

# ‘FAILURE IS NOT AN OPTION’

## Grant High School

Grant, Mich.

Grades: 9-12

Enrollment: 572

Staff: 25

Racial/ethnic mix:

White: 79.2%

Black: 0.52%

Hispanic: 17.66%

Asian/Pacific Islander: 1.05%

Native American: 0.35%

Other: 0%

Limited English proficient: 6.99%

Languages spoken: English,

Spanish

Free/reduced lunch: 48.43%

Special education: 11.54%

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## STRUGGLING HIGH SCHOOL USES STANDARDS TO GUIDE REFORM

By Sherry Lambertson

We know the story of the Wizard of Oz. Dorothy and her band of misfit friends embark on a journey to find something larger than life. They are in search of the Great and Powerful Oz, who has the power to make their every wish come true. Their story is one of relationships and adventures, from which they discover that what is truly important becomes visible as they overcome obstacles to achieve a common purpose. Their journey is not unlike that of educators.

School reform is hard. Turnaround seems impossible but holds the same promise of something larger than life: successful students who become healthy, contributing members of society.

Dorothy was repeatedly told to “follow the yellow brick road.” Similarly, school reformers have a path of their own. The Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011), when implemented with high levels of fidelity, guide schools to student achievement. Grant High School in Grant, Mich., is one such school.

In spring 2010, the Michigan Department of Education notified Grant Public

Schools that its small, rural high school of about 500 students was on the list of the state's persistently low-achieving schools. Grant High School was in the bottom 5% of schools in the state based on student achievement. District administrators and staff met the news with disbelief, embarrassment, and some anger.

Student achievement scores had been slipping, and morale followed the same downward trajectory. Educators knew they had to do better.

Legislation required the district to develop a transformation plan for the high school. Persistently low-achieving schools could apply for a School Improvement Grant to support their plans for comprehensive school improvement. That summer, the superintendent, title director, high school principal, and teacher leaders designed a plan using the Standards for Professional Learning as a guide. In fall 2010, the school received a School Improvement Grant.

## LEARNING COMMUNITIES

At the start, the staff at Grant High School was a disparate group. Teachers had little in common. They worked in the same building, but, as Principal Dan Simon explained, "We had always been kings and queens of our own castles. ... One person taught all sections of a given subject."

School leaders worked to change the culture from isolation to collaboration. With guidance from external coaches, teachers learned collaboration skills using strategies from *The Adaptive School* (Garmston & Wellman, 2009) and *Cognitive Coaching* (Costa & Garmston, 2002). Teachers learned how to facilitate meetings, how to engage in cognitive conflict, the importance of paraphrasing one another, and posing mediative questions to support one another's thinking.

Teachers learned collaboration skills through modeling and application. Coaches modeled best practices of collaboration, assisted teachers in engaging in cognitive conflict, and used facilitation strategies that were transparent and debriefed so they could be replicated. This process ensured fidelity of implementation and long-term sustainability of the desired practices.

Math teacher Bruce Tacoma says, "One of the biggest things [we learned] was collaboration. We have gleaned from one another ideas on how to be successful with our students."

Simon says this work has allowed the teachers to come full circle: "Groups are really working together now. The grant provided funding for teachers to meet regularly, and this has made a significant impact on our school culture. The shift was from kings and queens to where we are now with common assessments, sharing ideas, and deep conversations around teaching and learning."

## LEADERSHIP

Grant's leaders kept school staff focused on their goals. Superintendent Jonathon Whan and his predecessor Scott



Dan Simon

Bogner share a vision of academic excellence for all students. Principal Dan Simon set challenging expectations that required teachers to collaborate around data and the curriculum. He also honored the time designated for collaboration. House-keeping issues were set aside so that teachers could use collaborative time to concentrate on the work of examining data, practices, and student work that is central to professional learning communities.

Simon encourages teachers to identify new strategies and try new approaches. "At Grant High School, we are going to succeed. We believe we are going to succeed. Failure is not even an option," he says.

Maxine Schneider, an English language arts teacher, says, "Mr. Simon's leadership style focuses on data, and this has been the backbone of our professional learning community process. Data have helped the teaching staff to confidently identify student learning needs and ways to focus our collective teaching."

## RESOURCES

During the early stages of developing the transformation plan, Grant leaders decided to invest in the resource

that would yield the biggest result: teacher effectiveness, one of the biggest indicators of student success (Marzano, 2001).

Superintendent Whan says, “The key to achieving high levels of student achievement depends on adults having the desire, or at least the willingness, for self-improvement. Teachers and administrators need to live and model this philosophy, not only for our improvement, but also to support our students’ growth.”

As a requirement of the School Improvement Grant, the school’s planning team selected a state-approved service provider to support the school’s turnaround efforts. The school

committed to a comprehensive plan because the staff was determined to make a significant impact on student achievement over the three-year grant period.

The external partner, the Institute for Excellence in Education, created a plan that focused on teacher efficacy. Three on-site coaches were in the building three days a week and spent a fourth day each week reviewing data, collaborating with other coaches, and/or identifying and preparing resources to support teaching and learning.

One coach served primarily as the leadership coach and worked with building and district administrators and teacher leaders to guide the work. The other two coaches, one literacy and one math, spent time in classrooms observing, co-teaching, and engaging

teachers in planning and reflective conversations based on *Cognitive Coaching* (Costa & Garmston, 2002).

“It took time for the coaches to gain the trust of skeptical teachers, but the coaches listened, and, by December, the coaches had established trust. They were a part of the staff,” says former superintendent Scott Bogner.

The Institute for Excellence in Education also provided eight days of professional learning to the staff each year of the grant. These days focused on teachers’ needs as they related to increasing student achievement. On professional learning days, teachers learned research-based strategies to engage all students, the skills to differentiate teaching and learning, and more specific systems for analyzing and using data. Coaches followed up as they coached and co-taught using student engagement and differentiation strategies with all teachers.

## DATA

Almost everything about data has changed at Grant High School: the types of data collected, the frequency of assessments, and, most importantly, how teachers and students are involved in and use data.

The external coaches introduced a strategy that was instrumental in shifting the use of data. As an example, teachers

believed that students came to Grant High School with poor reading skills. Coach Mary Alice Krajenta used student reading data from state assessments to show that reading scores declined at the high school. Armed with this data, teachers began holding higher expectations for students’ reading and identified strategies to support struggling students.

Teachers and coaches in all content areas spent time in professional learning communities reviewing state (Michigan Merit Exam) and ACT assessments to identify the power or critical standards that students needed to master.

Once teacher teams identified the power standards, they aligned their teaching to the assessments. For example, if they found that algebraic thinking was an essential skill, teachers made sure to devote adequate time and expert strategies to this concept.

Teachers used biweekly assessments to monitor student mastery of the power standards. More importantly, students became engaged in this process and tracked their success. Students charted their progress to identify which power standards they had mastered and which they had not.

Teachers used data to determine what additional teaching, reteaching, and interventions were necessary and for whom. Students could retake assessments, rewrite papers, and revise work to achieve mastery. This new emphasis on learning became part of the school’s culture.

Coaches took data a step further. A coach met with every 11th-grade student to review results on Plan and Explore assessments (predictors of success on the ACT). This individual student focus encouraged students to invest in their own success. Student investment became obvious when ACT test results came in and students were heard in the hallway asking one another how they did on the test — something that would not have been heard in this agricultural community two years earlier. One student who received a score of 22 on the ACT was thinking about college for the first time in his life. He was a student receiving special education services, and now college was a possibility for him.

## LEARNING DESIGNS AND IMPLEMENTATION

The school’s redesign team took reform research seriously. The team developed a plan that provided focused professional learning for teachers and school leaders to develop new skills. The team invested in collaborative practices by establishing and honoring professional learning time. And the team created a system where professional learning was job-embedded and heavy on follow-up.

Coaches provided ongoing, job-embedded support by modeling best practices, co-teaching, leading discussions, and using structured planning and reflecting conversations to improve teacher practices. Initial efforts focused on math and reading and eventually included all content areas.

School leaders also paid attention to the fact that the School

**Teachers and coaches in all content areas worked in professional learning communities to review state and ACT assessments to identify the critical standards that students needed to master.**

Improvement Grant would only last three years. School reform is not sustainable unless the organization's culture changes. There is reason to believe that Grant High School's success will continue because the culture of the building is now focused on learning. Teacher efficacy, the biggest predictor of teacher effectiveness, is now high. And students believe they will be successful. Administrators in the district believe the sustainability lies in the fact that teacher practice has changed.

The changes are confirmed in the behaviors of the school community. Grant now celebrates its successes. A billboard announcing student success overlooks a major expressway near town. As students entered the testing area during the 2012-13 school year, teachers and staff lined the hallway cheering and encouraging them to do their best.

The grant expired Sept. 30, 2013, and with it the funds to provide additional collaboration time. The teachers created and administration supported a plan to sustain the collaboration time by restructuring their schedule and taking on additional responsibilities. It was a clear demonstration of their commitment to sustain the project and the culture of the school.

**OUTCOMES**

The administrators and teachers who designed the transformation plan for Grant High School began, as Covey (1989) said, with the end in mind. The outcomes they selected not only focused on increasing student achievement, but also recognized that teacher effectiveness is the variable with the greatest impact.

Educators at Grant knew that the adults in the school had to make changes. Teachers had to be more effective in reaching the school's rural, high-needs students, many of whom are Hispanic English language learners. Teachers needed to examine their own practices and embrace learning new strategies and ways of reaching all students.

The outcomes identified addressed the who and the what of the learning process. Teachers and administrators noted that they would sharpen their focus on curriculum standards and Common Core expectations. At the time the transformation model was written, the team did not know how this would happen, but they knew it was necessary.

Some staff members had already been introduced to professional learning communities and recognized the power of identifying clearly what Grant's students needed to know and be able to do, how teachers would measure if students knew it, and what to do for students who had not yet mastered the standards. The outcomes ultimately guided the work of everyone at the school.

**STUDENT RESULTS**

The school's staff and students knew they had achieved their goals when the ACT scores arrived in spring 2012. Grant's ACT composite score had increased nearly two points from the 2010-11 school year, landing the school in the 90th percentile



	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
<b>Composite</b>	17.5	17.8	17.9	18.5	20.3
<b>English</b>	15.9	16.4	16.9	17.5	20.1
<b>Reading</b>	17.5	18.3	18.0	18.9	20.5
<b>Mathematics</b>	17.5	17.7	17.8	17.9	19.4
<b>Science</b>	18.5	18.2	18.3	19.2	20.8

of Michigan schools.

The school continued that success during the 2012-13 school year, when it moved up to the 92nd percentile of schools in Michigan. The Michigan Department of Education named Grant a Rewards School and a Beating the Odds School. As Principal Simon says, "The culture of Grant High School has changed from a focus on teaching content to a focus on student learning. The staff have embraced the professional learning community concepts and collaborate weekly to plan for remediation and celebration of learning. These changes mean that our students have more opportunities than ever before when they leave our doors after four years."

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