



## Washington State Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

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### ‘Critical Questions’ Series November 2012

## Does change happen without REALLY taking a deep and focused look into the mirror?

### *One district’s pathway to success: The Othello School District Story*

Stories are a powerful thing. They remind us of who we are, what we believe, where we came from and where we are going. This story is one of change. It tells how a small school district located in a rural farming community of Eastern Washington made changes to significantly increase student achievement in reading and mathematics despite many overwhelming obstacles. We are the Othello School District and this is our story.

#### **District Context and Demographic Factors**

Located in central Washington, the Othello community is commonly recognized as the “Heart of the Columbia Basin.” Othello’s agricultural value comes from the 60 crops and over half the nation’s French fries that are made from potatoes grown in the area. The Othello School District currently enrolls 3,655 students of which 82 percent are Hispanic. Additionally, 79 percent of the students qualify for free/reduced lunch count. While being centrally located in the state, it does pose challenges of mobility for students. Current trends find Othello to be growing with student enrollment increasing the needs for more programming and space for classrooms. Most of the growth has come from indigenous Mexicans commonly known as ‘Mixtecos’ whom speak their own dialect related to Mayan.

#### **A Need For Change**

McFarland Middle School was one of the first schools identified in the state of Washington as a “School in Improvement.” It was, in a word, heart-breaking. We believed that the teachers were working hard. We believed that students were learning. And we believed that our community, although silent, appreciated the work that we were doing. We were disappointed with the reality. Although it was true that our teachers were working hard, we were not working together and we were not focused on our students’ needs.

As we surveyed students, parents, teachers, and staff the results deepened the heartbreak. The students didn’t feel like they had teachers who cared. The community didn’t feel welcomed in our school, and the staff didn’t feel that others were working as hard as they were working individually.

The findings at Othello High School were equally disheartening. Data from a variety of sources showed that we were not moving towards meeting the requirements for Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) as defined by the Washington State Office of Public Instruction (OSPI). There was a significant achievement gap between our Caucasian and Hispanic students, 50 to 70 percent of our students did not feel there was an adult on campus with who they had a strong connection, and a third of the staff felt that our students could not succeed in passing the reading, writing, or math sections of the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL).

Albert Einstein once said that insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. As a school district we realized that if we wanted different results for our students, we needed to make some changes. And so the work began.

#### **Change One: Multiple Perspectives**

Early on it was determined that multiple perspectives were needed to facilitate change. This would require inviting not only department chairs and administration, but also teachers, staff, community members, and students to participate in the process. At the high school the School Improvement Plan (SIP) team initially consisted of department chairs who were assigned to attend the meetings. This team was disbanded and a standing invitation was extended to all staff members to become participants. This allowed representation of invested staff from a variety of content areas, which in turn created an environment of respect and rich discussion leading to action.

Community members were actively recruited to serve on the team and students were given a voice by inviting a changing panel of students representing the socioeconomic demographics of the student body. The student panel continues to meet periodically with the SIP team to engage in conversations on topics relevant to both staff and students, such as the school environment and the reasons for dropping out. These student panels have become an invaluable resource, and are the inspiration behind some of the SIP team's most successful changes to OHS.

McFarland Middle School followed the same course. The School Improvement Committee was formed and chaired, not by administration, but by one of the teachers. Weekly meetings were scheduled and anyone could be a part of the committee which followed the norms outlined for equal representation of content instruction, grade level, and regular attendance.

### **Change Two: Teacher Leadership**

At the onset of the improvement process McFarland faced the challenge of a change in leadership which left much of the administrative responsibilities to the assistant principal who was already dealing with a very full schedule. Seeing a need, teachers stepped up to help carry the load. Smaller committees were formed to work on the specific goals of academic improvement, improved culture for students and staff, and improved communication with parents and community. As changes in administration have taken place, teacher leadership has continued to grow. Currently teachers chair committees more frequently than administrators. Teachers train teachers with new strategies, and teachers take the lead in training new staff members on the process and use of professional learning communities.

The high school also realized that true sustainability is achieved through having teacher leaders; that it is important to provide opportunities for staff to grow and develop into leaders, and that individual initiative should be encouraged and supported. A staff book club was started by one of the history teachers, Learning Improvement Days (LID) feature professional development by teachers, and three staff meetings a month are reserved for teachers to lead their fellow staff members in developing new strategies and skills. Both schools have realized that our best resources and solutions lie within each one of us.

### **Change Three: Collaboration**

Seeing the need for collaboration, both schools incorporated the Professional Learning Communities (PLC) concept. The PLC concept allowed for team meetings on a regular basis to discuss student needs and upcoming events such as school-wide assessments, conferences, and grading. These PLC meetings continue to help foster ownership of classes, teams, and school as well as build a sense of belonging for all members of the school.

If you were to visit Othello High School today, you would be taken into a variety of classrooms and encouraged to speak with students about their learning. This open door policy is a result of PLCs which have allowed teachers to share data, create common assessments, align curriculum and ask each other, "What are you doing that is causing your students to achieve?"

Another collaborative program incorporated is the BERC Group's STAR (Skills/Knowledge, Thinking, Application, Relationships) Framework for Powerful Teaching. Through the STAR program teachers were given the opportunity to visit different classrooms within the district and view fellow educators in action. Instructional practices in a Kindergarten classroom could be solutions to challenges faced in secondary classrooms. Instead of having six to eight other teachers to collaborate with, there were now over one-hundred.

In addition to PLCs and STAR walks, instructional coaches were incorporated as a resource, support and an instructional partner. Having an instructional coach enabled teacher to have individualized professional development.

### **Change Four: Culture**

Both schools saw the need to move from a “principal or administrator’s school” to one in which teachers, students, and community were invested. At McFarland Middle School this meant the adoption of an open door policy. Parents and community members are invited to visit the school at any time to observe what is happening in the classroom. Administrators regularly visit classrooms to observe and collect data on instruction and learning.

At Othello High School the goal was set to provide opportunities for students to invest themselves in school activities, and to feel that there are adults who care about them as a person. A Club Fair, Super Student Assemblies, and the Freshman Assembly are some of the ways in which OHS is working toward this goal. The Club Fair, held at the beginning of each school year, introduces students to the many school clubs available and provides peers to answer any questions. Super Student Assemblies honor students who exemplify traits such as the willingness to put forth effort and the desire to change and a Freshman Assembly at the beginning of each year introduces incoming students to support staff, administrators, and teachers. Parents and community are invited to participate.

### **Change Five: Focus**

Many believe that a secondary school’s main task is to get as many students qualified for graduation as possible. We used to think that too, but we have come to realize that it is not our end goal. Our goal is to enable each of our students to leave us being college and career ready. This goal cannot be met by administrators or teachers alone. It requires a partnership between educators, students, and community.

### **And The Story Continues**

While academic gains have increased at the high school and middle school, the improvement has been systemic. Reading, Mathematics and Writing scores show continual gains with occasional dips that remind us of the need to be focused and deliberate in our efforts.

The story of Othello School District will never be done because it continues to have new chapter written every day. Looking at the past, present, and future we believe the following:

- Admitting there is a problem is the first step to solving the problem.
- There is an abundance of valuable resources available within each of us.
- The focus must reflect the true mission.
- Embrace the uncomfortable nature of change because the results are worth it.

In the words of musician Robert Cushing, “The fact is that to do anything in the world worth doing, we must not stand back shivering and thinking of the cold and danger, but jump in and scramble through as well as we can.” In the Othello school district we live by these words thought our daily actions.

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