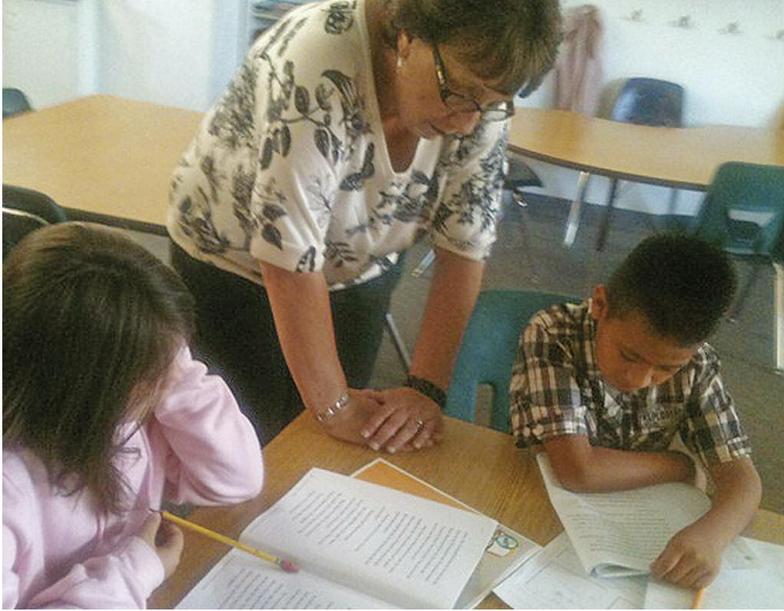


REVIVING THE COMMITMENT TO ACHIEVEMENT



Longtime SFA partner
Whitney Elementary school is finding a
way to reignite student success.



THE CHALLENGE

Whitney Avenue Elementary school in Sacramento, CA, had been a Success for All partner since 1989. So when, after years of steady progress, the school's scores plateaued recently, Principal Vincent Arias didn't panic; he knew that he already had the solution to reignite student achievement.

The school – where nearly 90% of students receive free or reduced lunch and speak more than nine languages, including Spanish, Russian, Arabic and Ukrainian – simply needed to get back to SFA basics and renew its focus on fidelity.

Arias had faith in the ability to effect a turnaround with SFA. When he came to the school three years before, he quickly saw the benefits of the program's cooperative-learning strategies and was impressed by the staff's deep commitment to them. "I really came to believe in the program," he says. "It's pretty phenomenal if really look at it from a principal's eyes."

THE SOLUTION

Arias, teachers and other staff collaborated to set updated goals that reflect Whitney Avenue's rekindled focus on SFA's core principles. The school plans to emphasize a shared set of beliefs, focus on a mission that provides direction for the school, set objectives on how to measure success and implement strategies to achieve it.

"It's so important, because [SFA] is not just a literacy block by itself. It has to be [used as] a whole-school reform model, or it's just not going to work," Arias says, also noting that SFA is most successful when school staff are highly effective and cooperative – qualities that Whitney Avenue has in abundance.

As Arias sees it, one of SFA's great strengths is its flexibility. While it provides a solid structure for teachers, it leaves room for creativity. "It's not about one way that's going to solve every problem," he says. "If there is something we need to change, we will."

After using a program for so long, a school's focus may wane. But SFA is constantly evolving to stay ahead of educational trends, which is why even after 14 years, the program remains relevant and valuable to Whitney Avenue. "SFA isn't stagnant; it's based on research," says Arias. "You just can't implement it once and kind of maintain; you've got to renew," which is what he and staff are doing in their efforts to raise scores.

As part of this drive, Arias has re-examined the Leading for Success Schoolwide Solutions network – a system designed to address outside issues that may hinder learning –

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in place at Whitney, especially focusing on the Cooperative Culture, Parent and Family Involvement, and Intervention teams. “We are looking at all the committees and getting them grounded again,” he says.

The Parent and Family Involvement team is especially important to Arias, who wants to get “back to educating the community on what [SFA] is.” “A lot of our communication [with parents] has to do with reading and how important it is,” he says, noting that the school has been hosting more activities to get parents involved, such as Second Cup of Coffee, where members of the school’s Leading for Success teams discuss school activities with them.

THE RESULTS

These efforts have already proven fruitful: the school’s Read and Respond (requiring students to read nightly for 20 minutes with a family member) daily rate has improved from 68% to 80% in just three months.

While at the time of writing the results of Whitney Avenue’s changes are not yet known, Arias and his staff are confident that the school is getting back on track. They also remain confident as the school undergoes preparations to adhere to impending Common Core State Standards (CCSS).

Arias explains: “I feel we are more ready than most places because CCSS are about expanding what we are doing within our reading block,” such as thinking independently and working collaboratively. “I think SFA does an incredible job of preparing kids for that.”



Preparing for the Future

Whitney Avenue is striving hard to prepare its students for college, career and adult life – goals that align with SFA’s tenets of giving children a solid foundation for lifelong learning.

“I think [SFA] prepares our kids for the future because not only are they thinking for themselves, but they are able to have those critical conversations with each other,” says school principal Vincent Arias. “We have kids who are prepared to be global citizens when they leave here, [who] can compete with any kid anywhere in the world.”

One of the ways SFA prepares students to evolve and succeed as they grow is through cooperative learning. Arias is impressed by how much this has permeated the school culture. “It’s just so phenomenal compared to anywhere else I’ve been,” he says. “The kids are always working together, but so is our staff. It’s always a team effort.”

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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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