

CHALLENGING SCHOOLS

CASE STORY

We Didn't Know What We Didn't Know

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Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary School, Yakima School District, Yakima, Washington

With demographics, like ours -- 92% of the students are Hispanic, 92% qualify for free or reduced-priced lunch, 64% are considered English Language Learners, 20% are migrant students -- there's no question that these data pose unique challenges for any administrator and teacher, novice or seasoned. However, we also know that other similar schools perform at high levels of academic achievement. In 2013 Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary was not one of those schools.

MARIA VILALOVOS-LUCERO, NBCT PRINCIPAL

I began my administration journey at MLK JR Elementary in 2013 as the new full-time assistant principal and was assigned to work with a principal, Travis, also new to MLK. Travis had successfully closed the achievement gap between African American males and Caucasian students in a high performing elementary school in South Carolina. Prior to my assignment at MLK, there had not been a full-time assistant principal assigned to MLK, a school of roughly 600 kindergarten through fifth grade students.

Because Travis needed to wrap up the school year in South Carolina and move his family to Washington, I began to learn about the workings of MLK before his arrival. Before I was an assistant principal at MLK, I'd been an instructional facilitator in the same district for three years. In that role, I looked at other schools with similar demographics to identify areas of high performance so that I could contact those instructional facilitators and draft a plan for moving my building forward. I had never looked at MLK's data because it regularly ranked as one of the lowest of the 14 elementary schools in the district. Now it was 2013 and it was identified as one of the bottom 5% of all Title I schools in the state.

I had been taught that a school's priorities were inherent in its master schedule so that was the document I first asked to see. After analyzing the schedule, it was clear that common grade level collaboration was not a priority. There was also a lack of effective and purposeful teaming among staff. I also discovered a four-inch binder that contained all of the detention slips filled out for the countless number of students assigned to the detention room throughout the school year. I knew that a high rate of student discipline issues equated to a loss of instructional time. I knew that this would be an area that needed immediate attention. I could only imagine the many hours spent on discipline related issues and thought what the school's state of academic performance could have been if a four-inch binder existed that contained artifacts of teachers engaging in data cycles. The more I learned about MLK the more I felt like a doctor might feel on her first day of triage in the ER.

With so many issues to address to begin to transform mindsets and instructional practice, where was one to begin? Early on, Travis and I determined that to address the academic achievement issues evident across all content areas, we were going to need to overhaul the mindset of the adults and this was not going to be an easy feat.



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There's no question that teachers were working hard before the school improvement process was initiated. What was revealed through analysis of MLK's achievement data, regular classroom walk throughs, and grade level team meetings, was that the focus had not been on the right work. From what Travis and I had discovered, there'd been no intentional work around language development. How could this be in a school with such a high number of ELLs?

Crucial processes for teacher collaboration such as setting agenda items, analyzing data, deconstructing standards for the purpose of backward planning were virtually nonexistent. There was no sense of school-wide direction or cohesiveness. How could a group of professionals fulfill a common vision when one did not exist?

In order to begin the right work, I knew that establishing relationships and building trust was going to be paramount in the getting this work off the ground. Connecting with staff is where I needed to focus my time and energy. After all, who would want to take direction from an administrator brand new to a building who didn't know or understand the MLK way? From personal experience, I worked best with people whom I trusted and who took the time to understand me as a person. I was torn between what I believed was the best first step in my career as an administrator and the steps that had to be immediately taken to begin to turn MLK towards the path of success.

Being a first-year administrator, I was hesitant to propose to a principal I was just about to meet, that we overhaul the master schedule as a means to communicate our priorities. Upon meeting Travis, he shared that he did not have any intentions of making any major changes during our first year, because he also understood that establishing a positive rapport with staff was crucial. Nevertheless, I was concerned that we'd have to spend an entire year with the current schedule that contradicted everything I believed was important to the success of a school, but I respected Travis's decision being that he was the leader of our school.

During our first year at MLK, we asked teachers to demonstrate knowledge of students by identifying the ELLs in their classroom and their overall level of English proficiency. Although we knew simply regurgitating this rudimentary knowledge would not be sufficient to effectively address the needs of our ELLs, we didn't ask for more. We realized the right people weren't yet on the bus and we wouldn't delve deeper in this area until after the school improvement process commenced.

As the initial days of our time as an administrative duo passed, we continued to have conversations around what both of us thought would be needed to begin to paint a new image of our school and more importantly to cultivate a culture in which students are the priority.

KIM GOSSER, TEACHER

When I began teaching at Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary 11 years ago I was a member of our school's Instructional Leadership Team (ILT). Our purpose was to use school-wide data to make instructional decisions and plans to positively impact student achievement. We analyzed DIBELS data (reading fluency and comprehension), State Assessment Scores and discussed our individual ideas about ways to improve student learning. We created yearly staff Professional Development calendars, using information our Reading Specialist received from the district about strategies they would like to see schools using in classrooms. The ILT created many different "plans" to present to staff about ways to improve student learning. These "plans" were the foundation for

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Kim Gosser has taught at Martin Luther Jr. King Elementary in Yakima, Washington for 12 years. She currently teaches third grade and is pursuing National Board Certification in English as a New Language.

more “plans” that were never realized. As a staff we had no idea how to collaboratively implement changes based on data. There was no follow through and everything was done in isolation. The ILT met monthly and attempted to adhere to an agenda, use data to drive instruction, and collaborate effectively to guide our school. Although we had structures, we didn't adhere to them and there was very little follow through from the team members. Often there was no agenda and items were presented as problems or in the form of questions when the district was requiring teacher action on a particular initiative. For example, the ILT was tasked with writing our school's improvement goals. We reviewed the goals for the previous year and, rather than use current data to set new goals based on the needs of the students we were currently serving, we simply changed some of the information and submitted the 'recycled' goals. We changed the dates to attain goals from the previous year by randomly throwing around numbers and percentage rates until the group agreed on the changes. There was truly no rhyme or reason for how the goals were set. I know this was not done intentionally to hurt our school, but more from our lack of knowledge about how to use data to drive instruction, set goals and collaborate effectively. I now realize that we were doing the same things each year and expecting change.

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As a group the ILT were ineffective and had no idea what we needed to do to lead our school, its teachers and educate our students effectively. As a staff we faced huge challenges. Most students performed well-below grade level, many ELL students progressed only to an ELL Level 3; never reaching transitional ELL status. Though most students had attended our school since kindergarten as an ELL level one or two, we had about students who remained an ELL Level 2 for two or more years. In the past five years, there were two years in which we met the state's goal for transitioning students to a Level 4, which means their language skills are similar to those of a native English speaker. Our school had adopted a “Sheltered Instruction” approach but we had no consistent, focused professional development to help us grow as teachers and to more intentionally meet our students' language needs. We had the heart and passion, but lacked the skills. We worked very hard but students continued to struggle in all areas because of the lack of academic language. We were defensive about our lack of academic progress, citing our school's demographics: socio economics, family issues, violence and lack of family involvement as reasons for our students' lack of success.

We needed to link knowledge of standards, collaboration, plan instruction based on data, use English Language Proficiency Standards and provide a safe, structured, welcoming environment in order to see growth in both basic and academic language and higher achievement on state assessments. We had no idea where to begin. I had a vague idea that schools with demographics very similar to the challenges that our students faced were succeeding, but I had no idea what they were doing or how to begin to close the achievement gap.

In 2013 when MLK began its path on the school improvement journey, it was a scary for many teachers who, like me, had been at MLK for many years. I was scared because I wasn't sure I could do what needed to be done to transform my school and help students succeed. I was already working very hard and getting very little results. Could I work even harder? Would I be able to become part of a successful team, or be asked, like some of my colleagues, to move to another school in our district?

New administration, new teachers and an intentional focus on language gave our students a new opportunity to succeed and our teachers the knowledge to put structures in place that would

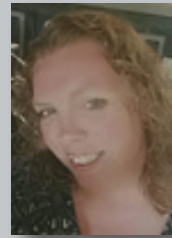
eventually become the norm for MLK staff. Positive change was beginning to occur.

Through well-planned PD, teachers began to understand the connection between standards-based instruction, English Language Proficiency Standards, collaboration and how to use data to drive instruction. Newly implemented school-wide procedures for structured hallway expectations as well as consistent expectations for school-wide behavior inside and outside the classroom provided students with a consistent message.

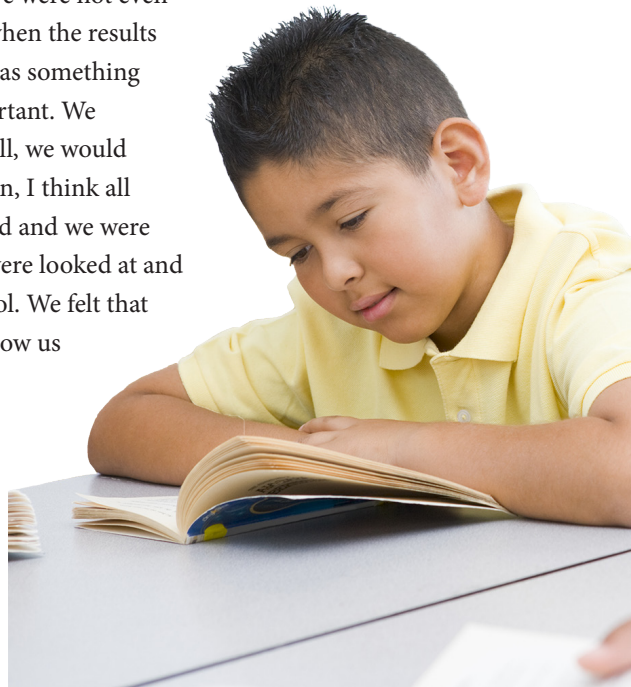
MLK was becoming a school of high expectations for staff and students. As teachers began to see the positive effects on student progress, a new normal took place at MLK. Students began to show growth in language and test scores increased but progress was slow and despite the “new normal” at MLK, some of the same problems remain. How would we move our ELL Level 3s to a Level 4?

KIM HARRIS, TEACHER

In the Fall of 2007, I became a teacher at Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary. I felt I was doing the best I could to teach the students in my class. We were labeled as a “challenging school” because our students were not making significant growth year after year. I thought if I taught the curriculum as it was written, I could get students where they needed to be by the end of the year. I thought that the curriculum would cover all of the needs that my students had. I didn't really know how to differentiate and still stick to the pacing guide. I knew I had English Language Learners in my class but did not keep track of who they were or what to do to help them access the complex text and assessment language. I would receive a list of my ELLs at the beginning of each school year, would look at it and put it away until parent-teacher conference time. I used this list to determine the students who would need a translator for their parents, but didn't know how to use it to design instruction to meet the needs of those students. Under our previous administrators, I was not taught how to reach each level of language learners. We would analyze data on one in-service day of the year. We looked at Student Language Assessment data and it was displayed as a whole class/grade level/district. It was not broken down by ELL language levels. All children were grouped together. We would look at it and talk about it for that day and move on. Differentiating for our language learners was not a priority. We did not analyze English Language Proficiency Assessment data. We were not even given the scores of our current students when the results came in. The language test was portrayed as something we were required to do but it wasn't important. We were told that if our students didn't do well, we would get more funding from the state. Back then, I think all staff felt like they were doing all they could and we were in this together. We ignored the way we were looked at and talked about for being a challenging school. We felt that others outside of our school just didn't know us and didn't see how hard we were working for our students. In hindsight, there was a lot I did not know. I look back now and feel horrible that I wasn't doing enough for the students in my classroom. Because of carefully structured professional learning,



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intentional instruction in how to analyze data and use that information to inform instruction we are now beginning to make a difference. We are also now changing the way we see ourselves and our students.

In my classroom 24 of my 26 students are English Language Learners. I now know the language levels of each my students and know what I can do to specifically scaffold instruction to meet their individual language needs. In order for my students to grow, I need to teach language through the content. Students have been making progress in language skills in the classroom, but all ELLs are struggling on accurately completing assessments. I am now very intentional in teaching the skills they need. When they get to the assessment piece, they are struggling to be successful. It is a recurring problem within our school. Students have difficulty understanding the “test” language so they are often unaware of what they are even being asked to do to successfully complete a task or respond to a question.

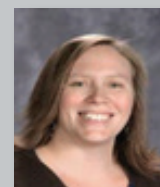
As a school, we need to equip them with the linguistic tools to access assessments. To me, the first step that needs to be taken is helping students understand the language in the state assessment and begin to embed that language into my instruction. That way it will not be new to them when they are asked to access and apply this language.

KIMBERLY BRUSO, TEACHER

In 2013 I came to MLK. I came from an elementary school that had already gone through the School Improvement Grant (SIG) process. When I came to MLK it was the year before the school became a SIG school. The previous school year ended with the administrations being removed and a few teachers being forced moved. At the beginning of the 2013-2014 school year there was new administration, a new instructional facilitator, and three new classroom teachers. I was one of the new classroom teachers and was bringing five years of experience with me. The morale of the school seemed low to me. It seemed like the staff wasn't completely sure of the new administration. The new administration put new structures into place starting at the beginning of the year. The first thing they changed was the schedule. They removed the recess after lunch. At that point many of the teachers didn't understand why and began to question the administration. One thing the administration did that many staff members liked was changing the master schedule so that two team members in a grade had common planning time. We also received PD about how to write objectives. Soon after the PD it was required to post objectives and communicate the objectives to the students daily. For me this was nothing new. I was used to posting objectives and communicating it to students. Towards the end of the school year three teachers were forced moved. That action completely brought the morale of the staff to a new low. Many teachers were unsure of what the administration were going to do next. There was fear in the building. Then the administration had a meeting with the staff to inform us that next school year we were going to become a SIG school because we had failing scores in grades three-five. We were informed about what structures might be put into place because of the grant. Our principal ended that meeting by saying we each had a choice to make, stay and go through the journey or leave. Over half of our teachers choose to leave. I chose to stay because I thought that I had gone through the process before, and it was all I knew.

The following 2014-2015 school year began with 13 new classroom teachers, most of them had very few years of experience. In addition to new classroom teachers, we also got a new math

“ Because of carefully structured professional learning, intentional instruction in how to analyze data and use that information to inform instruction we are now beginning to make a difference. ”



Kimberly Bruso is a third grade teacher at Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary. She has eight years of teaching experience. Kimberly is currently working to earn her National Board Certification.

instructional facilitator, a new P.E. teacher, and a new librarian. The theme for the year was rock, paper, and scissors. The rock was for things that were absolutely staying. For example, the curriculum, district assessments, and the state assessments. The paper was for ideas to be written down. The scissors stood for things that needed to be cut at our school. There were many new structures put into place this year. For example, teams had common planning daily. Teams also started having a weekly meeting where our instructional facilitators or administration created the agenda. We were also given many PD days where grade levels were pulled out of the classroom to learn about the English Language Proficiency Standards and dive deeper in to understanding them. Teaching language through the content started. Walkthroughs from administration and instructional facilitators started this year. They would leave feedback on a form developed by our Instructional Leadership Team. The last structure that was put into place at the beginning of the year was pulling English Language Learners level one and two students out of the classroom daily for additional focused language acquisition instruction.

Then the 2015-2016 school year started. Our first focus for the school year was posting and connecting a language objective to the content objective. We received PD during the summer to begin this work and still continue it to the day. Grade levels were still meeting weekly, however this school year teams were setting the agenda for the meeting. During our meetings we discussed data, plan units for different content areas, choose strategies to focus on during a unit for the week and calibrate when we correct tests. A big focus our school has had this school year is for each grade level to create writing plans for each reading unit. We are giving a pre-assessment at the beginning of each unit, giving writing prompts for the students to write about each week, and then giving a post assessment at the end of unit. This work began at the beginning of the school year as a way to assess language during the year before the English Language Proficiency Assessment in February.

Even though we have a very intentional school-wide focus on language, acquisition problems persist. Our students continue to struggle understanding the complexities of academic language and have difficulty applying the nuances of academic language. Students are successful in class when speaking, writing and reading at or near grade level, but are not yet consistently transferring their knowledge in summative assessments. School-wide scores are rising in all areas, but progress continues to be slow. We are in our second of the three years of the school

improvement process. Will we meet the target by the end of the third year? We will continue to be purposeful around meeting the diverse emotional, academic, and cognitive needs of all of our students.



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