

# Using *great teaching* to overcome poverty

A San Francisco principal is turning around his low-performing school by focusing on literacy and classroom practice, with the help of his district.

**J**ohn Muir Elementary School in San Francisco is like countless other schools in cities across the United States. The student body comprises mostly lower income, African American and Latino students who – despite being just as intelligent as their white and Asian counterparts – traditionally underachieve on many academic measures.

Talented, hard-working educators tried their best to improve the standardized test scores at Muir, but for the past five years those scores remained largely flat. During the years spanning from 2005-2010, roughly 75 percent of the students in second through fifth grades scored below proficient on the California Standards Test.

Despite San Francisco Unified School District's best efforts to provide additional support and funding during that time, as well as help from several community members and other well-meaning organizations, results remained the same and test scores did not significantly improve. The will to

improve achievement was clearly there, but the results did not change. This is a familiar tale for urban educators, and it is our greatest responsibility to address it head-on.

I have spent the past 20 years of my life working at schools just like John Muir, located across the country from the Bronx to Los Angeles, West Oakland and San Francisco. As a teacher and principal I have had some successful experiences raising achievement levels among the same demographics, but never to the level of creating long-term, school-wide, sustainable change.

After 19 years at these schools I was eager to focus my energy on the critical mission of “erasing the predictive power of demographics.” So it was with great enthusiasm and excitement that I accepted the job to be the new principal of John Muir for the 2010-2011 school year.

John Muir had ranked in the bottom 5

---

*By Chris Rosenberg*

percent of schools in all of California, and was in need of something new. I met with Superintendent Carlos Garcia, his second-in-command Richard Carranza, and my new immediate supervisor Guadalupe Guerrero. They all had the same message for me: raise the achievement levels of the students at Muir.

Knowing that strong educators had previously attempted to solve this dilemma, and that the school district had dedicated resources to support the work in prior years, I tried to think about what it was I could offer to change that pattern. I set about trying to develop a strategy to improve achievement at John Muir. I reviewed some of the current literature around school reform and the achievement gap, but became somewhat overwhelmed by the breadth and variety of solutions suggested.

Turning to my two decades of experience as an educator, I thought about the ways in which I had been successful at my previous schools, and also some of the obstacles to greater success. I realized that one factor inhibiting improvement at schools like John Muir is that we try to address too many challenges at the same time, often ending up with mediocre results on a wide range of issues.

Too often, we ignore the single most critical element of what happens at a school: classroom teaching. Fundamentally, I believe that great teaching can overcome the debilitating impact of poverty upon our students' achievement scores. For that reason, I decided that teaching would be the center of my strategy at Muir. I would keep our focus on the classroom, and in particular around the literacy instructional practices.

### **The Superintendent's Zone**

One of the unique aspects of the reforms taking place at Muir is that we are part of a broader effort to systemically change the traditionally lower-performing schools in San Francisco. Two years ago our superintendent created a small cohort of schools and established the Superintendent's Zone. The schools selected were all extremely low-performing, and had received considerable attention in the past with limited results.

The officially stated purpose of the Zone is to "expand and coordinate our resources

to ensure each school in the Zone has the teaching and learning conditions necessary to accelerate academic growth for its students." The superintendent set a high goal for "every school in the Zone to reach the district average Academic Performance ranking within the next 3 years." (From SFUSD Superintendent's Zone: 2011-2012 School Year, SFUSD website).

Within this context the work at Muir is



part of a larger vision, and for the first time in my career as an educator the goals of the school are lined up perfectly with the support from the central office and all the departments. The Superintendent's Zone is clearly a priority in SFUSD, and as such many of the old systemic obstacles to improving student achievement are being slowly broken down.

For example, in the past, low-performing schools usually received the least experienced teachers, or those who had not experienced success at other sites. In the Superintendent's Zone, long hard work between the central office and the teachers' union has led to the creation of a specific job description for teachers that outlines skills, attitudes, beliefs and expectations. In addition, HR staff help screen and recruit teachers based on in-depth conversations with principals from the Zone.

Perhaps most significantly, the practice of switching teachers with poor evaluations into schools like John Muir no longer occurs in the Superintendent's Zone. All of these ef-

forts at the central office level put those of us at the school sites in a position where we can be more confident that the teachers we assemble have the same dedication to the mission at hand, and many of the skills they need to reach our goals.

Another factor that has been instrumental to our ability to make systemic change at Muir is the funding provided through the School Improvement Grant, a federal

grant passed down to the states and then to individual districts. This massive grant provides John Muir, as well as nine other San Francisco public schools, with a substantial amount of funding to help with the work at hand. While monies had been directed toward John Muir and other low-performing schools in the past, this time the amounts were greater, and there was clear advice from the Superintendent's Zone regarding how the funding could be used to improve achievement.

### **Tools and materials for success**

During the 2010-2011 school year, funding arrived halfway into the school year, so the impact was somewhat diminished. Nonetheless, I was able to hire two literacy acceleration teachers for the second semester, a part-time ELD coach, and a part-time parent liaison to engage families. In addition, we purchased hundreds of sets of leveled books, enhanced classroom libraries, and upgraded some basic classroom technol-

ogy. While many of these elements had been provided in years past, the focus on using them to improve classroom instruction resulted in a more powerful impact.

All School Improvement Grant schools also work with a consultant group, Partners for School Innovation. This non-profit education organization has an outcome orientation and a focus on systems change and equity. The two individuals who work reg-

ularly with our leadership team help guide and focus our efforts to make the changes at Muir systemic.

Our focus with this grant, as with all of our work, was to help build teacher capacity to teach students in a balanced literacy framework. The funding puts us in a position to set up classrooms with all the materials they need for success, and give teachers all the tools they need to effectively meet the

needs of the diverse learners they have in their rooms.

The positive impact a classroom teacher can have upon any student is not even worth debating. Every parent knows it to be true, as does every principal at all levels of education. It is why parents fight to get their children into certain teachers' classrooms every year, and it is why principals spend countless hours trying to find and attract skilled teachers to their sites.

Great teachers have some innate skills, but also must be effectively trained and supported. Without some combination of innate ability and a mechanism for improving the craft, the impact a teacher can have upon student achievement is limited.


In order to develop the skills necessary to improve achievement at Muir, teachers need high quality professional development. Over the past two decades I have been frustrated by the lack of follow-through provided by most professional development plans, as well as the constant need to adjust the trainings to meet the needs of a specific situation. To address these concerns we provide almost all of our professional development on site by our own literacy team, which is spearheaded by two remarkable teachers.

Lisa Alley and Missy Read have worked as classroom teachers and support staff/coaches for more than 20 years, and their combined knowledge and leadership has been fundamental to our success. Their understanding of Balanced Literacy, genuine interest in continually improving their own understanding of best practices, and determination to be part of a team that bridges the achievement gap make them a rare team indeed.

The on site, targeted professional development they provide is one of the most impactful contributions they have made. We use a fairly simple approach:


- Identify a few key instructional practices the leadership team believes will have a dramatic impact on student achievement.
- Regularly assess our teachers and their specific needs in an overtly non-evaluative manner.
- Then provide specific professional development based on trends observed while assessing classroom practice.

A top ranked university by *U.S. News & World Report*



SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Leading-edge Learning



DREXEL  
PREPARES  
TOMORROW'S  
**LEADERS**

Employees of California Community Colleges receive 40 percent tuition assistance towards Drexel's master's degree programs.

Visit our website for details and upcoming information sessions.

\*These programs are now available in our new Executive Weekend format (one Friday evening/ Saturday each month).

EXPERIENCE THE DIFFERENCE

Drexel University at the Center for Graduate Studies in Sacramento offers a solid and dynamic path of academic and technological innovation for today's education administrators.

Programs offered include:

- **Ed.D. in Educational Leadership and Management:** A rigorous, professional practitioner's degree in a blended delivery format that combines on campus classes with transcontinental online education.
- **M.S. in Higher Education\*:** Students undergo rigorous preparation to lead in complex administrative and management positions in university and college offices, national and international associations and organizations, government agencies, foundations, and corporations in the U.S. and around the world.
- **M.S. in Human Resource Development\*:** Students learn strategic human capital leadership with competencies to facilitate employee and organizational learning, performance and change in a variety of workplace settings.

**For more information, call 916.325.4600 or email [sacramento@drexel.edu](mailto:sacramento@drexel.edu).**

drexel.edu/sacramento
LIVE IT.

Our primary focus for the fall of last year was the practice of guided reading, and we spent several weeks watching videos, conducting model lessons, and reviewing various best-practices checklists prior to launching our observations. Clear expectations were set for teachers, and other factors in the classroom were purposely ignored.

For example, one of teachers' greatest challenges with guided reading was how to manage the students who were not at the guided reading group with them. While clearly this is an important element of an effective classroom, we decided to focus on that later; teachers were told to pay little attention to those other centers at first, and the leadership team did not comment on the activities of students at other centers.

### **Setting specific, aggressive targets**

Building teacher capacity is clearly a central part of our work at Muir, but having a clear set of goals was another key element. Part of being able to get somewhere is knowing where you want to go, and for historically low-performing schools that seems quite obvious; we need to go up. But last year we went through a process of more specifically detailing out exactly how far up we needed to go, by what measures, and what that meant for each classroom teacher.

The targets we set were not anything new or dramatically different than achievement targets set everywhere for students in California schools. But we took some real time to make them aggressive enough to put us on a path for meeting the state benchmark in several years, but attainable enough so that the staff was fully bought into the possibility of reaching our goals.

Once again we choose to focus just on reading achievement, even though we know how important mathematics is and were aware of the fact that we would be held accountable for those scores as well.

When our achievement scores were released after year one, we were obviously pleased and proud of our efforts and the outcomes. But we also recognize that there is a long road still ahead. Our increase of ELA proficiency rates by 13 percent, including more than doubling that rate among African American students, put us at the top of the

list of schools receiving School Improvement Grant monies.

But two-thirds of our students still don't score proficient or above, and close to half of our African American students still score in the bottom two bands (below and far below basic). This other side of the data tells us we took a nice first step, but that our work is not nearly done.

Armed with this information and our shared belief that we have much more to do,

**Recruiting a group of talented educators and giving them the proper support and resources can put us in a position to make real progress toward ensuring that all children, regardless of the hand they have been dealt, can achieve at the same high level.**

we set about creating this year's achievement targets. I am proud of the leadership team and staff's determination to keep the pressure on, with even more aggressive targets for this year than last.

We again committed to working toward double-digit proficiency rate increases, specific goals for African American and English learner students, and internal goals based on our diagnostic reading assessments that help guide us along the way. We again decided not to include specific math targets, based on our determination to stay focused, and armed with the knowledge that math scores for matched students did not go down this past year despite our lack of attention there.

This cycle of inquiry around teacher practice and student outcomes was an extremely effective way to help move student achievement forward at Muir last year, and continues to be our approach in year two. Making the walkthroughs unrelated to the evaluation cycle was critical to the success, because then and only then were teachers

able to feel safe enough to participate in this process without fear that their summary evaluation was going to be based on a perceived weakness in a certain teaching competency. That fear aside, teachers welcomed the visits from the leadership team, the feedback sessions, and the opportunity to move their own practice forward.

In the end it is important to remember we are just in the beginning stages of our work at John Muir Elementary. We have one year of hard work and solid results behind us, but plenty of challenges still ahead. That can be said of many schools across the country, and the truth is that some of those schools will continue that progress, while others will see those results reversed in subsequent years.

We are determined to continue improving student achievement levels at Muir, so that we can add to the understanding of how best to support students who traditionally underperform. We will keep our focus on literacy and classroom practice, building up the skill set each teacher possesses, at times ignoring other important challenges and priorities in our effort to stay focused.

### **Providing every student the opportunity to go to a great school**

We will make some mistakes along the way, but we will keep pushing forward with a determination to succeed. No single reform plan or set of strategic actions will completely solve the achievement gap. But recruiting a group of talented educators and giving them the proper support and resources can put us in a position to make real progress toward ensuring that all children, regardless of the hand they have been dealt, can achieve at the same high level. We must do this because every child should have the opportunity to go to a great school, receive a high quality education, and have the same chance to choose his or her own path in life. ■

### **References**

SFUSD Strategic Plan: *Beyond the Talk*.  
SFUSD Web Site: <http://sfusd.edu>.

---

*Chris Rosenberg is principal of John Muir Elementary School, San Francisco Unified School District.*