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SWIFT Center

How Change Occurred at the Stoughton Area School District: Lessons from a SWIFT (Schoolwide Integrated Framework for Transformation) Knowledge Development Site

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Abstract

The SWIFT Center (Schoolwide Integrated Framework for Transformation) is an initiative to bring about educational equity district by district until all students excel, including students with the most profound needs. As the national technical assistance center to build schoolwide inclusive practices to improve academic and behavioral outcomes for ALL children, the SWIFT Center is currently partnering with five states, 16 school districts, and 64 schools to implement the SWIFT Framework for educational improvement over the next four years.

The SWIFT Center selected Fox Prairie Elementary School in Stoughton, Wisconsin as one of six Knowledge Development Sites where aspects of the SWIFT domains (Administrative Leadership, Multi-Tiered System of Support, Integrated Education Framework, Family and Community Engagement, and Inclusive Policy Structure and Practice) can be seen in practice. Fox Prairie and the Stoughton Area School District's history of aligning the district mission with an equity framework of support for all students embodies the SWIFT Inclusive Policy Structure and Practice domain. In this Issue Brief we highlight some of the policies and practices that contribute to the remarkable achievements in this Knowledge Development Site.

Context

Fox Prairie, located within the Stoughton Area School District (SASD), is a medium-sized suburban elementary school located just outside the state capital, Madison, Wisconsin. For the past 10 years SASD has experienced declining enrollment and has a current total enrollment of approximately 3,300 students (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2013). In the 2012-2013 school year, the district enrollment was 95% White students and 5% African-American students. The proportion of students in the district who experience poverty grew markedly over the past 11 years, from 9% in 2000-2001 to more than 26% in 2012-2013. The proportion of students identified with disabilities decreased from a high of 19.3% in 2003-2004 to a current low of 9.4% (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2013).

The dramatic change in the percentage of students with disabilities could raise flags of failure to provide appropriate supports and services to their student population. However, these declining proportions are factors that drew our interest to Fox Prairie. We make the case that further

examination of these data will reveal that this decrease is the result of dramatic policy shifts led by district leadership that reshaped the educational, cultural, and community approach to supporting the needs of all students in the district. The SASD leadership engaged the educational community in an active, multi-year process of shifting policy and practice toward a social justice approach supporting the needs of all students.

Prior to the shift in policies, in 2000, SASD administrators saw evidence of a math instruction crisis in their district. Statewide math assessment data indicated that only 30% of all students in the district were scoring proficient or advanced (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2013). Further, the data revealed that SASD had a significant over-identification of students of color as having disabilities. In the same time period, the state Department of Public Instruction cited the district for having a critically low graduation rate for students with disabilities, and began focused monitoring of SASD.

Lessons

In response to this context, SASD administrative leadership, including the director of special education, began an intensive process of examining the district's curriculum and instructional policies and practices. Rather than simply addressing the specific issues in order to become compliant with regulations, the district took action to "…create a cohesive district-wide structure—from central office to all schools—that would support improved learning for all students and align curriculum and assessment, professional development, policy and procedures, and funding sources around the four strategic drivers of (a) data utilization, (b) academic achievement, (c) climate and culture, and (d) communication and partnership" (National Center on Educational Outcomes, 2014).

In essence, the first important step the district undertook toward a solution was a serious *policy initiative* focused on four strategic drivers. SASD administration began by examining data that showed that the district was fractured by policies and practices that supported site-based decision-making, which resulted in schools across the district making vastly different decisions about similar challenges.

Second, in an attempt to recentralize important processes, district leaders examined and rebuilt the math curriculum. A year later, they did the same for literacy and reading curriculum.

The third key step was reconsideration of the special education service delivery model for the entire district, which was a pull-out model—that is, they removed students with disabilities from

the general education environment. Kurt Schneider, director of special education at the time, focused on the fact that pulling students out of the classroom for service delivery decreased the amount of instructional time those students received. He also acknowledged that changing the practice of the pull-out service delivery model meant that he needed to challenge the culture that had existed in the district for many years. Dr. Schneider's approach to the challenges that the district faced in improving student achievement was based on using many small remedies, not just one major change. Consistent with this approach, SASD enlisted assistance from Elise Frattura of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in 2003. Dr. Frattura conducted an external evaluation of student services and special education and her findings revealed troubling scenarios for students with disabilities, students living in poverty, and students of color (Frattura, 2010).

Another key step to addressing the range of issues was a district strategic planning process. This process, led by the district leadership, was aimed at examining the values and culture behind education practices in the district and intentionally involved a wide variety of stakeholders. Broad involvement was crucial for the success of the planning process as well as for sustainability and buy-in of the community as a whole. The elected school board, community representatives (e.g., mayor and business leaders), parents, school district staff, and even students were involved in the strategic planning.

The resulting strategic plan expressed the communal values and beliefs of the stakeholders, which became the scaffold for all district initiatives and decisions including instruction, professional development and curriculum (Figure 1). According to Dr. Schneider, "You have to hang [these changes] on something— if you don't have something to hang it on, it's lost."

These beliefs are largely the same as those articulated in state and federal policy. As we discussed in our first SWIFT Issue Brief (Stonemeier, Trader, Richards, Blank, East, & Toson, 2013), federal policies that address supporting the needs of children with disabilities, children living in poverty, and children who are English learners are deeply rooted in social justice and equity values for these children. In fact, the genesis of many of the federal laws came from the Civil Rights movement calling for equity throughout the United States. Beginning with the U.S. Constitution, the U.S. Supreme Court decisions of Brown v. Board of Education and Olmstead, all the way through Congress passing the 1975, P.L. 94-142 (predecessor to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004) and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, every branch of our federal government has affirmed and reaffirmed the equal rights of all children.

Stoughton Area School District

The values we hold as a school district

We believe that…

- Each student has the right to the opportunities to reach his/her full potential.
- Knowledge increases life's options and has the power to enhance the quality of life.
- The family is the primary influence in the development of the individual.
- Learning is enhanced in a safe, disciplined and cooperative environment.
- Learning is a life-long process and is the key to understanding and managing change.
- All individuals can learn, but at different rates and in different ways.
- Educating students is our highest priority.
- Individual potential to learn is increased by the cooperative efforts between the student and the school, family and community.
- For all individuals learning is achievable, observable, and measureable.
- Each individual has the right to a safe learning environment.
- Each individual has the responsibility to respect the rights and differences of others.
- Effective schools work in strong partnership with all parts of the community to establish and accomplish mutual goals.
- Each individual within a community has the responsibility to become a productive and contributing member of society.
- All people have worth and deserve respect.
- Personal responsibility for learning increases success.
- Excellence can be achieved through consistent effort and continuous improvement.

Figure 1. Stoughton Area School District Beliefs.
Source: Frattura, 2010.

Recommendations

When approaching the work of SWIFT implementation, decision makers for schools, districts, and states may feel overwhelmed by such perceived policy barriers as existing funding structures or teacher licensure/certification processes. Large-scale systems change efforts consistently butt up against obstacles, some real and some imagined. The SWIFT Center embraces the tenets of Appreciative Inquiry (Barrett & Fry, 2005) and Active Implementation Science (National Implementation Research Network, 2013) when encountering these barriers; that is, begin by identifying the strengths of the system—at every level—and continue to ask questions with the intention of seeking understanding while remaining focused on the vision. We encourage our

partners for change to resist the urge to make assumptions, and to think creatively.

From the SASD experience, Dr. Schneider suggests that policy alignment depends on the engagement of district leadership and begins with the articulation of values through the strategic crafting of a district mission statement with a broad array of stakeholders. His experience speaks to the importance of addressing concerns creatively, but also with simplicity. Once the SASD School Board adopted the mission and beliefs, the systems change initiatives of Dr. Schneider and his colleagues gained overt support as long as they could connect the proposed changes directly back to these statements. According to Dr. Schneider, the values and beliefs statement was the easiest policy to change with the greatest impact.

We do not suggest that the process was easy for SASD and Fox Prairie. Convening stakeholders in a community-wide strategic planning process that stretches over several sessions takes resources—both capital and human. However, the return on investment out-performed expectations from the perspective of the district administration, the community at large, and—most importantly—the gains in student achievement reported at Fox Prairie and the district as a whole. Since engaging in the strategic articulation of mission and values, SASD experienced:

- Double digit increases in state assessment scores for math and reading
- Increased Advanced Placement options for all students
- Improved performance on ACT
- Marked narrowing of achievement gaps among multiple groups
- Dramatic improvements in high school graduation rates
- Dramatic decrease in identification rates of students with disabilities (National Center on Educational Outcomes, 2010).

The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (2013) also reported a nearly 100% increase in the number of students with disabilities scoring advanced or proficient on the statewide assessment.

Conclusion

The improvements in multiple outcomes for students within SASD illustrate the importance of policy alignment as a crucial underpinning to any education reform initiative. Countless schools and districts have implemented reform models with little to no lasting success, but SASD is an outstanding exception. We have discussed here the first of three major policy district policy areas that support this outcome: (a) establishing district mission/beliefs supporting a social justice and equity framework for all children, (b) establishing a system for utilizing student data, and (c) actively and meaningfully engaging parents and community stakeholders.

In sum, SASD leveraged policy alignment to bring about meaningful and sustainable improvements throughout the district. In a future SWIFT Issue Brief we will explore specific aspects of policy alignment from SASD and other Knowledge Development Sites.

Action

Although every school community is unique, the process for engaging stakeholders is largely the same. Use the following actions as guideposts for beginning the work in your own community:

- Identify the stakeholders—who is already at the table? Who is missing from the table?
- Work from a place of strength—take the time to articulate what is working well in your district.
- Establish the list of non-negotiables—those values from which you will not stray.
- Ensure that all decisions align with the articulated beliefs—no exceptions.

Audience

SWIFT is a *schoolwide* framework for transforming schools, districts, and state education agencies and therefore, requires all stakeholders to have active roles in the process. Meaningful and lasting change can only occur when everyone is an equal partner in the process with shared responsibility for all outcomes of the work. The SWIFT Center identifies stakeholders in the broadest sense, recognizing that everyone who intersects with a school community, whether they live down the street, employ youth in their businesses, provide medical care for the community, or walk their kids to school every day. The SWIFT Center believes that "all means all" and the principle applies to stakeholders as well as students.

Suggested Citation

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