Languages spoken: 10

Free/reduced lunch: 30%

Special education: 14% (includes speech/language)

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FRANKLIN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL Madison, Wis.

Enrollment: 358

Staff: 25 classroom teachers

Racial/ethnic mix:

White:	63.7%
Black:	13.7%
Hispanic:	9.2%
Asian/Pacific Islander:	11.7%
Native American:	0%
Other:	1.7%

Limited English proficient: 16.5%

Languages spoken: 11

Free/reduced lunch: 30%

Special education: 12.6% (includes speech & language)

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doing that last year!”

REFLECTION

Having a clear focus is necessary but not enough for continuous improvement of student results. We need to know what

MENDOTA ELEMENTARY SCHOOL Madison, Wis.

Enrollment: 270

Staff: 36, including specials/special ed/reading teachers

Racial/ethnic mix:

White:	37%
Black:	54%
Hispanic:	4%
Asian/Pacific Islander:	3%
Native American:	1%
Other:	0%

Limited English proficient: 0%

Languages spoken: English

Free/reduced lunch: 66%

Special education: 12%

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to focus on. In schools where there is significant progress, there is a strong culture of reflective practice. Test scores and other measures — including measures of parent, student, and teacher satisfaction — are valued as decision-making tools.

All three schools use data-based reflection in everything they do. Lowell teachers have nine days a year to assess students, collaboratively analyze assessment results, and determine approaches based on results. Teachers have developed their own forms and templates to capture and share information; each form is tied to content and performance standards. (See example on the next page.)

Reflection is a never-ending process. Although Lowell has consistently improved student results, Sue Abplanalp, Lowell's principal at the time, had her staff look in fall 2000 at the number of special education students excluded from state testing. Reflecting on their values-driven vision and schoolwide goals, the faculty decided they would focus on specific skill sets special education students were missing and prepare them to

LANGUAGE ARTS GRADE-LEVEL PERFORMANCE STANDARDS: KINDERGARTEN

READING/LITERATURE

CONTENT STANDARD: Students in Wisconsin will read and respond to a wide range of writing to build an understanding of written materials, of themselves, and of others.

The student will be able to:

DEVELOP PHONEMIC AWARENESS

- Hear and identify rhyming words
- Identify uppercase and lowercase letters of the alphabet
- Identify beginning sounds in words
- Understand that letters represent sounds
- Recognize whole words at sight and locale in written materials

NAMES										

UNDERSTAND HOW PRINT IS ORGANIZED AND READ

- Hold book in the correct position
- Identify front, back, and title page of a book
- Follow words from left to right and top to bottom
- Match spoken words with written words using one-to-one correspondence

UNDERSTAND THAT PRINT MAKES SENSE

- Recognize own name
- Read and/or explain own writing
- Develop concept that print contains a message

SOURCE: Madison Metropolitan School District

take the state tests. As one teacher put it, “I don’t want to exclude a child just because she or he is in special education. I want to know how all my students are doing.”

The three schools are also part of a district that values and supports reflection systemwide. In addition to analyzing state test results for each school, the district worked with teachers to develop districtwide measures of reading, writing, and math that each elementary school administers to every child one to three times a year. Also, each year the district gives a climate survey to every parent and staff member, compiles the results by school, and helps the school interpret the results over time. Madison’s schools would still make progress without this support, but the district’s involvement is undoubtedly increasing their rate of improvement.

COLLABORATION

Even combined focus and reflection are not enough to keep student results

improving. Schools making the most progress have a collaborative environment where teachers see colleagues and parents as fellow travelers on the journey of continuous improvement. Collaboration doesn’t occur, however, simply by putting together teams of people. Collaboration requires skill development over time, constant reinforcement and coaching, and structures that encourage and invite shared work around common goals, for example cadres or action teams that target specific areas for improvement.

Mendota principal Sandy Gunderson said change came, but slowly. “The first year it was more principal-modeled because it was high risk for teachers to share what was working and not working. But competency increased with coaching and (training) and I saw the quality of questions improve. Now there’s more focus on student learning in these meetings, and less focus on concrete nuts and bolts like field trips.”

At Franklin School, a teacher told a

parent, “Two years ago, I was begging for help in my classroom. I had over 20 kids, many with special needs. Now look.” She swept a hand at her classroom where adults and students worked together. “I have so much help sometimes I can’t keep up with it!”

Franklin’s restructuring reduced class sizes by an average 38%, increasing the amount of instructional time per student. Principal Deb Mercier wanted all teachers to be able to teach ESL, and the school now has eight of its 30+-member staff double-certified in ESL and others working on their licenses. During the week, all students are pulled out for enrichment by a collaborative team comprised of the art, technology, and library media teachers, giving classroom teachers collaborative planning time.

LEADERSHIP CAPACITY

Leadership capacity grows when individuals focus on student learning, reflect on student assessments, and learn as a collaborative team. Linda Lambert

defines leadership capacity as “broad-based, skillful participation” (Lambert, 1998). Viewed this way, leadership is less about an individual, a position, or a set of traits and more about the positive energy created when knowledgeable, caring people convene around common purposes to make improvements together. Staff development is key to building this capacity.

In a recent study by the Wisconsin Center for Education Research, Newmann & King (2000) identify three factors critical to teacher learning and improved student achievement: 1) ongoing opportunities to study, experiment with, and receive helpful advice; 2) collaboration with professional peers in and outside school; and 3) coherent staff and student learning programs.

CONCLUSION

One of the most difficult challenges facing public schools today is helping all students meet high standards. Closing the minority achievement gap, while critical, is just one issue among many. How we develop learning environments where all students are challenged and receive the support they need to learn is the pivotal question. The CSRD project has poured millions of dollars into this endeavor, and there are positive signs that some endorsed programs and designs may work. However, when the dollars go away, when the programs are replaced by new innovations, we believe those schools that continue to improve student results will be those that have built sustained leadership capacity for focus, reflection, and collaboration. The students, teachers,

administrators, and parents at Franklin, Lowell, and Mendota elementary schools in Madison, Wis., are leading the way.

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