

All Eyes on the Prize

How a school improved its Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) and Academic Progress Index (API) in reading/language arts, even for the English Learners (ELL), and so exited from “program improvement”

As Congress looks at reauthorizing the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB), recent articles and editorials reflect a continuing debate about public schools and “accountability” (“*Make ‘No Child’ Honest,*” Los Angeles Times, October 28, 2007; “*Simple steps would close racial gap, educator says,*” San Francisco Chronicle, November 14, 2007; “*Shaping the System That Grades City Schools*” New York Times, November 16, 2007). In general, when teachers, school support staff, administrators, and district personnel (from the superintendent to the testing supervisor) use the school day so that students make adequate progress in reading/language arts and mathematics, they are being accountable. But accountability has a more particular meaning under NCLB.

What does accountability mean under NCLB?

The benchmark by which all public schools in the United States are now evaluated is the Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) report, a fixture of the No Child Left Behind Act. All schools receive their AYP score sometime in the summer based on the results of a “determining test” administered the previous spring. Since 2002 the benchmarks have been precise: a fixed percentage of students must reach proficiency in reading and mathematics, no matter their ability to speak English, their status as receiving Special Education support, their family’s income and education level, the condition of their school’s facilities or its ability to provide them with adequate materials, or the quality of the determining test. In California, the target, starting with tests in spring 2008, will rise every year. For a school receiving federal Title 1 funds, failure to hit the rising AYP target, even in one sub-group, means the school has not made “adequate yearly progress” under NCLB and imposes a new status on the school — one that identifies it as needing “program improvement.”

How are schools doing?

It turns out that some schools are doing well. They continue to turn out plenty of well qualified applicants for high ranking universities. In addition, many schools are still able to hit their targets — just enough students can read at grade level and perform well enough on math exams to reach the yearly benchmark.

So, on the one hand, it seems NCLB’s approach to holding schools accountable works. The expected educational outcomes are clear. Schools have become very focused on achieving those outcomes. Students who need extra help are easy to identify in the reports. Clear consequences occur if the data show some students are being “left behind.”

On the other hand, despite NCLB, some schools chronically under-perform and, no matter how stringent or how lax the state standards and exams, a large group of students do not do well in school. Many drop out before they finish high school. NCLB says nothing about how to save those students or reach the stated benchmarks. It leaves

the nature, depth, and quality of any needed reforms entirely up to schools and school districts. Obstacles to success are more evident than ever, and for many schools, the hurdles they need to overcome seem to be increasingly difficult and more numerous. The way to achieve NCLB's goals is anything but clear.

What to do?

Measuring performance to ensure quality is not new. Business people have developed practical models to design excellent products and to ensure that the products are marketable. Those business models share a few basic elements: the people assigned to an undertaking understand the desired outcomes and have the tools needed to achieve those outcomes. Assessments — based on valid criteria that reliably measure progress towards the desired outcomes — are made at regular intervals. The team responsible for the undertaking analyzes the results of each assessment to determine what's working (and therefore needs to be maintained or enhanced) and what's not working (and therefore needs to be improved).

In the school setting, a similar strategy can help teachers and other school professionals achieve the accountability targets under NCLB. For “program improvement” schools that means reaching the point where students at the school, including all relevant student sub-groups, have met the AYP benchmarks for two consecutive years. In the San Jose Unified School District in San Jose, California, one “program improvement” school — Grant Elementary — used such a continuous improvement strategy as its major thrust to meet AYP goals.

For those who are interested in meeting the accountability challenge, the Grant Elementary process used to increase student achievement offers solutions. Ten factors are keys to Grant's progress over time — and it took nine years of relentless, concentrated effort to achieve success.

Where the school began:

From 1998 to 2007, the demographics of the school remained fairly constant and looked like those of many other “low performing” public schools in California. For example, in 2005-2006 of 589 K-5 students, 75% were eligible for Title 1 funds, 55% were second language learners (most of them speaking Spanish as their first language), and 96% were identified as part of an ethnic minority (again, predominately Hispanic). In addition, during the '05-'06 school year, 42% of the students moved into or out of the Grant Elementary attendance area.¹

Until the intense process to improve student achievement began in Fall 1998, student performance at Grant was uneven. However, because student performance was only measured by available State achievement tests before the reform effort began, and because the State tests were revised on several occasions, it was difficult to compare statistics from earlier periods to results after 1998. Nevertheless, during the initial year of the reform from 1998 to 1999, the results from new in-school assessments made at 8-week intervals were surprising: It appeared that Grant students had made a considerable leap during one school year. In September 1998, approximately 35% of the students were

judged to be reading at grade level; by Spring of that year approximately 55% tested to be reading at grade level.

At the same time, however, the school's Academic Progress Index (API) score for the year was a dismal 474 — with very poor scores in reading/language arts being the main contributing factor to the low score.²

Before 1998, the school had a reading text, a math text, science and social studies texts, kits for ELD instruction and written expression. But staff development to implement a consistent curriculum was, at best, haphazard.

Finally, reflecting a phenomenon all too frequent at low-performing schools, new teachers would come to Grant each year, spend a year or two learning about the school, then leave for another assignment. And the remaining core of teachers spent part of each year coaching and mentoring another set of new people.

What changed?

Factor 1: A reform is mandated, but the school is permitted to choose the model that seems best suited to its circumstances and needs. In addition, the staff agrees to wholehearted participation.

In the spring of 1998, a strong assistant district superintendent pulled ten elementary school principals together, all from struggling schools, and insisted that something fundamental had to be done to improve academic achievement at the schools, particularly in reading/language arts. Grant's principal was one of the ten. Each principal was told that his or her school had to select one of several reform models that research had shown could be effective and that the district would provide the funds needed to implement the model appropriately.

Each school was given time to conduct research on the various models. Teachers visited other schools that were using the models. They met with representatives of the organizations that had developed the models or were set up to help schools follow the models. They found relevant information on the internet or in journals or other publications.

In May 1998, Grant's teaching staff voted on the model they felt was best suited to Grant's circumstances and the one they were most interested in implementing. That vote served as a recommendation to the principal who was expected to endorse the selection, but only if she was committed to promoting and enforcing the model over time. After her endorsement, any teacher who was not enthusiastic about the model, or who was otherwise reluctant to participate, could opt out by requesting reassignment to another school, a request the district routinely granted. For new teachers, too, a new practice was instituted: they would be introduced to the program during an interview in advance of their assignment to Grant and asked if they were willing to commit to following the selected model. Only if they agreed to participate were they hired at the school.³

Factor 2: Before the new model is implemented a program of intensive staff development is initiated and staff development is made a regular and continuing function at the school.

In advance of the Fall term in 1998, Grant's principal and all of its teachers completed three days of intensive training on the new model, including the methods and techniques they would need to master to deploy it effectively. One teacher received extra training to serve as a full-time "facilitator" of the reform program, a position similar to the position of "literacy coach" some schools are beginning to create. Broadly defined, the facilitator's job is to provide continuous oversight of the program and to ensure that teachers receive all of the essential materials and resources they need. He or she also coaches teachers and offers other support aimed at maintaining a disciplined approach to following the new model and its curriculum.

To incorporate regular, continuing staff development into the school's routine operations, the principal and facilitator scheduled monthly staff development sessions and established relationships with qualified trainers who visited the school many times the first year and returned often during the years that followed. Their principal goal was to help ensure a consistent implementation of the new model. Today, even after the initial implementation effort has ended, annual training for new teachers, as well as continued coaching and mentoring for all teachers, are features of the program at Grant.

In addition to the staff development the teachers received, the principal and facilitator attended monthly workshops (generally with representatives of other schools that were implementing the same reform model) to discuss challenges, acquire new techniques, and learn more about the reform model and how best to manage its implementation. The lessons they learned informed subsequent staff development at the school.⁴

Through the emphasis on staff development, all teachers, new and experienced, were supported by particular training to implement the model and consistently use best practices for instruction. The aim was to ensure that all students received similar instruction so that as they improved and moved to another level, they were familiar with the instructional techniques and could concentrate on the new skills and information they were expected to master. As students improved, the teachers were provided with further training to match teaching strategies with the increased abilities of their students.

Factor 3: Evidence of success is routinely celebrated, good work is always celebrated, but every teacher is required to apply the model and follow "best practices."

The reform model chosen by Grant placed a strong emphasis on the celebration of student success during instructional time as well as small events for teachers.⁵ Celebrating success included time at staff and component meetings to share and salute improvement, retreats outside of school time to socialize and share success as well as new research, articles in school newsletters, and appreciation notes to teachers.

In addition, the reform model adopted at Grant put considerable emphasis on the well-researched teaching strategies that support student achievement. The administrator and facilitator continuously monitored the delivery of instruction, modeled its delivery when asked, and coached when needed. While walking through the classrooms, the principal identified teachers who demonstrated skill or effectiveness that could be shared with their colleagues—thus, not only cheering teachers on, but providing a model for peer support. Currently, in order to help students close to, but not quite 'at proficiency,'

the school has three people who coach those who need support on the best strategies that lead to student achievement.⁶

Finally, Grant Elementary has many computers. The school took advantage of the technology resource teacher who taught a group and who helped with the “best practices” strategy of consistent assessment. For example, she set up a computer testing program used with older readers and provided the computer assistance in classrooms for the reading incentive program (see Factor 8). Using the computers for 8 week testing provided timely print-outs for classroom and reading teachers so both knew exactly how well the students performed to compare with the in-class weekly test performance.

Factor 4: Starting small, one aspect of the school curriculum is selected as the primary focus.

Grant focused its reform effort on its reading/language arts program. However, as changes to support that aspect of the curriculum took hold, other unexpected benefits occurred. Within three years, many, though not all, teachers implemented some of the new teaching strategies in other curricular areas. Teachers also noted that the ability to read and get meaning from science and social studies texts increased. Even so, concrete goal setting and improving instruction in reading/language arts in the classroom remains the focus at Grant.⁷

Grant also learned that it had to be cautious about new initiatives from the outside since they carried the potential to disturb its strategy and distract the staff. For example in 1999-2000, the state insisted that “program improvement” schools undertake a self-study to see what the school needed to do to reach the API goals. On paper, the study seemed useful, but in practice it diverted attention from reading/language arts instruction, raised numerous side issues, and consumed valuable time.

Factor 5: All the credentialed teaching staff is used to implement the reform.

Grant was — and is — eligible for extra federal and state funds because of its demographics. Those funds allow for extra teachers to support classroom teaching. All of the extra teachers, even the librarian and Reading Recovery teacher, were deployed to support the school’s reform effort and were assigned to teach a reading group. In addition, during the initial years of the reform effort, the primary grades (K-3) were strictly limited to no more than twenty students to one teacher. With extra teachers as well as classroom teachers working with students, the primary reading groups were small. (In 2003 the grade 3 class size rose to 30:1.) Grant also received funds for tutors who, after training, were used to provide reading intervention for identified students.

Factor 6: Assessment tools, coordinated with the materials used to teach, are employed at regular designated intervals.

The reform model chosen at Grant Elementary offered assessments for reading/language arts. These assessments compared the improvement students were making to the curriculum being presented. The testing was consistent, every 8 weeks. This regular and relatively frequent assessment yielded two important results: students

who made gains were moved up to higher reading groups, and students who were identified as beginning to have difficulties were immediately paired with a tutor.

After the second year, when teachers and staff were more experienced with the model, the assessments helped reading teachers identify the needs of their groups for the next cycle of instruction. In addition, reading teachers learned to look at data (e.g. weekly story test data, summaries of work over an 8-week interval, and running records) to make changes in instructional strategies. For example, if the data supported it, they might reduce time spent on one topic in favor of more time on another, more difficult, topic.

In 2003, the district asked schools to use additional tests that closely followed the mandated reading series. The district modified these tests and eventually they were also used to make instructional decisions. Currently, careful assessment has proven useful to identify the gaps in skills that hinder student success.

Factor 7: Disaggregating test data and collaborating for analysis provides detailed information. The results help staff make instructional choices.

In the first year of changes at the school, the facilitator collected the assessments from the classes and used the results to regroup students. By the second year, the reading group teachers began to look at the results and help with some group changes. As the support trainers provided staff development and teachers became more knowledgeable about disaggregating test data, they collaborated to make instructional decisions. In January 2002, for example, the kindergarten teachers, working as a team, used assessment data to reorganize how their students were grouped for the brief reading time called for in the kindergarten program so that their strong students could move ahead and the less ready could get all the support they needed. The data in Fall 2002 for incoming first graders showed a significant improvement.

By the fifth year, additional personnel joined the staff from the Partners In Schools Innovation Foundation. They pushed the staff, providing more training and guidance in collaboration, to disaggregate test data and make instructional decisions. Grant School took two steps: 1) teachers who were willing to lead group work formed a leadership team and 2) Partners strongly reinforced the process of a “cycle of inquiry” to promote continuous school improvement.⁸

Factor 8: More components are added as the data indicate what is needed and the staff is trained.

Overall, reading/language arts scores improved, but there were exceptions. English Language Learners (ELL), for example, lagged, a concern of the “achievement gap” discussion. As a result, the principal and facilitator increased their attention on instruction for English Language Development (ELD) and, using evidence from the data they had collected, obtained added resources to expand and enhance the program. Enhancements relied on many of the same practices already in use throughout the reading/language curriculum and provided additional intensive staff development for all teachers. By the end of the following year improvements in assessment data validated the effectiveness of the effort and demonstrated, to funders and others, that the added expenditure on the program had been worthwhile.⁹

Similarly, the improvement in the number of students reading at grade level and above and the steady increase in students who completed their reading homework¹⁰ meant that students were using the library more often. The school found funds to purchase more library books and the school implemented an incentive program¹¹ to support the higher reading level books that students chose.

Factor 9: Other elements that affect student achievement are addressed immediately. The effort is tenacious.

While Grant had a school-wide policy for behavior standards and a plan for discipline, part of the staff development for the new model was organized around cooperative learning. From kindergarten on, at the beginning of each year the students reviewed strategies for helping each other learn. The strategies were the same from grade to grade and stressed all year. The emphasis changed from discipline to incentives for positive behavior.¹² Beginning the fourth year, for example, the principal held daily before-school assemblies, giving brief pep talks about the advantages of good reading and math skills and about pride in the school.

With special State funding, the school retained a full-time counselor and an outreach consultant. They oversaw attendance and absence, making sure that the rate of attendance was close to 95% each month, and also provided incentives to remedy daily tardiness, a common problem. Over time, chronic tardiness was reduced to about 60 students out of an average 550. The counselor and outreach consultant supported the School Study Team to provide help for students who had problems that interfered with their ability to learn, like poor eyesight or hearing loss, asthma or other chronic illnesses, behavioral problems, or homelessness.

Factor 10: Parent and school support staff involvement is valued highly.

Once the reform model was implemented, the school introduced a number of new programs to involve parents so they understood how instruction was being approached in the classroom and what the staff expected from the home. All workshops and meetings were held in English and Spanish. Regular groups met monthly to oversee the various budgets (SIP, LEP/NEP, Title 1). In addition, the principal reached out with a monthly “2nd Cup of Coffee” after students were dropped off in the morning to explain tests, show results, and share experiences. The news began to pass around the community.¹³

From the first day of reading instruction, teachers emphasized reading homework. Each day, students took home the child’s book and a form to be signed by the parent. The teacher checked it the next day. Parents were called if the child didn’t have the signature. With families moving in and out, it took three years before parents understood and the reading homework improved.

All support staff at the school encouraged students, asking what they had learned, what book they were reading. The school newsletters reported good news about achievement as well as regular news about holidays and events. Besides tutoring, school and community interventions played a key role in helping the students improve. In the

longest-lasting program, the outreach consultant organized the after school homework, reading/math practice, and sports program.¹⁴

In summer 2006, based on the results of State tests administered the previous spring, the Department of Education calculated Grant's API score at 752. It also announced an AYP for the school of 38.25% for English/Language Arts and 52.75% for mathematics, with all sub-categories exceeding the target percentage for proficiency, including ELL. Good news.

When results were announced the following summer, the API had dropped seven points to 745, but the school earned an AYP of 42.1% for English/Language Arts and 56.7% for mathematics, with all sub-categories exceeding the 'proficiency' target. Grant had met its benchmarks for two consecutive years and — nine years after the start of a steadfast struggle to help students raise their level of achievement — it was finally off the "program improvement" list.

All is not perfect, of course. Along with the entire state, Grant's teachers are worried about the English Language Learners who haven't moved out of the "basic" and "below basic" quintiles. If those students don't do better, the percentage of proficient English Learners won't meet the AYP target for 2008. Also, the targets will rise for all students each year from now on until 2014. Currently, as revealed by the percentages, not even half of all students are proficient readers. One thought is to increase the length of the school day, but that will require money and agreement by the school staff.

The teaching staff is strong, but a few can't seem to keep up and they haven't asked (or been required) to move to another school. New teachers join the staff each year. Constant coaching and staff development continues. Students keep moving in and out of the school which plays havoc with assessments as well as learning.

As many school observers state, the emphasis on reading/language arts, though valuable, limits time for science and social studies. Finally, the school has not been able to focus strongly on the improvement of written expression, the most difficult part of the language arts curriculum to teach and the most difficult to improve. Students may be able to recognize language conventions and correct grammar, but that is quite different from writing a cogent, thoughtful essay.

To Grant's advantage, research is available on the use of assessment and standards to foster student achievement.¹⁵ Grant is similar to many schools studied in the research. Like other successful schools highlighted in the studies, Grant has been persistent in the strategies used to achieve academic success, including coaching and collaboration. The techniques it adopted are replicable. They don't depend on a specific reading series or math series. And Grant applied the strategies consistently, in the way that complied with California's rigorous standards. Assessment was regular and reliable. Over nine years, students have learned what good readers do. They read words to get meaning from the books they choose. And, they talk about those books, not every moment, but the difference from nine years ago is apparent to everyone who still teaches in the school.

Despite imperfections at the school, one should be able to predict continued progress at Grant, making this one school accountable from now on under NCLB legislation. But, factors outside the school's control loom ahead. Of the many, three immediate concerns stand out.

First, the school must rely on consistent, reliable federal, state, and district funds over and above the monies set aside for every student. In the past those funds varied considerably from year to year and in the future, those funds depend on unpredictable changes in legislation.

Second, the school relies on support from parents. Unfortunately, "because of the relative paucity of social services in this country" (Shrag, 42) parents spend time looking for medical and dental services (or ask the school to help) which takes time away from supporting their child's academic success. If those parents who are undocumented leave the country or are deported, placing their school-age children with caretakers, any number of hurdles suddenly affect the school's ability to teach and then the student's ability to reach NCLB targets.

Third, the school bases all its strategies and resources on tests and targets that keep changing. For example, the state test changed from norm-referenced to criterion-referenced, each with different purposes and goals. The California CST has changed its format and kinds of questions more than once so that teachers, no matter how carefully they collaborate and analyze, are left to guess which of the innumerable standards are the current high stakes standards. In California the AYP targets change as statistics dictate. Establishing reliable and comparable assessments is a priority for individual schools. The revised NCLB legislation should authorize realistic benchmarks and maintain them.

Be aware. To reach the goal—every child a proficient reader, achievement for students in socio-economically disadvantaged areas, especially for English Language Learners, will continue to consume time and money and effort. And, all members of the school community, every single person, must hold on, keeping their eyes on the prize.

Claire Noonan, November 2007

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¹ The counselor at Grant School, Maria Chichizola (email, November 13, 2007), keeps track of the data. The average from 2000-2007 has been 41%. It is California state education law to accept and find a school for any child that moves into the district, no matter how short a time.

² Note that AYP benchmark scores were not available in 1999. Until 2001 'proficiency' meant that students were reading "on grade level" by grade 3 (Goals 2000). The AYP targets began in 2002 with NCLB legislation. Also, note that over time, analyzing in-school data, it became apparent that students must read a year above grade level to achieve a scaled score on the California state exams that indicated 'proficiency.' Last, in 1999 students were tested with the SAT-9 norm-referenced exam. By 2006 students took the CST criterion-referenced exam.

³ Of the several models reviewed, Grant School voted to implement Success For All, a whole school model designed for schools with students “at risk.” It emphasized early intervention for reading difficulties. It provided substantial reading/language arts training in curriculum and strategies, materials for K-1, materials to support the school’s reading series for grades 2-5, materials to support bilingual classrooms K-3, and training for other socio-economic disadvantaged school needs like attendance, tardiness, and home-related problems. As with all new reforms, the model depended on the quality of implementation.

⁴ Norma Murakami, principal 1996-2001 (phone call, November 17, 2007), stated that initial teacher training and support by the trainers each year was one of the most important factors in the implementation of the reform model. A Master’s degree research paper by Grant teacher Renee Johnson surveyed teachers’ perceptions of the first year of implementation. The conclusion was that teachers felt that they didn’t receive *enough* training before the program started. When the conclusion was broached with the trainers, they agreed, but also said that a new program is always difficult to start and with time the stress will decrease as expertise improves. The outcome was to cheer teachers on and to provide intensive support and mentoring.

⁵ “One of the chief jobs of the school administrator is to build trust and honor the good things that happen in the school.” (Janis Hubbs, principal 2001-2005, phone call, November 12, 2007).

⁶ Examples of best practices (consistently replicated strategies that link with achievement) used for pacing of instruction include allocation of the most time to instruction, student engagement in instruction, continuous progress in small steps by students at high levels of success, and monitoring student performance (Brophy and Good, 360-61).

⁷ Comment of Anna Moreland, facilitator and literacy coach, 2006-present, (email, November 13, 2007).

⁸ The strategy of a “cycle of inquiry” had been introduced the previous year, but Partners made it an interactive part of the school improvement process.

⁹ In 2003 for English Language Learners in grades 2-5, the proficiency was 7.5%. In 2005 the proficiency was 13.5% for grades 2-5. In 2006, 24.5%. There are many ELD programs to use; Grant implemented Guided Language Acquisition Development (GLAD).

¹⁰ Students in grades 2-5 choose a book they want to read for twenty minutes minimum daily after school or at home. Students in K-1 are provided with the little readers which they have studied on that day. After they finish that short book, they can read other easy readers that they choose.

¹¹ The school implemented Accelerated Reader, not as the school-wide reading program, but to support high level choices for students’ reading homework.

¹² The school employed many typical incentives: monthly award assemblies, lunch with the principal, Eagle Tickets for small things done well which could be redeemed for small prizes, books for students who never missed completing their reading homework (4 times a year), attendance rewards.

¹³ Other efforts have been made. The outreach counselor arranged Family Nights to bring parents into the school. Emphasis was made to ensure the maximum attendance at individual parent/teacher conferences. In the fourth year, the Kindergarten teachers organized a set of workshops for parents and students after the school day during the first two weeks of school to show how to support the child in the readiness activities that students would learn. The first grade teachers met with first grade parents at assemblies and classroom end-of-the-day workshops to emphasize and institutionalize reading homework.

¹⁴ Cecilia Barrie, principal 2005-present, (email, November 16, 2007) listed several valuable interventions. Funds were set aside to have teachers tutor after school. Sessions were held on Saturdays for high risk students. A two week extended year was implemented. In addition, an Eagle Eye Club was established

from the second year on. Students went to a classroom to read for 20 minutes after school and some years during part of the lunch recess if they hadn't returned their reading homework form. A few never came, but the vast majority used the time well. The increase in percent of reading homework completion made plain the students' belief that reading was important.

¹⁵ Three research studies often noted are "The 90/90/90 Schools: A Case Study" from The Leadership and Learning Center, "IV. Recommendations" from the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative, and "Whole-School Reform," an ERIC Digest report by Jim McChesney.

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