

Resilience Through Adversity

Like many districts, Indiana's Elkhart Community Schools faced a host of challenges due to the recession. So how did the district manage to thrive despite hard times?

Elkhart, Ind., once was known as the nation's recreational vehicle capital, manufacturing RVs by the thousands and feeding the demand of retirees and families who wanted an economical way to travel. It was a working-class community, with about 13,000 students in its schools, and proud of its Midwestern values and work ethic.

In recent years, however, a different sort of notoriety came to Elkhart. Hard-hit by the recession, the town was twice visited by President Obama during the

2008 campaign because it had one of the nation's highest unemployment rates. Prior to the 2008 economic meltdown, the number of low-income and second-language students soared and student achievement, particularly at the high school level, languished.

As the economy grew worse, many expected student results to plummet. Instead, the opposite happened. In 2009, reading and math achievement improved at every grade level, the high school failure rate was cut in half, and Elkhart was named the most improved system in Indiana.

The 'miracle' of hard work

The journey toward systemic improvement began during the 2005-06 school year, despite some of the most adverse economic conditions in the nation.

"For a long time, we tended to attribute the academic problems of our students to factors we could not control," Superintendent Mark T. Mow says. "It was clear that we needed a better focus as a district."

Mow said the most significant step was when the president of the teachers union signed a joint letter with him that committed to "three key areas of learning for every teacher: data teams, effective teaching, and standards."

"We have now reached the 100-percent level, so that all staff members

have a common base of knowledge and use common language for teaching and learning," Mow says. "Before, we had data but did not really collaborate."

It's particularly interesting to note that the majority of professional development was accomplished within the district by its own cadre of teacher leaders.

Changing the conversation

Mow concedes that Elkhart's journey toward improved achievement certainly is not finished, but he says the conversation with teachers and administrators has changed dramatically over the past three years.

"I'm most gratified by the questions we are now getting from teachers about student achievement," he says. "The questions are focused on adult behaviors—our teaching and leadership—more than student behaviors. We're all asking what we need to do as adults to make a difference. That's a huge change of culture for us."

Changing professional conversations and cultures that took decades to establish seems like an overwhelming challenge for many school systems. John Hill, Elkhart's director of curriculum and instruction, says the district started by systematizing "our collection, interpretation, and use of data to make better instructional decisions."

"What we needed was a system to actively use data," Hill says. "We took this from the theoretical realm into actions that are nearly universal across the entire system."

How Elkhart did it

One remarkable thing about Elkhart is the broad nature of the improvements.



Ontario's Minister of Education Michael Fullan has noted that many educational systems have isolated examples of school improvement, but it's rare to find examples of genuine systemic improvement where you have measurable gains at every grade level in every school.

Here are some keys to Elkhart's success:

■ **Resilience in recession:** In 2007 and 2008, Mow says, "the economy fell in around our ears. But young people were still growing and learning. The system in place is responsive to student growth and achievement, regardless of external factors. It's not about the economy; it's what students can demonstrate in their learning. The economy has certainly had an impact on the number of families in economic need. But we have also seen a great outpouring of generosity. This year, for example, the school district's staff hit a record high in its giving to United Way."

■ **Reducing secondary failure:** One of the most important elements of Elkhart's success has been reducing middle school and high school failure rates. Hill says the district starts "addressing the ninth-grade failure rate

before students leave elementary school. We have identified specific indicators for fifth-grade students that require extra support, and we begin it immediately, before failure occurs. We especially focus on the transition years, from elementary to middle school, and from middle school to high school. In ninth grade, we use an academy model that gives each student individualized attention to address their needs long before they risk failing a class."

■ **Role of the board:** Mow estimates that board members include discussions of student data in more than 75 percent of their meetings. That includes both individual school and district-level data, focusing on a host site each month.

The board agreed to pay teachers as part of their contract for participation in data teams. Mow says the payment is "only for one team meeting per month, but what has happened by formalizing this as part of the contract is that teachers now meet much more frequently because they see the value of that investment of time."

Also, the board has remained relentlessly focused, revising its own goals so

that board policy is congruent with the expectations of teachers and school administrators.

The road ahead

Despite the infusion of Race to the Top funds that some schools will receive, most U.S. districts face long-term structural financial challenges. Property values have declined, and as a result, districts that depend on property taxes must increase tax rates just to maintain level revenues.

In the current political and economic environment, that is unlikely. Therefore, almost every system in the nation must consider how to achieve its goals of academic improvement in the face of a deteriorating economic environment.

They might look to Elkhart, Ind., for inspiration and ideas. ■

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