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# EYES ON THE PRIZE

**A STRUGGLING WISCONSIN SCHOOL FORGES A STEADY PATH TOWARD ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT**

**I**n his book *Complications*, Dr. Atul Gawande writes at the end of his introduction, “Throughout I’ve sought to show not just the ideas but also the people in the middle of it all — the patients and doctors alike. In the end, it is practical, everyday medicine that most interests me — what happens when the simplicities of science come up against the complexities of individual lives. As pervasive as medicine has become in modern life, it remains mostly hidden and often misunderstood. We have taken it to be both more perfect than it is and less extraordinary than it can be (Gawande, 2002).”

At Lincoln Elementary School in Madison, Wis., we,

too, are interested in the simplicity of everyday school, not the quick fixes or flashy programs. Thousands of schools, public and private, educate children daily. Some schools make significant contributions to a child’s growth and development with little to show on a standardized test, while other schools do little, with acceptable results on those same tests. While quantitative educational researchers have developed a valued-added formula to understand the truth about students achieving in schools that may have insufficient test scores, we are committed to leading Lincoln holistically, driven by our core values. Our professional development supports our continuous improvement efforts, and Lincoln has made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) two



consecutive years and been removed from sanctions after being a Level 2 school in need of improvement.

#### CORE VALUES

Core values are critically important to whole-school reform, as they support the central vision and drive all actions taken toward improvement. At Lincoln, we believe the following:

- “We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us; we already know more than we need to do that; and whether or not we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven’t so far” (Edmonds, 1979).
- Public schools can be the greatest conduit to social justice.
- Building the capacity of teachers presents the greatest opportunity for students to experience academic, social, and emotional success in school.
- When budgets get cut, our investment in our staff will not be lost on the Lincoln students. Our students deserve our best.

#### OUR SCHOOL CONTEXT

Lincoln Elementary School serves two neighborhoods that were paired in 1984 following a court order for the school district to desegregate Lincoln. The neighborhoods span about 10 miles in the city of Madison. Our 360 students include the following demographics:

- 1% American Indian, 15% Asian, 16% black, 29% white, 35% Hispanic, and 4% two or more ethnicities;
- 72% economically disadvantaged;
- 13% students with disabilities; and
- 47% limited English proficient (10% Hmong, 32% Spanish, 5% other).

Like many schools across the country, we have achievement gaps between white and all historically marginalized groups — nonwhite, economically disadvantaged, students with disabilities, and English language learners.

Despite our ongoing gaps, we have made enough continuous improvement to get off the AYP sanctions list through a holistic continuous improvement effort supported by rigorous professional development. We have supported that professional learning through a creative use of resources.

## THE BIG PICTURE

Lincoln teachers have many opportunities to access learning that meets their needs and, consequently, their students' learning needs. We believe teachers should reach all students at whatever level they need in their academic, social, and emotional learning. We believe the same holds true for staff. If Lincoln teachers are our patients and one teacher needs CPR, it would make no sense to give CPR to the whole staff to save one teacher. With the range of experience, knowledge, and skills on staff, we strive to provide access to learning that is supportive to the specific needs of all individuals.

Professional development at Lincoln School over the past four years includes the following:

- Professional development days, when teachers have a substitute and meet as a grade level, facilitated by an instructional resource teacher in the areas of literacy and mathematics;
- Spitzer days, when a retired teacher and a substitute take students on a science field trip while teacher teams learn and plan with their instructional resource teacher;
- Visitation days, when teachers are released by substitutes to visit other classrooms;
- Academic book clubs;
- Teachers creating individual professional development plans;
- Staff meetings as professional development;
- Conferences near and far; and
- One hour set aside each week during the school day for teachers to meet one-on-one with the instructional resource teacher.

We also believe there is merit in building a rigorous intellectual community for staff. We have to come together around our core beliefs about our students. The culture of the whole Lincoln community depends on the attitudes and beliefs we

hold about the students. Through examining our own racism, prejudices, stereotypes, classism, and language use, we have been able to combat perpetuating the myth that something is wrong with the students — they're poor, they're homeless, they're disabled. While changing our language about what students cannot do to what students can do can hardly be called professional develop-

ment, we know that how we think and talk about these learners every day has an enormous impact on our brains. Exploring our core values is at the foundation of all professional development and leads to creating a learning environment conducive to each student's assets.

## GETTING CREATIVE

Many educators might think their school doesn't have the money or time to do even a few of the professional development ideas mentioned. Or they may think that their contracts won't

allow them to move forward with the creative ideas they already have. Such educators may feel defeated about being labeled a failing school. That's what happened at Lincoln. Four years ago, a new principal was assigned to Lincoln and brought with her a trusted staff member to take on the enormous challenges of this struggling school. Almost daily, with threat of sanctions looming, Deborah Hoffman, the principal, and Kelly Jones, an instructional resource teacher, felt overwhelmed. By the end of the year, the first round of sanctions was instituted. With encouragement from friends, family, colleagues, and staff, these two leaders kept going, one step at a time, with their eyes on the prize: **academic achievement for social justice**. Over the next three years, they formed new teaming structures, used resources creatively, and professional development became part of the way we do things around here.

## CREATIVITY SUCCESS STORIES

### Spitzer days

First and foremost, core values need to drive the creativity in a school. Here's an example from Lincoln. One day, Hoffman learned that Lincoln would receive grant money because of the impending sanctions. The grant money had to be used for professional development. Hoffman and her instructional resource teacher knew that teachers were already immersed in professional development and were concerned about asking them to absorb more. They also didn't want to create more work for teachers by asking them to write additional substitute plans. They tried to think of a creative way to offer professional development support that would provide meaningful education for students. Aha, they thought — Mr. Spitzer! An extraordinary retired teacher could take their students on a daylong standards-based science field trip to the school forest. While the students were away, instructional resource teachers and teacher teams could examine student work, rethink curriculum implementation, redesign classrooms, and more. Students and teachers would be engaged in a meaningful learning opportunity. Teachers wouldn't have to write substitute plans, and the students would benefit both from the teachers' learning and their field trip. As an added bonus, because all classrooms were included in this schoolwide endeavor, the school community grew more cohesive, which resulted in a more positive overall school atmosphere. A core value of the school, to build the capacity of teachers, resulted in students also having a meaningful experience.

### One-on-one coaching sessions

While Spitzer days were funded by a grant, other creative professional development strategies were not, so we had to find other resources. For example, we used Title I money to support instructional resource teacher coaching sessions for one hour each week. During the principal's first two years at Lincoln, teachers voluntarily chose to work with the instructional

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resource teacher during planning time to improve their instructional practices. Teachers who chose to do this told the principal that these meetings had significant impact on their instructional practices. We realized it was important to find a way to provide all teachers this support without taking away planning time. For the past year, we have funded four full-time teachers from Title I, allowing for an additional prep time for teachers and reducing class sizes for students. Because this prep time goes beyond contractual requirements, it can be used for coaching. The idea that **teachers need to be their own experts and interventionists** led to a plan for teachers to meet with the instructional resource teacher while their students worked with an educational assistant in a nearby computer lab.

These meetings have led to dramatic improvements in professional learning and student achievement. Each teacher works with an instructional resource teacher for one hour a week. The teacher and the instructional resource teacher meet for 30 minutes to examine and reflect on student work. During this time, the teacher and instructional resource teacher discuss instructional strategies, look at resources, plan next steps for instruction, and explore content. This meeting is followed by a 30-minute session with a student or small group of students where the teacher and instructional resource teacher work through problems or lessons. The instructional resource teacher or teacher leads the lesson while the other observes and takes notes. The observations and notes provide immediate feedback that is used to create goals and plan lessons to improve classroom instruction. The teacher and instructional resource teacher revisit and document the goals and work each week to ensure targeted, standards-based instruction and continued growth.

The frequency of the meetings has allowed teachers and instructional resource teachers to develop trusting relationships. The meetings are nonevaluative

and differentiated based on teacher need. Teachers have time to reflect on student learning, allowing them to make instructional decisions based on evidence from student work. This differentiated professional learning has sparked teachers' excitement about what they know and what they want to know. Just as doctors are assigned patients, teachers are assigned students. Patients have individualized treatment plans, even if they have similar health conditions. Students deserve differentiated instruction even with similar academic, social, and emotional levels.

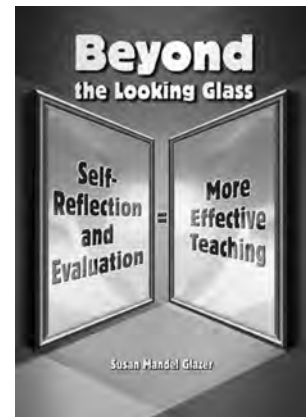
We hope to continue to learn from our students and staff so that we, too, can improve our practices. As Gawande states, "People have proposed two strategies for change. One is to shrink the amount of uncertainty in medicine — with research, not on new drugs or operations (which already attracts massive amounts of funding) but on the small, critical, everyday decisions that patients and doctors make (which gets shockingly little funding)" (Gawande, 2002).

Through professional development, we are providing staff the knowledge and skills they need to make the small, critical, everyday decisions. We do not believe in quick fixes or grandiose canned programs. It's complicated, and we made AYP.

#### REFERENCES

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**Susan Mandel Glazer's**

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