

CHALLENGING SCHOOLS

CASE STORY

From Self To Synergy...This Is Our Journey

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Monticello Middle School, Longview School District, Longview, Washington

WHY WE ARE HERE

“Why would you work at Monticello?” A common question that was asked of staff. From an outsider’s perspective, no one would know why anyone would want to work in a school like ours.

What they saw was that Monticello was plagued by low attendance rates, many students getting their only two meals of the day at school, less than half reaching benchmark learning on state assessments, 2500 discipline referrals within one school year, students who had to be the parent in the house, and a revolving door of students that were entering and withdrawing. All of these were true. However, this information translated into unfair labels of our students including - ghetto, trouble makers, gang-bangers, drug users, fighters, unmanageable, and more derogatory terms. All of these words were universal terms applied to our student population by observers on the outside, but once you stepped within the doors, it was quick to see there was little to no merit to the stereotypes.

Despite the reputation from the outside, we knew we worked in a great place where students’ lives were being impacted by our efforts.

Picture yourself working in this school where teachers greeted students in the halls with a “How are you, Gabriel?” and the principal could be seen talking and joking with students. There was an atmosphere established that pulled people in, which was founded in compassion, caring, and kindness. This translated into trusting relationships for a student population that was in need of it most. Our students definitely could be a challenge, but it was these difficulties that drew in staff who wanted to make a difference in young people’s lives. A difference that some realize could be life-saving.

Our answers to the question “why would you work at Monticello?” were these...

“Students stand beside you just to be near you.”

“Students come back after two years and tell you that you were the reason they came to school every day.”

“The staff members are some of my closest friends.”

Though we were committed to our school and to our students regardless of our reputation, we had no idea what instructional, cultural, and student learning developments were on the horizon.

PIVOTAL EVENT

As the staff settled in for a routine faculty meeting, the emotional words spoken by our principal, “I will not be principal at Monticello next year because our school has been continually performing in the lowest 5%,” weighed upon us. He let us know that he was told we had three choices, two of which were our only options. Both of the options included him leaving, but only one left the staff in place. He took the bullet for the team.



Angela Allen has been in education for 16 years. She has served as a classroom teacher, a Dean of Students, Assistant Principal and is currently the Principal of Monticello Middle School. Monticello is the school she attended as a middle school student. While at Monticello the school has been transformed from a School Improvement Grant Priority School to a Focus School. Angela was also the St. Helen’s Region Middle Level Distinguished Principal of the year for the 13-14 school year.



Teacher: *I felt responsible. Although I worked hard every day, I hadn't done a good enough job teaching my students and now our principal, a man that had spent 30 years of his life at this school, would no longer be there. It didn't seem fair to put the blame on him.*

A month or so later, while the staff was still trying to process the fact that our respected principal was "retiring", we were once again gathered for a meeting. This time our superintendent gave us data indicating how poorly we were doing, with no suggestions for improving.

Teacher: *I was pissed! We were pissed! Who was she to come in, after the fact, and force us to re-analyze the data that told us we were all failures? Where have you been the last two years? We've already done this work. "This is not good enough," she scolded. We knew. We were aware of the situation. What we craved were ANSWERS to help our students achieve at their fullest potential, not to do a crime scene investigation.*

It was a slap in the face that left us feeling frustrated, angry, and let down. The most frustrating part, was we were all aware of the data and it was presented to us as if it was the first time we had seen it. No suggestion for improvement or vision for student success was offered. Even though we engaged in annual data walks, which is where we identified students who were close to passing the state assessment, we had not yet developed ways to identify and address student needs to increase student growth in a meaningful way. We were hungry for a leader that would guide us to our vision. Little did we know, our future leader was already thinking about us.

High School Administrator: *In 2009, I was sitting in my office at the high school across town and got the news that my alma mater middle school, Monticello, was going to lose their principal. The school had been declared a low performing school in the bottom five percent of schools across the nation. I was concerned and felt that the school that I once attended had fallen on such bad times. It was often referred to as the "ghetto" school with gangs and students running the show without any control over the learning. I wanted to know how I could help make a difference and what the future held for an administrator in this school setting. After asking questions from district administration I was told that there would be no guarantees for the principal to keep their job if the school could not come out of improvement in three years. Since my administrative career had just practically started I felt I could not put myself in this setting. Once I heard that a new administrator had been hired to take over the leadership at Monticello I felt better and continued my work at the high school.*

INITIATING CHANGE

As the staff at Monticello embarked on a new school year with a different principal, many changes occurred, some embraced, others not.

Teacher: *"Would you be willing to move upstairs and teach 7th grade next year?" Those words from our new principal, began the beginning of an instructional change in my practice. Before then, for me, data meant the biopsy of a score report the state released in August that told me how poorly I had done with my previous group of students. Now, with a new principal, instructional coach, and 7th grade team, we looked at data in whole new way.*

The 7th grade team was hungry to improve instructional practices. Substitute teachers were scheduled so the 7th grade team could work on learning and planning with practices that



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were grounded in research and would bring about impactful change. Through collaboration and discussions we started by creating a grade level syllabus. This opened up communication between all 7th grade teachers and formed the beginnings of a foundation to discuss common practices among them. We identified ways to help students start thinking deeper and reaching higher levels. We celebrated student effort and success by recognizing growth in student learning measurements and grades earned. The team also looked at making sure our instructional plans had rigor and relevance related to the standards. We integrated and utilized common writing strategies in all classes. Instruction was becoming purposeful and positive results were evident.

The student growth observed created a heightened awareness and a continued desire to implement more effective practices. This same year other schools were visited, conferences were attended, and staff started using a peer observation protocol with walk-throughs. This brought with it a level of discomfort. Staff had to carry a clipboard and identify if they observed targeted instructional strategies. The intent was to make instruction more public and promote reflection, but...

Teacher: *"They came in my class last period," one teacher remarked as the second lunch crew sat down. "All eight of them had clipboards and were marking things down. It looked like they were all talking about me when they huddled afterwards outside my classroom door." I thought but didn't say, "I hope they don't come in my room!"*

It felt evaluative and uncomfortable.

Teacher: *On the day of scheduled walk-throughs, I remember feeling a sense of relief when the announcement came over the radio that school would be delayed. YES! No walk-throughs, this was twice now we had been saved by the weather. It was not that I minded having colleagues come into my room, I just couldn't get over the thought that it felt threatening instead of constructive.*

Even though we as a staff knew we needed to support one another to strengthen teaching practice, the clipboards and evaluative feeling tone was not helping us to improve. Nevertheless, the 7th grade team continued to move forward. A rift began to form working with the new instructional coach. Some staff welcomed this coach and her insights, while others were rubbed the wrong way and even felt attacked by her bluntness. Some were made to feel like they were traitors for working with the coach. Success was not felt building wide, like it was for some teams.

Teacher: *From a teacher's perspective on the 8th grade team I desired the 'togetherness' of the 7th grade team, of how they supported each other and wrapped around the needs of students. Later as an instructional coach and part of the leadership team we looked for ways to place personnel in the 6th and 8th grade teams to facilitate the team effectiveness happening in the 7th grade team.*

We received yet another shock as state testing was getting ready to begin. This was exceptionally poor timing as we were hopeful in measuring progress of student learning as a result of all of our hard work. We were called together for a quick stand-up faculty meeting in the library where our



Misty Velke has been in education for almost thirteen years. The first three years were spent subbing in various schools, in multiple districts, where she found that Monticello Middle School was the team she wanted to be part of. She is now finishing up her tenth year at Monticello, where during this time she taught 6th and 7th grade English Language Arts and Social Studies, participated in almost every committee, and served as a facilitator on some of these committees as well. Misty was also the Kelso Longview Chamber of Commerce Pillars of Strength and Crystal Apple Teacher of the Year in 2015.



principal said, “This has been the toughest decision for me...” which reverberated across the room with a deafening silence. Comfortable stances turned tense, as we knew what was coming next could not be good. “I have decided to take a different position next year, and will not be principal here.” This one, 16-word sentence, carried the weight of a heavy cloak, which settled upon the staff in the room.

Teacher: *Upon hearing this, I felt personally hung out to dry and let down by an individual who had asked us to trust her. I felt I had done everything that was asked, even burning bridges with some of my colleagues in the process, to bring about change. When asked to embrace work with the instructional coach she had hired I did, even to the point of being told that if people saw her entering my room, judgments would be made. I took a chance, put myself out there, and with her leaving, I wondered who was going to help us with the repercussions of going against the grain.*

To compact the situation, we found out that our principal would not even finish the year, but would be leaving at the end of April. One thing was for certain, the staff was hurt, frustrated, torn and in need of a strong leader. Once again, the leader we needed, was thinking about us.

High School Administrator: *The newly appointed principal of Monticello was leaving for a new position. I knew that it was now my fate to take the steps to be the new principal of Monticello. I could no longer sit and wait, I immediately called the superintendent to ask if I could be given a chance at the position. I wanted the great middle school experiences that I had to be a reality for the students of our community. I wanted a chance to see what I could do to change my school around.*

THIRD PRINCIPAL IS THE CHARM

New Principal: *I wanted to make sure that I heard everyone’s voice. My first step was to meet with each staff member of the school to get their perspective on what was working well and what needed to be improved. From these conversations I was able to develop a plan and act quickly in removing staff and utilizing the School Improvement Grant budget to build effective, sustainable changes. The hard work was beginning and some of the staff would need to be told that they would not have a position the following year. I needed to let staff understand that I listened to their input and was making changes that were suggested. The first step in developing trust.*

The first time we met our current principal, formerly an administrator at the neighboring high school, she was introduced to us at an after school meeting by the outgoing principal. Our new principal, who is still with us, let us know that she empathized with what we had been through, but she was here to listen and become part of our team. This process of losing two principals, one year after another was overwhelming. If people had labels for our school before, they had even more now. Trust was lacking, confidences had been lowered, and many of us wondered, what next?

Teacher: *It seemed like just yesterday we sat down as a staff to create our long-term mission for student success. Our short-term principal spoke of vision for our future and now we were hearing it all over again less than one year later. We were making such amazing progress as a 7th grade team. Now what? Part of me wanted to close my classroom door and just focus on the students. I felt numb.*



Gunnar Guttormsen is a National Board Certified Teacher in Early Adolescence Mathematics (2007). He is an Assistant Principal in the Kelso School District at one of two middle schools. Gunnar taught math, science and English Language Learners at Monticello before becoming the Math/ Science Instructional Coach there.

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Throughout this whole experience we had the constant worry and threat of consequences if we didn't show growth on state testing hanging over our head as well. We lost a few staff, but the majority of us stayed, and once again buckled down to work hard and embrace new change if it would benefit our students and help them succeed.

Principal: *I had the opportunity to create a new leadership team to build trust and create positive change. With this a new assistant principal was hired with a background in literacy and was really good at using data and technology. I myself was a science geek so I needed to find a compliment to my weaknesses. We then hired a well respected teacher in the community that had experiences at the high school level in social studies and literacy to serve as an instructional coach. She was dynamic in her interactions and relationships with others and her personality was what staff needed to buy-in to new ideas. The last member of the leadership dream team was a math instructional coach. I needed to have someone on the team with the perspective of the school. I needed the background on staff and previous strategies tried that didn't work. That led me to an NBCT, teaching 8th grade math already in the school. We needed to show growth in our math scores and he was just the person to help bring the staff together. Next, was taking care of "Drinking the Kool-Aid". It was a building joke held by a few that whoever bought into the suggestions from the previous administration team meant that "you were drinking the Kool-Aid", and not aligned with the feelings of the rest of the divided staff. I needed to honor this perspective but also highlight it as a stimulus for work that needed to be accomplished. How do we honor the staff that have embraced new ideas and changes but also honor the previously held perspectives that other staff still held? We make a celebration out of it.*

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BELIEVE, INSPIRE, SUCCEED

One thing was for sure, the staff felt worn out and beat down by the lack of trust, the loss of leadership and a division of grade levels. We needed some fun, and we needed to have fun together. Here an idea was born to award trophies at faculty meetings to recognize and reward staff for their changes and work around the school and in their classrooms. We had taken the time to create a vision and mission together before the school year started, and now this work would be the focus of our trophies.

Random trophies were donated to the school that we transformed into "Believe", "Inspire" and "Succeed", the key elements of our vision statement. The Believe trophy had a bottle of Kool-Aid affixed to the top as a tribute to the phrase shared by staff. Where as before it was used with negative intent, now it had a positive connotation that included all staff. This trophy would become the trophy given out by the leadership team to recognize a staff member once a month who was believing in the hard work and implementing new strategies to create learning opportunities for their students. The other trophies would be for staff who were inspiring each other and succeeding in the classroom or school. Inspire and Succeed would also be handed down by staff members to each other each month. This helped our staff to recognize each other for the work that was being done.

Principal: *I needed help and I knew it. Our biggest areas of growth needed to be in reading, writing, math and special education. I was not an expert in these areas and I needed to fill my team with leaders that could support teachers with this work. Our instructional coaches came*

in with experiences to support staff and build trusting relationships so staff would buy-in to the professional development that they were providing in their classrooms. In order to do this we needed to create a line where staff knew that they could be vulnerable to try new things without having it show up on their evaluation. We wanted them to feel comfortable with new learning, experimenting and growing as learners, all the while increasing rigor in their classrooms. Having clear lines in coaching and administration freed our staff to open their doors to the coaching being offered.

Teacher: *Having worked with our new math instructional coach for several years, I was comfortable working with him and confident he had our best interests in mind. Our conversations continually challenged my thinking and pushed me to try out strategies in my classroom that I wouldn't have without them. I knew I could try them without feeling evaluated.*

DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP

Staff did not feel like decisions were made for them, as key school members were put in charge of committees in order to lead the changes that needed to take place. Decisions were not to be thought of as top down but as a collaborative process to make changes. Staff needed to feel like their perspectives could be honored and shared with others and we would make changes based on the majority of the staff's vote. The implementation of committees and the expectation of each staff member participating in a committee facilitated the sense of 'with.' This prompted the teacher-driven change and from here teacher leadership took root.

A COMMON LANGUAGE

The school leadership team recognized the need to continue the work of literacy in the classroom. The work started by the previous administration was paramount work built on research practices but wasn't well received by all staff. The literacy instructional coach began to build a reading program founded in research based reading practices, which was called the *6 Flags to Literacy*. These "flags" were rolled out at faculty meetings once a month to teach staff and then support use in the classroom. The objective was to have staff use the strategies most effective to them in their content area to increase student growth in reading, writing and vocabulary. This work was reinforced by a literacy committee that discussed the practices, implemented the professional development and demonstrated the practices. Videos were also made of the strategies so



parents could be involved in supporting literacy at home. These became the pillars of common instructional practice and key to developing the understanding that ‘we are all teachers of reading.’

USING DATA FOR STUDENT LEARNING

In the 2011-2012 school year when introducing a strategy students would often make statements like, “But we learned this in our other classes already!” Later, after implementing several strategies, it was about student choice of strategy. When asked, students could select and set up a research based graphic organizer for gaining meaning from text. All of the six reading strategies were regularly used in all classrooms including PE and Music classes. There was an awareness of student deficits before, now instructional strategies were being implemented in a collective effort directly addressing those deficits.

A student progress learning tool currently in place, *Measurement of Academic Progress (MAP)*, gave current information on math and reading. Data available from this assessment was used to determine the effectiveness of the strategies being implemented for students to make next step decisions on instructional changes. Understanding evolved from awareness of deficits to how to serve the needs of the traditionally underperforming students (ie - Special Education, English Language Learners, Low Socioeconomic). The aggregated pockets of data analysis of previous years had become a collective work where teams developed effective plans for instruction to address student deficits in learning.

Development of ‘making instructional practice public’ helped create a willingness to not only share in the progress within the school, but with others as well. Staff actively sought ways to learn from other schools and districts. There was a greater collective openness to reflect on practices and explore ways to improve.

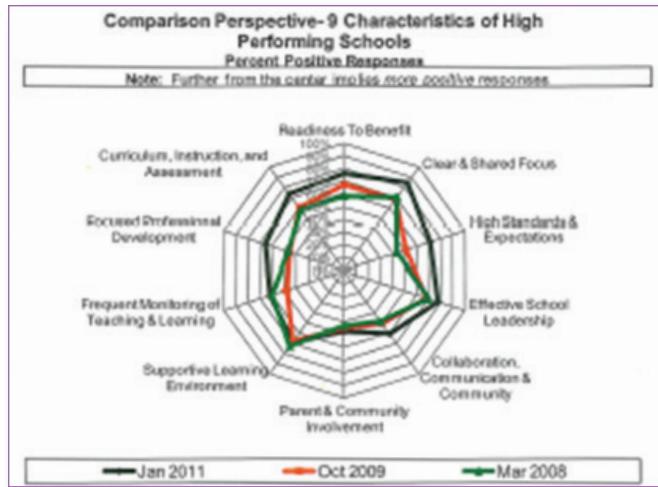
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FROM SELF TO SYNERGY

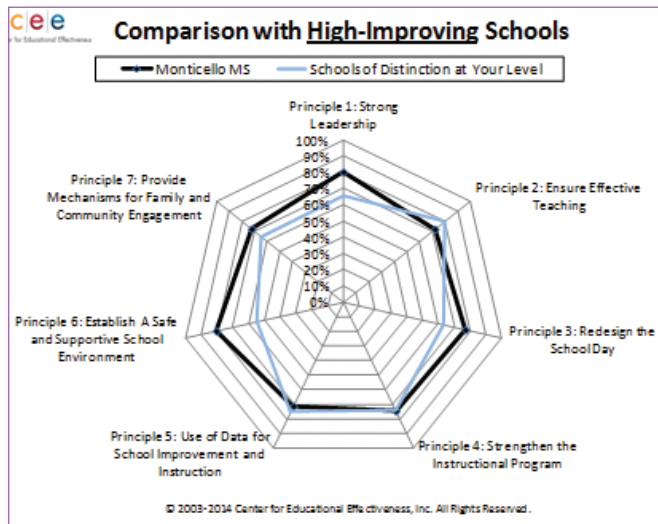
In 2015-2016 the school theme is “synergy”. The definition of synergy is “the interaction or cooperation of two or more organizations, substances, or other agents to produce a combined effect greater than the sum of their separate effects”. Synergy describes all of the staff, students, and families working together for positive changes at our school. As a school with changes still to make, and growth to demonstrate, we are working together to find the best ways to have our students be better learners. Our staff creates learning opportunities and jumps at the chance to share work with others. We celebrate along the way, and we enjoy each other’s company with activities that promote our team work, from bowling competitions, potlucks, bingo, and Minute-To-Win-It games on Friday mornings before school. Our PLC’s are focused on goals and student interventions, and we work together to problem solve the issues that come up. Community perspective has also changed about our school. By sharing the work with the community and opening our doors to others, people can recognize both our efforts and successes. Other schools now want to come visit us to see our programs from Standards Based Grading to Co-teaching programs. Our school name is now associated with positive comments and we are often highlighted by other groups for our accomplishments. There will always be more to do, more students to support and different issues that arise. But now that we don’t operate with the “self” and we work together to build “synergy” our school will continue to benefit.

DATA FROM THE CENTER FOR EDUCATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

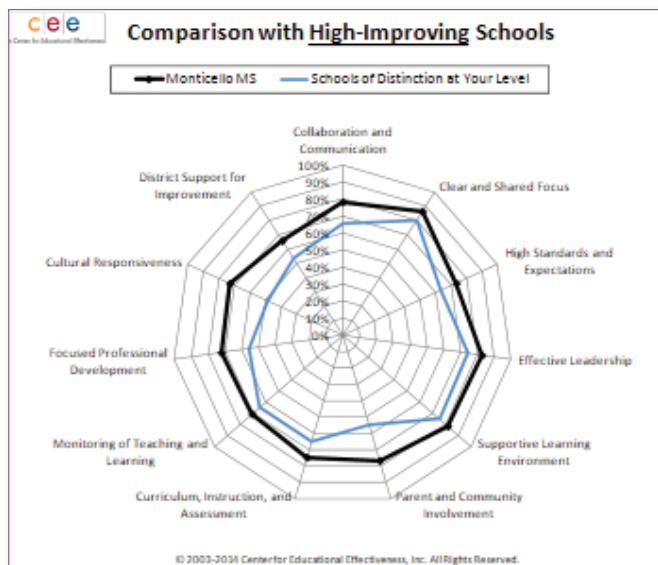
2008-2011



2014



15-16 School Year



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