

MAKING STRONG STRONGER



Already performing well, Ohio's Alliance School District turned to Success for All to kick it up to the next level.

THE CHALLENGE

Success for All helps schools bring about significant academic improvements, especially among their lowest performers. But SFA also helps make strong schools stronger. This is what happened at Northside Elementary School in Alliance, Ohio.

For five years, test scores showed slow-but-steady improvement. Northside staff, however, wanted to do more. “What they were using was not working,” says Jane Stoner, Alliance School District’s director of elementary education. “So there was a push to find something – a new curriculum.”

With a large economically disadvantaged population – 90.9% of Northside students receive free or reduced-price lunch – intervention teams did what they could to keep learning on track, often working overtime to meet student needs. “We saw growth but we could only meet with the children a maximum of three times a week in half-hour slots,” says Gretchen Cox, the school’s SFA facilitator. “We couldn’t get to the kids every day.”

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THE SOLUTION

Looking to improve test scores, reading skills, and student interest, Alliance School District brought SFA to Northside, Rockhill and Parkway Elementary Schools in 2010. “We needed a program that was going to step it up and help all of our kids,” says Northside principal Lori Grimaldi.

School district superintendent Peter Basil was deliberate in ensuring that staff were willing and able to implement SFA– he required an 80% majority vote from staff instead of the 75% typically required by the SFA. Though some staff resisted, most “saw the big picture and were looking for a more comprehensive program and were willing to take this on,” recalls Stoner.

Northside used its Community Connections team to reach out to parents, reminding them that doing schoolwork at home was key to their children’s success at school. The team also offered encouragement and support. “Every time our kids did something wonderful in SFA or did their homework for a week, we sent postcards home to those parents and said thank you. And that was just huge for some of them,” says Stoner. “It made them buy in and feel really good about themselves that they were also helping their kids in school.”

Like other schools nationwide, Northside needed a strategy to help students prepare for the impending Common Core State Standards (CCSS). SFA fit the bill. Alliance schools that are using SFA feel prepared for the new stringent learning goals because SFA’s cooperative-learning strategies are already in place.

“With the Common Core, you can’t work in isolation anymore because of the integration across the content areas. SFA really brought that to us,” says Stoner. “So when we started to shift over to teacher-based teams, we were ready to go because of SFA and that collaboration.”

SFA’s emphasis on critical thinking has also prepared students for CCSS. “That’s what SFA does. It pushes them and makes them think more,” Grimaldi said, noting that teachers are less apprehensive about implementing CCSS after having learned how SFA can provide a seamless transition to the new standards.





Improvement on All Fronts

Improving reading ability, Success for All's cornerstone, also trickles into every other aspect of the students' school day, boosting their confidence. "It goes into everything – it goes into them being able to do math better, and to do science better, and to do social studies better," says Lori Grimaldi, principal of Northside Elementary.

Adds Jane Stoner, Alliance School District's director of elementary education, "I think we created a learning environment that's very safe now. And kids are willing to take risks. Before, a lot of those children would not take those risks."

Gretchen Cox, Northside's SFA facilitator, agrees that students are bolder and more engaged: "Their confidence is built, and they're not intimidated to answer questions or to try."

As part of its comprehensive approach, SFA does more than improve student reading ability. Through its Leading for Success Schoolwide Solutions teams, for example, it helps to address other issues that can hinder learning, such as absenteeism, discipline problems, and personal issues.

THE RESULTS

After just two years of using SFA's whole-school approach, results at Northside have shown significant gains. At the beginning of the 2011 school year, 57% of students were reading on or above grade level. By the end, that number had jumped to 80%. "Students were reading with SFA. It was heartwarming, and it almost took your breath away," says Stoner. "The bar was raised dramatically for all kids."

Adds Grimaldi: "They love going to reading. If you see them walking in the hall, they can't wait to go. [SFA] has not only gotten them to read better, but it's gotten the children to love to read."

SFA's emphasis on professional development has also been very beneficial to teachers. "There was a real need for that ongoing piece of [professional development] and support that wasn't in place previously," said Stoner.

As recipients of a federal School Improvement Grant, other schools in the district chose to use some of the funds for even more SFA professional development. "I think it provided more strength to teachers' learning and their foundation to grow," says Stoner. "We were able to really use the coaches to specifically design the needs for those buildings."

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FOUNDED IN 1987, the nonprofit Success for All Foundation is dedicated to ensuring that every child, from pre-kindergarten to grade 8, becomes proficient in reading and learning – opening up new doors for a lifetime of achievement. Not only has SFA been proven time and again to help with student reading ability and math performance, it also addresses non-academic concerns, improving behavior, attendance and parental involvement. Please contact us for more information.

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