

# Reaching the Forgotten 10 Percent

*A successful elementary school reexamined its scores and launched a schoolwide effort to help its weakest readers.*

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**S**chools with high dropout rates, low achievement, or serious discipline problems face a built-in impetus for change. But how does a school at which most students experience success create a sense of urgency for improvement?

Claresholm Elementary, a K–3 rural public school serving 185 students in Alberta, Canada, found the impetus to change when we looked more closely at our school's historically high reading scores. In 2006, on our provincial standardized reading assessment, 95 percent of Claresholm's 3rd graders scored at the proficiency level or higher, with 29 percent scoring at the excellence level. Averaging the scores of three years, 92 percent of students achieved proficiency. Because these scores were significantly above the district and provincial averages, we could have celebrated and continued with existing practices.

But averages often hide what's happening in a school. We realized these



scores meant that almost 10 percent of Claresholm students were *not* reading successfully. Looking more closely at individual scores on the standardized test and on various classroom assessments given before 3rd grade, we realized we could have predicted which kindergarten students would develop problems later on if we had compared reading scores earlier. So we launched a schoolwide effort to improve reading, using professional learning communities to probe the learning of all Claresholm students.

## **Five Essential Elements**

We ensured that five elements consistent with professional learning community literature became part of Claresholm's school culture: (1) common assessments

at all grade levels, (2) collaborative team meetings, (3) tiered multiple supports, (4) a culture of hope and perseverance, and (5) celebration.<sup>1</sup>

## **Common Assessments**

If Claresholm wanted to identify struggling readers, waiting until 3rd grade to give students their first standardized reading assessment was too late. We needed to administer a common annual assessment from kindergarten on so that we could determine growth as students progressed from grade to grade and pinpoint grade levels or classrooms where growth stalled. In 2007, Claresholm began implementing a standardized reading assessment at all grade levels. We also had grade-level teams administer common formative assess-

ments—created, graded, and analyzed by these teams—throughout the year.

However, adopting these two levels of assessment would have been meaningless if we had not disaggregated the data. So in the spring, Claresholm teachers analyzed reading assessment data at the school, grade, classroom, and student level to determine whether instruction had been effective. Once we established class lists for the upcoming year, teachers reexamined data for individual students who would be in their class and planned appropriately for individuals and groups. As teams began to focus on individual students, data became increasingly valuable. We now follow this process each school year.

### **Collaborative Team Meetings**

The best place to change a school's focus from an emphasis on the whole school to a look at individual students is in collaborative team meetings.

Claresholm's collaborative grade-level teams, which include teacher assistants and administrators, meet monthly to discuss individual students' progress and plan any interventions necessary to ensure reading growth. On the basis of assessments and observations, teachers group students into three categories:

- Sustain (students currently experiencing success).
- Watch (students beginning to experience difficulty or, conversely, moving toward success).
- Concern (students *not* experiencing success and in need of intensive support).

The monthly meeting ensures that teacher teams address the needs of all students in the *concern* and *watch* categories. Our examinations and discussions of student achievement now get to a much deeper level than they did when we considered overall averages. This practice enables teachers to coordinate programs among classrooms and reinforces teachers' conviction that all Claresholm students are "their" students.

### **Tiered Multiple Supports**

Although acknowledging individual student needs is powerful, it will not lead to change unless the school follows

up by articulating a tiered system of multiple supports. A system of supports with increasing intensity ensures that no student will become part of the "forgotten 10 percent" Claresholm discovered when we looked more closely at our reading scores.

As a first step, we identified the effective interventions currently in place at the school and ensured that these interventions were available for everyone. This process helped us recognize gaps and identify new support structures that we needed. We developed a pyramid of interventions. Initial interventions included

## **Averages often hide what's happening in a school.**

- Additional time at lunch and recess for students to work with computer-based reading programs.

- Early literacy instruction focused on basic phonics for small groups of students needing extra help.

- Guided reading groups meeting during our schoolwide silent reading period.

### **A Culture of Hope and Perseverance**

These first three elements can bring powerful change to a school. But more important is establishing a culture of hope and perseverance and creating a sense of urgency that every student must succeed.

When a school sustains a culture of hope and a belief in the potential of each individual student, a "never say die" attitude emerges; teachers won't stop investigating how to support all students. We maintain hope and perseverance by taking collective responsibility and recognizing successes. When our kindergarten end-of-year assessments identified which students were not yet proficient, teachers in the higher grades became eager to work with these

students. We no longer heard such comments as, "It's unrealistic to expect that Jim will achieve at grade level. Giving him essential life skills is daunting enough!" and "Until her parents decide to read with her at home, she's never going to make it."

### **Celebration!**

Exceptional schools not only communicate that "we will achieve exceptional results," but also celebrate when they do. At Claresholm, every team meeting starts with celebrations of student progress. We rejoice when any student moves out of the *concern* category and applaud progress on common assessments. We celebrate large-scale achievements and individual successes during community planning afternoons, at which staff members, parents, and community members come to Claresholm to examine school data and collectively plan for the coming year.

Since Claresholm launched our reading improvement effort, the percentage of students scoring proficient or higher on our annual reading assessment has increased. The percentage of 3rd graders scoring at proficiency has remained high, and the percentage of students scoring at excellence has risen to 50 percent. In 2008, the tested reading level of 24 students in grades 1 through 3 increased to proficiency for their grade. Schoolwide, students' reading level has risen by an average of one-and-one-half years since we made these changes. By focusing on individual student progress, we have put excellence within reach of all. **EL**

<sup>1</sup>DuFour, R., DuFour, R., Eaker, R., & Many, T. (2006). *Learning by doing: A handbook for professional learning communities at work*. Bloomington, IN: National Educational Service.

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