

Abbotsford, Wisconsin¹

Abbotsford is a rural, primarily working class town in central Wisconsin. The main industry in the area is the meatpacking plant, Abby Meats. Ever since 1991, Abby Meats has attracted a steadily increasing number of Mexican immigrants to work in its two local factories. This year, after procuring the national sausage contract with Hardees, Abby Meats plans to expand, and the town anticipates another large growth of Mexican families moving here for jobs in the factory.

This shift has had an impact on the demographics in the school, which has grown from zero to 13 percent Hispanic in just 15 years. The lower grades of the elementary school indicate an increasing trend. This past year, the entering kindergarten was 33 percent Hispanic, a record for the school, which had no students of color until 1991. Despite this steady increase in Hispanic students, the school has continued to serve a fairly stable population of low income students. The percent of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch has been larger than half the school population for several years. This year, 62 percent of the students are eligible.

The growing population of ELL students and high percentage of low income students have presented challenges to the school system, which has undergone significant changes in order to meet the needs of its students and the requirements of No Child Left Behind. An analysis of test score data indicates a considerable increase in the percentage of students scoring proficient and advanced over the last four years. District scores in reading have increased from 78.8 to 93.5 percent proficient and advanced. The percent of students scoring proficient and advanced in language arts has risen from 73 to 93.5 percent. In mathematics, the district scores have risen from 55 to 87.1 percent proficient and advanced.

While overall scores have improved, the school has had particular success with low-income students. *The percent of proficient and advanced students from low SES backgrounds increased from 31 to 82 percent in mathematics, and increased in both reading and language arts from 69 to 89.5 percent.* These scores show a significant growth in achievement in both reading and math for those students most at-risk, and demonstrate the possibility of serving all students well.

This success is largely due to reform efforts at the elementary school, where leaders have sought ways to respond to the changing needs of their students. In so doing, the school has focused on improving instruction for all students and supporting struggling students, while maintaining inclusive practices. Throughout the process, school leaders have relied on the external support of Cooperative Educational Service Agency (CESA 10), which has proved instrumental in funding reform strategies. The district has also depended on the internal expertise of the teachers, who have been given opportunities to shape the reform process throughout, and in so doing, have built a strong sense of professional community.

Using the expertise of CESAs. Over the last 10 years, the school has continually sought extra funding and support for improvements in instruction. In order to do this, school leaders relied heavily on CESA 10, the regional service agency that has provided information about

¹ This case was researched by Rebecca Lowenhaupt and Sarah Archibald, and written by Lowenhaupt.

grants and professional development opportunities, and also provides onsite consultations and coaching, and free training tailored to the needs of the district. It is important to note that while CESA 10 provided the resources, the motivation for reform came from within the district.

Literacy reform. One of the first steps in the change process was reviewing the district's reading and literacy curriculum. The district was looking for a way to meet the goal of supporting all of its ELL and low-income students more successfully. In order to reach its higher goals, the district realized that it would need a stronger curriculum that was better equipped to meet students at their individual levels. The administration decided that the basal readers in use were not adequate for this goal and that a stronger curriculum program was needed. The district also knew that developing good reading skills was a key to student achievement in all other subject areas, including a new mathematics program that would focus more on problem solving and application.

When the leadership decided that a shift was necessary in literacy instruction, CESA 10 helped the district apply for a READS grant to support the switch to a guided reading program. The new program required an investment in professional development, engaged teachers in data based decision making using formative assessment, and focused teachers on providing individualized instruction to students. The curriculum also provides a variety of extra help strategies for students who are struggling.

Not only did the grant provide funding for the new materials, but it also included funds to dramatically expand professional development for teachers. Grant funds were used to purchase the time necessary for teachers to learn how to use the new curriculum. The principal was able to pay for substitute teachers so that teachers could participate in off-sight training, visit other schools already implementing the new curriculum, and work in grade-level teams to strategize about lesson planning together. Finally, the grant purchased time for a literacy coach, who spent considerable time in the school modeling, observing, and providing feedback to teachers using the curriculum for the first time.

In interviews, leaders expressed their views about the problems inherent in providing one-shot training for teachers. They described the importance of extensive professional development in new curriculum, in order to prevent teachers from simply returning to the old, comfortable way of doing things. The grant allowed the school to invest in extensive new professional development, which supported the successful implementation of the new curriculum, as well as instructional improvement.

The implementation strategy was designed to build new instructional expertise and support for the new literacy curriculum on a year by year basis. Rather than change the entire school at once, the principal first purchased materials for the first grade teachers, focusing the READS grant resources on those three teachers, who received training and coaching services. By the second year, they had become advocates for the program, and the upper grades were eager for their turn. After five years, the program has now been incorporated into all grades in the school.

One of the additional benefits of and emphases of the new curriculum was its inclusion of formative assessments to help teachers guide their instructional practice. One objective of the professional development the district had provided over the past years was to help teachers learn how to use formative assessment data in tailoring their instruction to the precise needs of the students in their classrooms. With the help of the coach, teachers have learned how to collect running records of what students do and do not know in the literacy curriculum, constantly checking to see how their instruction impacts each individual student. An understanding of such micro-data allows instruction to be targeted to the exact learning needs of students and also facilitates conversations with parents, as well as helping the principal hold his teachers accountable. The generation of data by the new curriculum not only helps guide instruction, but also provides the foundation for in-depth analysis of other forms of student achievement data, including the WKCE scores. Finally, the principal said that these uses of data have transformed the kinds of conversations that teachers are able to have about their work with each other and about their students.

Mathematics Reform. Simultaneously, the administration recognized a need for change in the way mathematics was taught at the school and decided it was time to throw out the old curriculum. Rather than simply adopting a new curriculum, the leadership pulled together an internal committee of the strongest math teachers in the elementary school, providing teachers a leadership role in determining the new curriculum. By giving teachers a voice in the reform process, the administration smoothed the way for successful implementation.

The committee decided to use a curriculum focused on building conceptual understanding and problem-solving skills. The increased success in literacy bolstered this choice for a mathematics curriculum, which was much more word-based than the previous curriculum. By choosing a much more hands-on approach which incorporated the use of manipulatives, teachers were encouraged to focus on building the mathematics understanding of all students, providing much more individualized instruction to everyone.

Next Steps: Science Reform. The next instructional reform planned by the district is in the science curriculum. The principal noticed that high-school ACT scores in science were low, so he has organized a team of teachers to work on the science curriculum. Recognizing the importance of elementary school science, he has included teachers from 3rd to 12th grade. When he asked CESA 10 for help with this initiative, they offered the services of a science curriculum facilitator. She will visit and begin the process of revising the science curriculum. Her work will involve breaking down the data for science teachers and helping them re-organize the curriculum around the standards. If the experiment works with science, he plans to follow the same processes to revise other subjects as well. Again, a similar pattern of reform emerges, in which external support is coupled with internal expertise to solve the problem of science achievement. Once again, the teachers will use data to inform the design of their curriculum.

Supporting struggling students: No one slips through the cracks. Along with changes made in the curriculum, the school has also shifted its attention to its struggling students. This is another aspect of the significant increase in achievement scores for students from low income backgrounds. By ensuring that no one slips through the cracks, the school is able to provide individualized, differentiated services to each student.

Once again, grant money played a key role in the district's reform strategy. Since 1998, the school has participated in SAGE, which has reduced class size in kindergarten through grade 3 to fifteen to one. The principal spoke about how much this has helped, especially with low-income students who can no longer slip through the cracks. In larger classes, students were getting lost in the shuffle. Quieter students, often ELL students or low SES students, were not forced to participate. The smaller class size helps ensure that everyone participates and allows teachers to use more individualized curriculum that meets students at their own level. The principal believes this is one of the major causes for the improvement in achievement.

With money from yet another grant, the 21st Century Grant, the school has also been able to provide extensive support for students outside of the regular school day. Both before and after-school programs provide students access to tutoring from teachers. Three weeks of summer school have been developed using the same grant money. While these summer classes are optional, the teachers often lure students into academic activities, disguising extra-help academic work with appealing titles and encouraging specific students to participate. Both Title I and ELL funding provides additional tutoring for at-risk students, so those needing extra support receive some tutoring services during the day. Again, funding is central to providing sufficient tutoring resources to students. The principal explains that with more funding, he would be able to support the growing population of ELL students more successfully.

The culture of the school is one in which all students are held to the same high expectations. Those who are struggling to keep achievement up to standards are targeted for extra support. Small class sizes, plenty of opportunities for extra help, and teachers who are willing to volunteer their lunch time to help students demonstrate this emphasis on achievement for everyone. Other cultural components of the daily life of the school provide additional individual support. For example, the school provides each student with a homework assignment notebook in which both teachers and parents must sign their names each day. If a student does not complete the homework, he or she stays in during recess for a study hall, during which a teacher makes sure the student completes the missing work. These extra supports may seem insignificant, but the message they send to both the students and the school community is strong. Every student is responsible for completing all the work successfully, and if it is not done, a teacher makes sure it gets done. The expectations are held high for everyone, and the school is committed to providing the resources so that everyone can meet them.

Collaborative culture and distributed leadership. The district and school leaders have created an environment of shared decision-making at the school level. Whether making decisions about curriculum adoption, scheduling, or class lists, a team of teachers is involved. The principal believes that it is natural and important to ask for teacher expertise whenever decisions are made. This philosophy of leadership has had an impact on the school culture, creating an environment in which collaboration and conversation are encouraged and supported

by the administration. Teachers are encouraged to take on leadership positions, helping one another with practice, deciding on new textbooks, and contributing to the design of the school reform. The open lines of communication and trust between faculty and administrators help the school make decisions as a community.

Philosophy of inclusion. The leadership of the school has embraced a philosophy of inclusion for students. With the growing number of ELL students, there is a temptation to create a more segregated school environment. The principal describes the scheduling conundrum faced this year, with enough Spanish-speaking students in the Kindergarten to make their own classroom. While the team recognized that it might be easier to have one bilingual classroom, the priority of inclusion drove them to split the students into integrated classrooms, rather than segregate them. He said they were tempted, but in the end, they did what they knew would be best for the students.

While this temptation may grow as the population of Spanish-speaking students increases, the school intends to continue to prioritize integration, viewing the incoming population as an opportunity for everyone rather than a threat. There has been some anxiety in the town about the new community, but the school has focused on the benefit for all the students of growing up in a more diverse and integrated school setting.

Lessons learned. Abbotsford Elementary has successfully responded to the shifting needs of its student population by focusing on instructional improvement, supports for its struggling students, and building a culture of shared leadership and inclusion. Some of the key lessons learned from this case study include:

1. Set ambitious goals for the learning of all students. Abbotsford viewed the changing demographic of its student body as an opportunity to set high achievement goals for all of its students, including the increasing percent of students from lower income and non-English speaking backgrounds.
2. Adopt new curriculum programs. Abbotsford concluded that in order to make sufficient progress in reading, they needed to adopt a new approach to literacy instruction and math instruction and did so – with the help of their local regional service agency, CESA 10. The district is now in the process of changing its science curriculum program in order to boost student performance in science. The district understands that in order to have students do better in a given content area, they must restructure that curriculum area.
3. Invest heavily in new and intensive professional development. As the case indicates, adopting a new curriculum program is only step one. It requires concentrated, long term professional development to help teachers learn the instructional strategies to put the new program into place in their daily classroom practice. Abbotsford, with grant funding secured with the help of its CESA, expanded the number of days for teacher professional development, hired trainers to provide professional development, and put literacy coaches into their schools to help teachers incorporate all the new practices into their ongoing instructional work.

4. Engage in data based decision making. An integral part of the literacy program was learning how to collect the “running records” or “formative assessments” of students in reading, and to turn this knowledge into more focused and efficient instruction tailored to the exact needs of the students in each teacher’s classroom. Training in data-based decision making also included aligning efforts with standards and state accountability measures.

5. Provide a variety of extra help strategies. Abbotsford, with grant funding, was able to provide a multitude of “extra help” strategies to students who struggled a bit more to achieve to standard. It was able to provide teacher tutoring before and after school, more intense tutoring to ELL students during the regular school day, and even three weeks of summer help to some students. These strategies reflected an understanding of two important ideas: some students need extra help even with high quality instruction in the core classroom and that time needs to be expanded through extra help programs if all students are held to a high level of performance.

6. Collaborative decision making and professional community. Moving to a more inclusive leadership style which respects teacher expertise and provides teachers with a voice in decision-making has helped build a school culture in which everyone, teachers and administrators alike, take responsibility for improving instruction for all students.