

## A MODEL FOR SUCCESS



A partnership with SFA pays off with a number one ranking for Wells Academy.

# WE DON'T EXPECT OUR STUDENTS TO BE AT LEVEL; WE EXPECT THEM TO BE ABOVE LEVEL.

JOE NOCERA, Principal

## THE CHALLENGE

School officials in Steubenville, Ohio, have learned that there are no shortcuts to transforming struggling schools into ones where high achievement is the rule and not the exception. But they've also learned that such progress is possible.

In 2000, the school district's Wells Academy began partnering with Success for All to improve instruction and raise student achievement. Steubenville – which has 2,200 students, mostly from economically disadvantaged families – adopted SFA after receiving a grant to implement a school-improvement program. The district evaluated several options, but an ABC News special on SFA reading programs caught their eye.

## THE SOLUTION

The district chose SFA because of its uniform application and its research-proven effects on student achievement. “We liked it because it placed students where they needed to be based on their individual needs,” says Wells Academy principal Joe Nocera.

Teachers credit SFA's pre-K program Curiosity Corner for getting more students above grade level. Incoming kindergartners were more familiar and prepared to use SFA, which led to greater performance throughout the elementary school. “For the majority of our students who go into kindergarten through Curiosity Corner, there is a marked difference in performance from those who don't,” says Nocera.

With better-prepared students, teachers could pinpoint smaller performance issues. They used 4Sight data to drive instruction and regularly met with an SFA coach to plan interventions. Discussions usually focused on one issue: how to improve written and oral responses to questions. As responses improved schoolwide, student scores on the standardized tests went up.

Wells Academy teachers, administrators and support staff have worked with SFA approaches to help students make new strides, maintaining 100% proficiency while putting more students above grade level. The school makes sure that correct answers are explained in complete sentences. Teachers have to act as though every student in the school is one of their own. Moreover, parents are expected to take time to evaluate and then sign off on their children's Read and Respond assignments.

## THE RESULTS

Since implementing SFA, school improvement has been steady. The Education Trust picked Wells Academy as a winner of the Dispelling the Myth Award in 2008. The school was also a National Blue Ribbon School of Excellence for 2003–04 and 2004–05.

Recently Wells Academy was rated by the Ohio Department of Education as the state's top public elementary school. The number-one rating was based on the school's state performance index, which is a weighted average that looks at a range of student performance



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MELINDA YOUNG, Programs Director, Steubenville City Schools

## Letting Nothing Stand in the Way of Greatness

Ohio Governor John Kasich gave a big shout-out to Steubenville's Wells Academy in his State of the State Address at the school on February 7, 2012. After leading the state's public elementary schools on the most recent state assessments, Wells Academy was picked by the governor to host that year's address.

"The teachers and administration have adopted a principle – nothing stands in the way of kids being great," Kasich says. "It's important to note that 60% of the children in this school are economically disadvantaged. That's 15% above the statewide average, and yet, they're number one, and they're number one because of that commitment."



indicators on state tests, including students who do not meet, meet, or exceed the standards.

The award is the result of the school's sustained instructional focus and a commitment to high expectations. Wells Academy students have scored 100% at or above grade level on the Ohio Achievement Test in reading since 2005. Principal Joe Nocera explains it this way: "We don't expect our students to be at level; we expect them to be above level."

With SFA, the school has pushed through nearly every barrier – especially barriers associated with children from low-income families. "Before SFA, we heard the term 'nonreader'," says Diane Cassucio, Wells Academy facilitator, "but now we don't hear it."

"Cooperative learning pushed the students, and now we've started using the model beyond just reading and math," says Melinda Young, programs director, Steubenville City Schools.

She adds, "By now [SFA] is second nature. The nice thing is you could take any teacher out of any classroom, even move them into another building, and they would know exactly where to pick up. Everyone is on the same page, and everyone knows what is expected."

Today, Steubenville's two other elementary schools are enjoying similar progress as SFA partners, joining Wells Academy on the state's most recent list of 122 Ohio Promise Schools based on their high achievement rates. While proud of such achievements, Nocera insists they are not the main point. "[The ranking] is not what we're about. We're trying to teach kids the best we can and have them prepared for 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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