

Why Some Schools with Latino Children

BEAT THE ODDS

and Others Don't

Joint publication of:

**Morrison Institute for Public Policy
School of Public Affairs, College of Public Programs
Arizona State University**

**Center for the Future of Arizona
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Excerpts from this study reflect Nooksack Elementary School's journey to develop into a Blue Ribbon School in 2005. We have chosen certain sections of the report and inserted comments about Nooksack Elementary School's implementation of the practices to tell our story. Our intent is for all readers to recognize the strength of the report and acknowledge that credit for the original document and information remains with the researchers and authors.

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<http://www.arizonafuture.org/>

HOW WE DID IT....

The Common Drivers of Success

(Beat the Odds p.8)

It's true that the odds are against high achievement in schools with demographic data that includes a high percentage of students living in poverty and, in addition, large numbers of second language students. And indeed, most schools with such demographics do have a hard time. But some such schools "beat the odds" and achieve consistently high results or show steady gains. Nooksack Elementary School is one school maintaining a successful trend over several years despite difficult demographic data.

Nooksack Elementary School found the things that created a successful school were common practices for any effective organization. This is not to say it's easy to adopt and maintain these practices. But leaps in performance are neither miraculous nor accidental. We realized there were neither "magic bullets" nor reasons to blame factors such as demographics, parents, students, or ourselves. However, we recognized our responsibility for student achievement and focused our efforts on internal improvements for teaching and learning. Nooksack Elementary became a professional learning community and there was slow and steady progress over time.

The Six Keys to Success – or Successful Schools - Successful schools do things very differently than struggling schools. The BEAT THE ODDS study revealed six specific elements that were common to all the successful schools-- and typically not evident in the struggling schools.

(Beat the Odds, p.22)

DISCIPLINED THOUGHT

(The six elements fall into three forms of discipline that were identified in Good to Great and the Social Sectors - Jim Collins)

Clear Bottom Line - not waiting for something to be different, but doing the best for every student under the circumstances

Nooksack Elementary School emphasizes the achievement of every student in every classroom and takes responsibility for that performance. Our School shifts the focus from district and school data to achievement per classroom, achievement per teacher, and achievement per student. This approach uncovers poor performance and forces everyone at the school to take responsibility for student achievement.

Successful schools emphasize the achievement of every student in every classroom *and* take responsibility for that performance.

Nooksack Elementary School's culture can best be described as taking responsibility. The School's efforts are focused on the following:

- **Clear bottom line:** No teacher or student is allowed to lag behind. If every student in every classroom isn't learning, the school isn't doing its job. School efforts are focused on ensuring that each individual student learns.
- **No excuses:** Staff members have the strength to look at the problem and take responsibility. They don't even think about playing a blame game when students aren't learning.
- **Efficacy:** Belief that we can do it. If teachers believe they can teach, students will believe they can learn.
- **Accountability:** If students aren't learning, the school needs to change because *it's our job to do it*.
- **Culture of responsibility:** teachers, parents, and students share the responsibility for successful learning.
- **State Standards:** Washington State EALRS and GLEs, NVSD curriculum, and individual student's needs drive curriculum.
- **Careful alignment:** Research based curriculum materials, instructional strategies, and assessment practices are selected by district/building committees.

Ongoing Assessment - frequent in-school assessments to spot problems early and to drive improvement

Most schools track results only through test scores on mandated tests which typically come at the end of the year, when it's too late to turn around bad outcomes. Nooksack Elementary School digs deeper, examining a full range of information and tracking student performance data on a monthly, weekly, or even daily basis to stay on top of each student's performance. Classroom teachers use this information to monitor student performance constantly and make adjustments in programs and teaching as needed.

Teachers and principals alike assess student and teacher achievement early and often – and use the information to drive improvement rather than to assign blame.

Nooksack Elementary School embraces regular assessments as a way of identifying problems earlier and understanding them much more clearly. Our school identifies assessment as one of the top reasons for success. The key, however, is not simply that a successful school has data – it's who is using the data and how they use that data. Nooksack teachers are deeply engaged in their own assessments in a way that can only be characterized as embedded. The principal and teachers collect assessment data, often every week or daily, to make sure they are catching problems as they arise. And they're not just looking at aggregate data. They're disaggregating the data so they can look individually at each classroom, each teacher, and, most importantly, each student. They are digging deeper and considering data from enough angles to uncover problems. The assessment tools vary from classroom to classroom, but visibility is the first step to ensuring that no struggling student and no struggling teacher is left behind. The staff is also diligent about using this knowledge to change so as to improve student outcomes. Of course, the way the principal and the teachers respond to the data is just as important as the data itself.

(Beat the Odds, p. 28)

- **Clear Instructional Targets:** Teacher and student use standards, district curriculum guides, and student assessment data as drivers for planning instruction. Targets are known to students prior to instruction.
- **Formative Assessment:** Teachers use observable systems and routines such as charts, conferring, portfolios, rubrics etc. to monitor student progress.

- **Teaching and Learning Reflections:** Teacher and students share a role in assessment and use frequent reflections to plan next steps for learning.
- **Summative Assessment:** Teachers assess the targets and determine the learning for each student. We mine our data to determine percentage of students who are successful and improvements for instruction in the future.
- **Transparent and Respectful:** Assessment criteria, methods, and purposes are known to the students. Discussion of the data is transparent and used for increased student achievement.
- **Lessons and Assessments use WASL format** – Throughout the entire school year, lessons are altered to prepare students for high stakes testing.
- **Assessment Training:** A representative teacher attends annual OSPI-WASL training sessions.

DISCIPLINED PEOPLE

**Strong, Steady Staff and Distributed Leadership -
- focused on the things that truly improve schools and
keep pushing ahead, no matter what the roadblocks**

Leaders help schools succeed when they stay focused on student success. They make no excuses for their school's zip code, ambivalent parents, or their inability to replace teachers. They keep pushing ahead, no matter what the roadblocks.

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Principals seem to recognize that they have a new role. They still have to run a school smoothly **and, in addition**, they must set a direction for school improvement. They have to know how to move people and use limited resources to come up with something tangible in pursuit of results.

The principal must guide the progress of school reform while providing the stability that is necessary for learning to continue. School leaders must **embrace** a subtle skill that shows respect for their highly skilled teachers and an approach that provides their staff with enough flexibility to do their job well and enough accountability to do it right. The best principals are no different. They manage the school improvement process by being neither too rigid nor too flexible – and do so largely with what they have. They make no excuses for the school's zip code, ambivalent parents, or inability to replace teachers. They keep pushing ahead, no matter what the roadblocks.

It's also important to note that the best principals are characterized by determination and collaboration.

- **Distributive Leadership:** Leadership responsibilities are shared among all staff members.
- **Clear norms and expectations:** Staff members set and monitor their own norms.
- **Beliefs and Commitment:** Consensus about individuals' beliefs ensures group commitment to a topic or project.
- **Professional development:** Adequate training at the right time includes a full range of adult learning activities from book studythrough individual coaching model.
- **Placement of staff:** Careful hiring and reassigning teachers based on their skills and experiences ensures successful teaching and learning.
- **Building Experts:** Teachers follow their passions to learn and practice innovations and then work in a network of sharing and supporting colleagues in gaining the expertise.
- **Longevity of leaders and teachers:** Stability is provided by consistency of staff members and many are residents of the community.
- **Community support – Trust is strong because of long term service of Superintendent and Board**

PLCs and Collaborative Solutions - problem solving is pushed throughout the ranks, not concentrated in a few people at the top

Nooksack Elementary School created effective work teams comprised of people with a wide spectrum of talents who not only tackle projects together, but also engage in real teamwork.

- **Safe Environment:** Teachers work as a team where it is safe to change and innovation is expected.
- **Grade Level Partners:** Each grade level has at least two classroom teachers that share common curriculum expectations.
- **Daily Schedule:** Allows release time for teachers while students are receiving other important instruction to educate the whole child such as music, art, character building, Spanish, nutrition, physical education, technology, library skills, etc.
- **Looking at Student Work:** Student assessment data is analyzed for improving instruction and providing for individual student support.
- **Lesson Study – In-depth look at curriculum, instruction, and assessment.**

- **Training for PLC work:** – Roles such as facilitator, note taker, participant are shared by PLC participants.
- **Observation Guide for PLCs:** This document is used for evaluating group effectiveness.

Responsibility for school improvement is shared among the teachers and staff, not concentrated in a few people at the top.

Leadership from the principal is important. But Nooksack Elementary School doesn't just concentrate responsibility for improvement in a few people. Principals and staff reach an agreement on the school improvement goals and then responsibility for improvement is shared among all the teachers.

Nooksack Elementary was an early climber school and remained a steady performer under the same leadership and staff during the past ten years. And the staff remains determined to share the ownership of the process for guiding their school to continued improvement.

- **Face the Facts:** Teachers and other staff members are involved in the analysis of the data and other empirical evidence at all levels – student, grade, subject and school-wide – so that they identify problems, including identifying internal weaknesses that are causing or abetting low outcomes and obstructing improvements.
- **Find the Solutions:** Teachers and other staff members identify possible solutions to problems and opportunities for making changes that will lead to greater success.
- **Select Good Solutions:** Data, creativity and extensive investigation of best practices and evidence-based practices are used to decide among possible solutions. Sometimes the solution is district driven, but the school enhances it.

DISCIPLINED ACTION

Stick with the Program - it's not about a particular program, it's about selecting a good one, sticking with it, and making it better and better

Nooksack Elementary School Staff does not believe any single education program or approach is a “magic bullet.” The key is the commitment and breadth with which the program is implemented. In most cases, any number of programs could succeed. The Nooksack Valley School District has chosen

research based programs that the teachers can embrace and stick with it over time. But, “sticking with it” doesn’t mean blindly doing the same thing over and over. Instead, it means using class and student performance data to assess students and teachers on a regular basis and make changes to the program as required.

The magic isn’t in a particular program – there are many good ones. The magic occurs when the school finds a program and sticks with it.

Like any organization under pressure to improve, schools crave the easy answer – the “magic bullet”– the program or approach that will fix everything. But the magic doesn’t lie in the program per se. It lies in the school picking a good program inside a rigorous, data-driven process and sticking with it. Nooksack Elementary School didn’t have a particular program. They found a way to buy in to a good program with a strong track record of producing results, and used that program, over time, in every classroom, making changes if the data said it was necessary. The school selected a program that the teachers felt they could embrace and mold to fit the school. So the key is to pick a program or set of programs based on:

- **Knowledge:** Know the needs and abilities of your school and know what programs work – based on the evidence, not perception.
- **Ingenuity:** Organize and train to fit a good program and credible curriculum into your school.
- **Focus:** Pursue it relentlessly. There are, of course, some gains that spring immediately from something new. And, some of the chosen “magic bullet” programs have, as part of their systems, a focus on continuous, data-driven improvement. Picking one of these can certainly help a school. But, when all is said and done, what performance requires is hard, focused, purposeful work. If diligence, persistence and commitment are lacking, ingenuity and a good program are wasted. It is focus and hard work that matter most.
- **Repeat the Process:** Create a process and a strong coalition for on-going change – then do it again and again.
- **Top-Down Mandates:** Instances in which top-down mandates from the principal or from outside the school were not guaranteed success and many failed from the get-go or were not sustained.
- **Things that Matter:** Teachers might work together well in preparing an improvement plan, for example, or carrying out easier, but less meaningful activities that are unlikely to result in substantial increases in student learning. But they may not be collaborating on other, harder things such as changes in classroom instruction or school

culture that are more likely to engender real, long-term improvements in student achievement.

- **Confronting Mediocrity:** Finally, there's no question that even the most far-sighted school leaders have limited control over personnel and resources, making it difficult to get rid of teachers who resist reform initiatives and get teachers who are a good match in terms of abilities, experiences, and attitudes.
- **Program Evaluation:** Identify the intended impact and outcomes prior to implementation. Analyze success or lack of then modify and make changes.
- **Monitor Program Implementation:** Look for barriers and supports to accommodate successful program implementation.
- **Principal and Peer observations:** Observations are used to support improvements and not solely for supervision/evaluation
- **Adequate Instructional Time:** Schedule time for regular classroom instruction and look to integration for strengthening instruction.

Built to Suit - intervention is personalized so it suits each student's needs

Nooksack Elementary School did not aim simply to meet state academic standards or even implement the School's Improvement Plan. Rather, they sought to meet those standards and more by placing a relentless focus on individual performance – a vital cycle of instruction, assessment, and intervention, followed by more instruction, assessment, and intervention. Over time, this led to an educational program tailored to each student, to help maximize his or her success.

Schools are figuring out ways to customize instruction and intervention so it exactly suits each student's needs.

Nooksack Elementary School teachers are focusing on individual students and customizing education to fit individual needs. And, instead of measuring achievement by grade and by school, they measure achievement per student, per classroom, and per teacher. This shift in performance measures drives the entire learning process. It leads to the creation of formal, yet flexible, structures that ensure all students receive the personal attention and support they need to succeed academically. Over time, this leads to an educational program tailored to each student to help maximize his or her success within the school. Ongoing assessments and collaborative processes, for example, allow schools to identify and deal with sudden shifts in student needs, on the fly, in real time, even where most of the students need special attention to be successful.

- **Remediation: Do it right the first time....**Recalls are too expensive in time and resources.
- **Interventions vs Remediation:** Student learning is more successful when support and practice is provided as soon as a gap is discovered.
- **Pre-teaching:** Students have a greater opportunity for success when learning topics are pre-taught prior to the class sessions.
- **In-Class Support:** Individual students benefit from tutorial support during classroom instruction.
- **Differentiation:** Teachers use flexible approaches to space, time, materials, groupings, and instruction, but the essential knowledge, understandings and skills are the same for all students.
- **Monitoring student performance:** Schools and classrooms use a variety of methods for keeping track of student performance.
- **Power Standards:** Essential skills and concepts are identified at each grade level so planning, teaching, and assessing can be accomplished in all curricular areas.
- **After-school program –** Teachers provide reteaching, practice and pre-teaching on concept and skills taught during the school day.
- **Summer School –** Students are selected for summer school because they would benefit from an extended learning experience. The learning expectations mirror the instruction that was provided in the classroom and will be taught in the next year’s classroom.

The Road Ahead - The message of this report is a message of hope: Public schools can turn around academic performance. Or – to put it more accurately – many public schools are already doing an excellent job of helping their students toward high academic achievement under arduous circumstances such as poverty, tough neighborhoods, and difficulty with English.

What does it take to get great results in educational achievement in a school with a student enrollment that is mostly poor, and has many students who are still learning English? This document presents recommendations for schools to create a more customized or “built to suit” educational system. And, if the capacity is expanded and the lessons of success are followed widely, then more schools can overcome a major stumbling block to increased student achievement in the 21st Century. Poor, non-English speaking students will be provided opportunities to an education that is the key to prosperity – for individuals, for families and for the Country as a whole.

