

## SETTING STANDARDS OF EXCELLENCE



Relying on SFA's whole-school approach,  
a Kansas school continues to win awards  
and set new levels of achievement.

## THE CHALLENGE

McDermott Elementary School in Liberal, Kansas, adopted the whole-school approach of Success for All in 2006. Before this, the school was doing reasonably well, due to the efforts of a skilled and dedicated staff led by principal Kathy Fitzgerald. Even so, McDermott teachers kept running into a problem: they couldn't find a consistent solution for students who were falling behind in reading.

"Prior to SFA, the teachers would say, 'They just can't read.' We weren't really data-driven. Data was missing to drive our instruction," says Fitzgerald of the lack of actual performance statistics needed to gauge reading results and set new learning strategies.

## THE SOLUTION

The McDermott staff embraced the SFA model wholeheartedly, particularly the Leading for Success program, a schoolwide approach to addressing the needs of every child by using streamlined data analysis across grade levels, early intervention strategies, behavioral programs and parental outreach.

"SFA has impacted everybody," says Cindi Lyddon, the school's SFA facilitator. "We're all going in the same direction now."

The ability to pinpoint specific problems with individual students is a result of SFA's data-driven approach. Trained to interpret the data, teachers collaborate and share ideas and intervention strategies throughout all reading and grade levels.

In the early stages of implementation, this data analysis caused some shock. Many teachers were not accustomed to having flaws exposed. According to Fitzgerald: "When we started looking at data, there were tears. It was really personal and painful at first. But it got to a point when we were using it to guide instruction."

Soon teachers were able to pinpoint where a child was having difficulties, and, with an early intervention, reading scores kept climbing.

Reformation efforts also focused on improving the culture of the school, using SFA's Leading for Success program. The Getting Along

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Together team used a multifaceted approach to improve student behavior in the classroom. "This was huge as far as teaching behaviors and social interactions," says Fitzgerald.

The ability to get students to work together, coupled with the fast-paced instruction of cooperative learning, has paid dividends in the classroom. "The kids are much more engaged. They love their reading groups. I don't think they would've ever said that before," says Fitzgerald.

## THE RESULTS

Since partnering with SFA, McDermott has had a sustained record of excellence and many state awards to show for it. Call it the SFA effect. Since adopting the comprehensive program in 2006, the school has thrived, consistently scoring more than 90% in reading proficiency, culminating in a perfect 100% for 2010.

In December 2010, McDermott won the Governor's Achievement Award for the third time in five years and the Standards of Excellence Award for reading and math for the fifth year in a row. It's a pedigree that any school would be proud of, but it is even more special for a school handling the challenges an 80% free and reduced-price lunch population.

McDermott remains one the highest performing Title I schools in the state. But this hasn't stopped staff from continually refining how they teach and draw better performances from students. At one time, meetings with an SFA consultant would have been "complaint sessions." Now they are focused on setting and achieving goals, and reaching the next level.

**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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## A Wider Cultural Transformation

The cultural transformation at McDermott Elementary School has extended beyond the school walls and into the surrounding community. With help from Success for All, the staff started taking gradual steps to connect to parents, getting them involved in their children's learning.

"We started moving the parents from that first level, where they're comfortable walking through the door," says principal Kathy Fitzgerald.

Then McDermott took some of the ideas of SFA's parental-involvement plan and gave it their own spin. They started Come Eat with Me, where parents are invited to have lunch with their children, see a demonstration of SFA in action and receive instructions on how to use Read and Respond (homework answer sheets that require a parental signature for completion). This event has turned out to be a hit, and school staff are assisting with rising read-and-respond completion rates by making reminder calls to parents.



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