

**Clear goals and transparent accountability:
A public campaign for school improvement**

**A Presentation to the Minnesota Association of
School Administrators**

**Fall Conference 2009
Duluth, Minnesota**

Richard Green Scholar 2009

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Background

Three years ago, after 10 years serving as superintendent of a rural school district, I became superintendent of a suburban school district. As I suspect is most often the case, I was hired because my thoughts and beliefs about education and leadership made a connection with school board members. Specifically, in regard to the mission of education I believe that:

1. **“Schools should be without holes.”**

Every child deserves an education that virtually guarantees their success in learning the basic knowledge and skills every one of us needs to be a successful and contributing member of society. Students come to us in such a fantastic wide-array of preparation for success that we must continually adjust our system to meet their needs for this goal to be realized. The fact that all students are not successful, and that this lack of success occurs more frequently in certain populations, creates the achievement gap. I believe this occurs not because we don't know what to do, but because we don't practice what we know must be done universally across our system.

2. **“Schools should spend just as much time helping students develop their strengths as overcoming their weaknesses.”**

We are all ultimately successful because of our strengths, the things we are passionate about doing. In their work on this concept, the authors of Now, Discover Your Strengths, 2001, Marcus Buckingham and Donald Clifton indicate that our area of greatest potential growth comes not from our weakness, things we are not good at, but from our strengths, things for which we have passion. Every child deserves to know their strengths, deserves to know we recognize their strengths, and deserves to spend a significant portion of their school career developing those unique talents and abilities that they recognize

allows them to add worth to the world.

3. **“Every student deserves to be part of something great.”**

Whether this is performing on the stage or in a band, being part of a great debate team or athletic team, being part of a club working to better the environment, or writing for the school newspaper. For each of us who has been part of something great remember it and cherish it. The experience becomes part of our internal motivation to excel, to support others, to become part of things greater than our self. Providing a comprehensive variety of opportunities for students, and working to get every student involved is as important as any part of our mission as school systems.

Now, I like this set of beliefs. They make sense to me, motivate me, and give me lots of stories to tell. And I find that a high percentage of people are motivated by these beliefs as well. The point of this paper, the reason that these beliefs are merely “background,” is that this project is not about picking the right beliefs, it is about how to give a good and worthwhile set of beliefs life and breath throughout an organization. Two longstanding theories about educational systems change help me organize my thoughts, plans and strategies to get things done:

1. **“If changing school systems was easy, straight forward, based only on developing an excellent plan and telling people what to do, we would all be great!”**

School systems are blessed with many people who are great at planning, organizing and communicating, and people who are terrific at strategic planning are close at hand to all of us, but yet significant, system-wide improvement is as elusive as ever.

Einstein is widely reported to have said two things that expand and filter my

thinking and actions in regard to how to authentically produce positive change. “No problem can be solved from the same level of thinking that created it,” and “If at first an idea does not sound crazy, than there is no hope for it.”

And so here is crazy idea number one from the work of Margaret Wheatley in her book, Finding our Way, 2005. “Start with the assumption that people, like all life, are creative and good at change. . . Start with the understanding that leaders can’t direct people to excellence.” The kind of organization Wheatley envisions would be “self-organizing.” The key is to engage everyone toward a worthy purpose that builds organizational clarity and identity, and engages their ability to create. This only happens if this sense of identity is nurtured and set free by boundless opportunities for all members of the system to build relationships through meeting, learning and planning together, in a system that provides universal and intuitive access to information.

Wheatley puts it this way, “It is information, unplanned, uncontrolled, abundant, superfluous – that creates the conditions for the emergence of fast, well-integrated, effective responses” and “the more access to one another, the more possibilities there are.” And if these two conditions hold, in the context of a true organizational identity through clarity of purpose and values, with the understanding that each and everyone of us has strengths, talents and abilities that allow us to make unique contributions to that identity, greatness is as natural in our world as life.

And so I believe it is not the few good decisions I might make, or a principal might make, or a school board might make that creates a powerful, responsive organization. It is the thousands of decisions made by every staff member, and for that matter, every student, parent, and community member that can lead us to be great organizations that truly serve all students excellently.

2. “Schools are more a reflection of their communities than communities are a reflection of their schools.” Our school systems are, to use a science term, buffered, buffered to remain as they are. Our communities have an expectation of what their schools are like, who they serve, how they do their work, how they teach kids, what they teach kids. Anytime we as systems try to change, especially when we start to change, the larger context of our community, our parents, our students, our community leaders, political system, and even our colleagues in neighboring school districts push back. If they don’t like, understand, believe in or value the change, and especially if they feel threatened by the change, they make sure in a thousand subtle, and often not so subtle ways, that our system moves back to the acceptable confines of their expectations.

The good news to this rather bleak sounding assessment is that the opposite is probably also true. If a community comes to believe in a change, to hunger for that change, to rally them self around the change, the change will happen. The natural momentum of our school system would be nothing compared to the momentum of our entire community. Each step we make in the direction of their desire would bring the kind of positive reinforcement that leads to a positive feedback loop for our system, a feedback loop working for us, not against us.

Superintendent Mark Wolak in his Richard Green Scholar paper, states that:

“This paper proposes that school superintendents must provide more leadership to advance the profession and improve public education. To accomplish this, school leaders must first adopt evidence-based practices as an effective means for improving performance. Second, we must share what we learn through implementation with other superintendents and education leaders to increase our effectiveness and the outcomes for all students. Third, we must use that evidence to stem the tide of errant political fixes and the rhetoric of crisis that harms public education.”

Inherent in this statement seems to be the notion that just putting a great system in place, making all the best decisions for the best reasons, monitoring and adjusting based on results is not enough. We must communicate to the larger context, educate and inform ever-wider circles of context to truly move the success of our overall system.

The work we have been doing in my current school district accepts this idea, and puts in play the belief that our current level of communication and engagement is a whole order of magnitude too small for what ultimately becomes the controlling variable of positive change. And if we have laid the proper groundwork in our community, and the change we desire matches the change they want, change becomes a natural process, full of joy and fulfillment.

Context

These efforts have been taking place in the West Saint Paul, Mendota Heights, and Eagan Area Schools, a first ring suburban school district along the southern edge of St. Paul. District #197, as it is affectionately called, serves 4500 students in eight school buildings, 5 elementary schools, 2 middle schools, and one high school, Henry Sibley. One unique aspect of this school district is the wealth of private schools located within its boundaries, and near by, that have attracted, for decades, nearly 40% of students living inside its boundaries.

Another, much newer aspect of this school district is a rapidly changing population, as it becomes much more racially and culturally diverse, with large increases in children qualifying for free or reduced lunch and an explosion in the number of languages spoken in the home. Currently, four of our schools have minority populations of over 50%, three with poverty levels above 50%, with one having 40% of its students with English as a second language.

As result of these changes, and the fact that we as a school district had not been changing fast enough to address the changing needs, a greater and great percentage of our schools, and the students within them, were not finding success. We needed to markedly change our capacity and rate of change.

It is within this context of a rapidly changing community, an ever increasing variety of cultural backgrounds and needs of its learners and families, necessitating changes to curriculum, instruction, programs and activities, and a very clear, and very public accountability through No Child Left Behind, that we engage our community to do more than “find out what they want,” but to lead them to what they truly should expect from us.

Problem

With so much rhetoric and noise inundating citizens and communities about what the mission of schools should be, much of it centered on minimalist ideas like “back to basics,” and narrow standards such as those that make up No Child Left Behind, both representing concepts that are far from what is needed to meet the demands of our current age and global economy, not to mention the future, it is virtually impossible to make wide scale systems change that truly prepares children for their future and not our past;

and when even the work of very popular researchers, writers and speakers, such as Thomas Friedman and Daniel Pink, seem to still not connect parents, communities, leaders and politicians to the idea that their schools need to change substantially, possibly even becoming unrecognizable in comparison to the schools they attended;

how can we as individual school systems possibly bring our community to the point where they, on the whole, welcome and even hunger for the change we need to serve the promise of every student being successful and prepared for future success for themselves, their family, their community, our nation and world?

Initial Concept

In my first 18 months as superintendent of the West Saint Paul, Mendota Heights and Eagan Area School District, we ran two levy campaigns. The 2006 campaign failed resoundingly. Given our demographics, that failure was not surprising: 40% of the school-aged children in our district attend private schools, only 13% of district households even have K-12 students, plus we have a substantial elderly population and large pockets of extreme poverty. Faced with both an expiring levy and the need for a substantial increase in levy authority to avoid draconian cuts, we devoted considerable time and energy to learning how to run a successful levy campaign. Hundreds of community members were marshaled to call, to write, to walk, to distribute, and to share our key messages. I personally spoke at 50-plus meetings ranging from local service organizations to well-publicized town halls. By the first Tuesday in November, virtually every resident in our district knew about the levy and how the results of the election would impact education in the communities we serve. The levy renewal and a substantial increase passed by a margin of 58-42%, the exact reverse of the previous year's failure.

The moment the levy cycle ended, our district's energies returned to setting clear, measurable goals and developing a new strategic plan to guide school improvement. As we immersed ourselves in that process, I was struck by the odd fact that our public learns the most about us during our levy cycles, not our school improvement cycles. While school districts generally involve citizens as part of the strategic planning process, those citizens are just a small, representative sample of the whole community. Their work, while published, is rarely known, appreciated, or understood. But when we are raising money, we plan a process to reach every citizen through campaigns that deeply engage hundreds of citizens who themselves connect with dozens of other community members.

Levy campaigns and strategic plans may seem like strange bedfellows, but our thought was to meld these two professional activities. What if we developed goals that were so

clear and compelling, so free of jargon and acronyms, that the entire community could understand them? What if the measurements for those goals provided easily accessible and completely transparent accountability? What if the goals, measurements and strategies went far beyond politically motivated measurements and truly addressed school reform? And then, what if we took our goals to the community and tried just as hard to reach all citizens, to engage them, to educate them, to get them to partner with us, as we do when running a levy campaign?

As these ideas were forming, I reflected on the work of the 2007 Richard Green Scholar, Mark Wolak of Mahtomedi, who addressed linking effective research with effective implementation to improve schools, including the need to measure progress with a balanced scorecard and increase public support. I wanted to build on his work by providing a blueprint for how gaining public support, and even public pressure, to make the changes we want to make can be done. The first part of our process was the development of clear, measurable goals based on research and best practices for preparing students for a future we are beginning to imagine based on the work those such as Friedman, and Pink, along with the initial belief system about what schools and education are for that I brought to this position. The second part describes how a “goals campaign” was used engage the community and increase public support ahead of changes that ultimately needed to occur, with a cataloging of the changes that did occur. Next, some of the early results, both in terms of student achievement, and in regard to public perceptions obtained through a very comprehensive scientific survey will be presented. Then finally, some thoughts about where we go from here will be presented.

And so in summary, since our current school system is, for the most part, a reflection of our community, real reform can only happen on a system-wide basis when the reform is welcomed, expected, and championed by a majority of the community. The idea of providing schools to meet the needs of our students’ future, not our past, will only happen if our community knows what this means and believes it to be true. And so our job as educational leaders is not just to design this school for our children’s future, but also to lead our entire community into wanting it, expecting it, and being willing to pay for it.

The objective of this paper is to encourage superintendents and other educational leaders to work together to help their constituents see the need for a new educational model that relies less on testing and more on preparing students to succeed as citizens in a global economy. Together, I believe we can energize whole communities to drive the change that needs to happen.

Imagine the power of this kind of campaign if the outcome is engaging our communities in authentic school improvement. Not only would the improvement be more successful, but the next levy would hardly need a campaign.

Clear, Compelling, Measurable

Because the theme of this paper is much less about the “what” than the “how,” I will only briefly describe the goals and scorecards and their development. The process we used was typical for an effort as important as this with cycles of input from the community and staff as the school board and administrators developed what ultimately became called our district’s “Strategic Directions and Vision Scorecards.” This was a term borrowed from TeamWorks International, the consultants brought in by the school board in the later stages of development of our goals and accountability process. They provided a great service to the district and definitely improved the end product.

When it became apparent that our new school district goals would have elements quite unique to us, including a goal area that could drive us to substantially change the work of our school, we knew that the “campaign was on,” and so a massive school improvement campaign began, much as our levy campaign began when we came to the realization that we had no other option to balance our budget short of draconian cuts.

One of the unexpected benefits of this campaign, especially through the positive response we received from our parents and various community organizations and leaders, was that it made us bolder, even more willing to dream big and plan big. This boldness became a

common theme throughout these efforts.

But first, a bit about the what. Our school board has adopted five Strategic Directions, each measured and tracked through its own balanced scorecard. The first two scorecards define our educational program and portend the need to aggressively communicate with our community to bring a critical mass of understanding that will, at the least, allow us to carry out the necessary changes, and at the best, bring the community to the point where they expect us to make the changes we need to make.

Our Scorecard A, Increasing Measurable Achievement for Every Student and Subgroup, measures not only total achievement, but also growth of every student and the learning gap of all subgroups, both socio-economic and ethnic. The best, most authentic way to address the learning gap is to assure that all students learn. If every child meets and exceeds expectations, the gap measured by this standard disappears. But the effort this takes is a very different effort than we have done as a system before; an effort that stretches what our community typically sees as the role of “school.” This effort requires significant extra time and support for struggling students, efforts that provide a wide array of direct support to families, efforts that provide even such things as mental health services to students. It was also clear that we needed to make significant changes in the starting time of every one of our schools to better match the schedules of working families and the ability for the school to address a student’s need for extra time. These changes can all raise eyebrows, raise emotions, and raise strong opposition.

Our Scorecard B, “Finding and Nurturing the ‘Spark’ in Each Student that will Lead to Personal Success,” is meant to be a bold statement that school is about more than just meeting standards. No matter how high a standard is set, if everyone is expected to meet it, by definition it is a minimum standard. People generally do not find success simply because they have met a minimum standard (although not meeting that minimum can hold you back). We all, including students, most readily find success, or are propelled toward success, through our strengths, things we have a passion for, things that give us joy. While almost everyone is drawn to this idea, the changes that occur in schools

necessary to make this universal, to assure every student's "spark" is nurtured, can change priorities of how we as a system spend our time and resources. Many of these changes look strangely non-academic and could predictably lead to parents and community questioning strongly our actions, unless they have been brought to the point where they understand why we are making different decisions than they have seen in public schools before.

School Improvement Campaign

What if your daughter's education was tailored to her unique strengths, talents and abilities and gave her joy?

This question embodies our campaign in less than 5 seconds. It engages people and changes their thinking without immediately challenging their long held beliefs about what schools should "really be about."

Below is the actual school improvement campaign we planned for our initial implementation of this theory of treating school improvement as a campaign in its initial form from December, 2007. This was a public document.

Mapping and Measuring Success

A four-year plan for accelerated excellence and transparent accountability

Introduction

Our district's mission is to provide a supportive and challenging learning environment that assures lifelong success and high achievement for **all** community learners. To make sure our energies and resources are focused on accomplishing that mission, we are

developing a four-year plan to map and measure success. The plan is driven by our commitment to the community to provide an excellent education for all students and to hold ourselves accountable for results.

Most people equate long-range “strategic planning” with a lot of work that ends up gathering dust on a shelf. We must be perfectly clear from the beginning that this project will be highly visible and serve as a constant reminder of what we are trying to accomplish and why. In addition to strategies for meeting our goals, the plan must contain measurable, data-driven outcomes. Progress will be measured on “dashboard dials” that are updated regularly on our website, displayed at each building, and reported annually to the entire community.

In the coming weeks and months, we will be gathering insights and input from staff and community members, tapping their wisdom and expertise to build a road map and set targets for meeting our goals for the 2008-09 through the 2011-12 school years.

Goals

#1: Measurable achievement for every student

Although our schools have had and continue to have many stellar accomplishments and results, we also have holes. Those holes are most evident on the MCA-II reading and math tests that measure proficiency and document achievement gaps for subgroups of students. **Our most basic goal is measurable achievement for every student, regardless of heritage or family circumstances.**

By measurable, we mean proficiency on standardized tests in reading, writing, math and science. MCA-II scores and GRAD results must be factored into measuring this goal, but considerable weight should be given to Measures of Academic Progress (MAP), the assessments that measure growth in individual student learning and highlight areas of deficiency. As we move toward the goal of proficiency for every student (required by 2014 under NCLB), we must act quickly to identify students who are having difficulty in

the general education classroom and implement strategies such as differentiation and Response to Intervention (RtI) to ensure success for all.

Front-line responsibility for meeting this goal belongs to the classroom teachers who must identify struggling students and try individual strategies for overcoming deficiencies, including referrals for Targeted Services and, when necessary, Special Education Services. By incorporating MAP and other assessments into the measurement of this goal, we can make allowances for students who are not yet proficient but are making measurable progress. Building administrators must be responsible for supporting teachers and ensuring no student in their school falls between the cracks.

#2: Acceleration of widespread excellence and individual strength development

Standard assessment systems, by their very nature, provide only a limited measure of student performance. Of the seven categorized intelligences first described by Howard Gardner and now widely accepted as learning style models, only the linguistic and logical-mathematical are even assessed. Some of the students whose strengths lie in other realms (musical, visual-spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, intrapersonal or interpersonal) struggle mightily on standardized tests. Although our system places great importance on these two-dimensional tests, one-size-fits-all assessments do not measure how well we are preparing students for successful lives as productive members of society. **To become a truly great school district, our most important goal must be the acceleration of widespread excellence and individual strength development with multiple opportunities for students to find their own individual greatness.**

This three-dimensional goal embodies the development of those skills, abilities, knowledge, passions, attitudes and values that lead to a successful life. To accomplish this creative and individualized goal, we must do more than prepare and enroll students in rigorous Advanced Placement classes. We must have high expectations for all students and provide a challenging learning environment that includes differentiated instruction in classrooms where multiple ability levels are represented. We must teach to students'

strengths as well as their weaknesses. We know technology helps engage students in learning and is crucial in preparing them for the future. We know physical activity and proper nutrition help children learn. We know opportunities in music, art, languages, sports, councils, clubs, hands-on vocational and technical training, and service to others all provide pathways to increased student engagement and, for many, are the keys to school success that make learning relevant.

The bigger questions concern strategies for accelerating and measuring excellence and individual strength development. As a starting point, here are some possible measurements:

High School

- Co-curricular participation
- Involvement in a performance (music, drama, art show, sports)
- Volunteer service in the school
- Volunteer service in the community
- Documented development of student strengths
- Graduation rate
- ACT participation
- ACT scores
- PSAT participation
- PLAN scores
- Advanced Placement (AP) and College in the Schools participation
- AP exam scores
- Exceeding expectations on assessments (MCA-II, MAP)

Middle School

- Co-curricular participation
- Involvement in a performance or competition
- Volunteer service
- Documented development of student strengths

- EXPLORE scores
- Exceeding expectations on assessments (MCA-II, MAP)
- Participation in accelerated courses
- Participation in meaningful projects (example: Diversity Fair exhibit)
- Success in accelerated courses

Elementary School

- Participation in meaningful projects (example: Science Fair)
- Involvement in performances and exhibits
- Documented development of student strengths
- Participation in enrichment programs and activities (example: Chess Team)
- Exceeding expectations on assessments (MCA-II, MAP)

#3: Focused, transparent stewardship of resources

Because we must support state and federal mandates while coping with the vagaries of education funding, we need constant vigilance to ensure the district's resources are aligned with our goals and to provide responsible stewardship of public funds. This means we must continue to increase the amount of learning per unit of investment. It means regularly evaluating programs for viability and continued funding and eliminating ineffective and inefficient programs. It means constantly looking for ways to streamline operations. And it means holding leaders responsible for supporting learning in all its forms and providing a transparent accounting of how resources are spent. **Quite simply, our goal is to provide focused, transparent stewardship that increases learning and accelerates excellence.**

To help stabilize and even increase funding, one of the priorities in support of this goal is to measure our attractiveness as a school system based on K-12 student enrollment. We need to develop and implement a comprehensive marketing program that helps schools recruit and retain students through better communications and customer service. We need to bring in additional resources, including identifying and securing grants to fund innovation and developing partnerships with organizations that support our learning

goals. We need to maintain an appropriate fund balance. Other possible measures of our efficiency include additional energy savings, satisfactory financial audits, and data related to focused stewardship, such as cost-effective, efficient support for enhanced technology.

Finally, we need to develop a measure that can document how resources are spent to maximize student success. This measure should not be based on common beliefs, but rather on solid evidence. For instance, it is commonly believed that dollars spent in the classroom are the most effective use of resources, yet evidence shows money spent to better support and direct classroom practices can improve student outcomes more than simply hiring more classroom staff. Such a measure might compare revenue per student, the cost of hiring staff, and the needs of our student population with the growth measured by goals one and two.

#4: Positive, respectful learning climate

We want our schools to provide safe, welcoming, respectful environments where employees want to work, students want to learn, parents see themselves as partners, and the community feels supportive and proud of its public schools. **Our goal is to continue building the kind of positive learning climate that characterizes a professional, respectful place to work and learn.**

Although organizational climates can be difficult to quantify, we believe improvements in this area are vital to ensuring the success of our other goals. The best way we know to measure climate is to ask the primary stakeholders for their assessments, so one measurement tool will be surveys of students, parents and staff. For example, employees could be asked if they know how their roles and individual goals line up with the larger goals of the district, if they feel supported in their work, if they have high expectations for themselves as well as their students. Parents could be asked if they feel welcome in their child's school, how they partner with the school by supporting learning at home, how safe they feel their child is at school, and how they rate customer service in our district. In addition to a survey, data on attendance and discipline could provide

additional measures that assess the climate for students. Measures related to staff development, staff diversity, and community engagement could also be developed.

Stakeholder Input

Clearly, we will need substantial stakeholder input to develop strategies to meet our four district goals and increase engagement of staff, students, families, community members, employee unions, and community organizations. This document is designed to provide a starting point to guide the upcoming discussions. The suggested timeline below indicates the process that will be followed to gather input, develop strategies, and set targets by which to measure progress.

Initial Discussions (December/January)

School Board

District Leadership Team

Instructional Programs Committee

Marketing/Communications Committee

Result: Gather input and insights to focus work sessions with staff at each of our buildings.

Staff Discussions (January/February)

Pilot Knob (Jan. 9, 7:30 a.m.)

Mendota (Jan. 15, 8:30 a.m.)

Moreland

Garlough Environmental Magnet School

Somerset

Friendly Hills

Heritage

Henry Sibley

Result: Gather input and insights and buy-in to better focus community presentations and to guide additional building-level discussions with the school's principal. In some cases, these discussions might be better focused if they are organized by grade-level and/or department team.

Community Discussions (February/March)

Town Hall meetings

Parent meetings (PTAs and/or by invitation)

Older Adults Advisory Council and other interested persons

Mendota Heights City Council

West St. Paul City Council

Chamber of Commerce

Commercial Club

Public school detractors who are vocal in wanting more accountability for results (Mr. Fisher has offered to organize this group)

Leaders of local faith-based organizations

Other interested groups

Result: Gather input and insights that contribute to a plan that will be embraced by all stakeholder groups.

Complete draft of goals, strategies, and data-driven measurement targets (April)

This draft will be presented to stakeholder groups and final adjustments will be made.

Goal: Final draft approved in May so implementation strategies can be settled, interactive dashboard dials designed, and loose ends taken care of in time to launch at the start of the 2008-09 school year.

Improvement Initiatives

One of measures of success in campaigning in our community with regard to school

improvement is the capacity and rate of change we are willing to achieve. As one small school district, below is a list of the major change we were able to successfully institute in conjunction with our community, parent and staff campaign.

Started an ALC (Alternative Learning Program) in the District

Began Targeted Service in 7 Schools

Kindness Project in 5 Schools (revolutionary approach to counseling in the elementary)

GEMS (Garlough Environmental Magnet School)

Adopted Strategic Roadmap, Scorecards, and Governance Policies

Complete Change of Start and End Times for Every School

“Universal” Application of (District Way):

PC to Mac & Anytime/Anywhere Access - 2X capacity/10X expectation

District Adopted Curriculum

Classroom Differentiation

Data Directed Decision-Making

PLC (Professional Learning Community)

CGI (Cognitively Guided Instruction – Math)

RTI (Response to Intervention)

PLP (Personal Learning Plan – for every student)

ATPPS Plan (Q-Comp)

AYP Plan

Sparks! (Finding the strengths, talents and abilities in every student that will bring them success).

Results

Besides our ability to implement change, we looked at two areas of measurable results to determine whether our school improvement campaign improved our school improvement efforts, a large, scientific survey of our community, and a variety of student achievement

measures.

Result 1 – Community Survey

In the Spring of 2009, Dr. Bill Morris from Decision Resources, Inc., did a comprehensive community survey involving 550 residents. Below are the applicable results from this survey.

- An unusually high 63% are at least “somewhat familiar” with District 197 Public Schools; twenty-four percent are “very familiar” with the District.
- Residents have solidly positive perceptions of specific aspects of the School District. Fifty-one percent agree that “during the last couple of years, the District 197 Public School District Administration and Board have spent tax money effectively and efficiently.” This level of agreement is 11% higher than the current statewide norm.
- By a 55%-22% margin, residents agree that “I am satisfied with District 197's decision-making process of adopting new policies and making financial judgments.” The five-to-two ratio is well above the Metropolitan Area suburban norm.
- By a very solid 61%-12% margin, residents agree “District 197 Public Schools are held accountable enough for the quality of education provided to their students.”
- By a high 68%-16% margin, residents agree “District 197 does a good job of communicating important issues and decisions to the residents of this area.”
- By a 74%-7% margin, residents agree “I am proud of District 197 Public Schools and would recommend them to friends.” The ten-to-one ratio is among the highest in the Metropolitan Area.

- And, by a stunning 80%-8% margin, residents agree “Our community receives a good value from its investment in local public schools.”

Result 2 – Student Achievement

First, before presenting graphical representations of our progress in regard to student achievement, I am including a recent article penned for the TPAC Times (a newsletter for our older adults) that tries to put in words the progress we have made academically as a school district. This communication represents more than just information, it is also one more message moving our community toward a fuller understanding of schools and what it means for every child to be successful. It will be made pervasively available to our community through podcasts, websites, blogs, electronic newsletters, listserves, news outlets, and every other media medium we can come up with.

A second article is in the works that once again invites our community to invest themselves, their resources, and to communicate high expectations of us that we work to develop the “Spark” in every child. The first line of this second article is all that is written, but it is a good one. “What if your child’s education was tailored to her strengths, talents, and abilities and her joy?”

Starting on the next page is the first article describing student achievement.

Following this are tables that portray incredible systems growth across every one of our Title 1 schools, significant improvements in regard to student attendance and student discipline, and the targeted services enrollment and hours that were made possible through the change in starting and ending times in all of our schools. We began improvement efforts mainly with our Title 1 schools, because first, they were our schools that were

having the lowest percentage of students successful, no matter how success is measured, but also because they had all received “failing” labels in regard to AYP and NCLB and were facing sanctions. And no matter how excellent their work was, how great the learning was, how well they met so many needs of their students in every classroom, the failing label overshadowed it all and huge like and angry cloud, paling their work and the success of their children.

Riding the Wave

by Jay Haugen

September 15th, 2009

Schools throughout our nation are on a quest; a quest to assure that every student is academically successful. We hear every day about a school that overcame some perceived challenges in their student population to achieve great success. While these stories of individual school success are inspiring, the real transformation to achieving academic success for all students cannot happen with just a school here and there doing great things. At some point, such success needs to become system-wide. When this happens, we will be better able to identify what organizational structures and practices best promote success in every school. Clearly, there is no one-size-fits-all plan for every school in the country, but here in District 197 we believe we are on to something great and have begun riding a “wave of success.”

When we talk about student achievement, most often the conversation is about test scores, even though we believe there is more to student success than test scores. Nonetheless, to be a true break-the-mold district, we must have each and every one of our schools significantly outperform their state peers. To attain this dream of success for all students, we have opted to start at the beginning, with our elementary schools, to build a wave of success that can be sustained through all of our schools and grades.

This year, our elementary school students outperformed their Minnesota peers by six percentage points, with 83% of elementary students meeting or exceeding expectations in reading and math. Two years ago, our scores just missed being “average” and now they are well above state norms. The increase was due primarily to giant gains in our three Title 1 schools (schools with high levels of poverty) where students out-performed state expectations by over 20 percentage points. In addition, our other two elementary schools continue to post achievement levels in the 90% range. Three key factors in our success at the elementary level were:

- *We started our elementary schools earlier in the day in order to provide struggling students an extra two hours of instruction at the end of the regular school day and then provide them with a bus ride home. The cost of this after-school program was covered by additional state funding our district is now able to access.*
- *Second, last year was the first of a three-year, \$1.2 million federal grant that provides a full-time counselor in every one of our elementary schools. The counselors worked to provide a more welcoming and safe learning environment for all students. They also help students deal with individual problems that may impede their ability to learn.*
- *Third, each staff member focused intently on data and results and held high expectations for every child. We tracked progress student-by-student, aligned district curriculum and instructional strategies, and met regularly as a team to plan for success.*

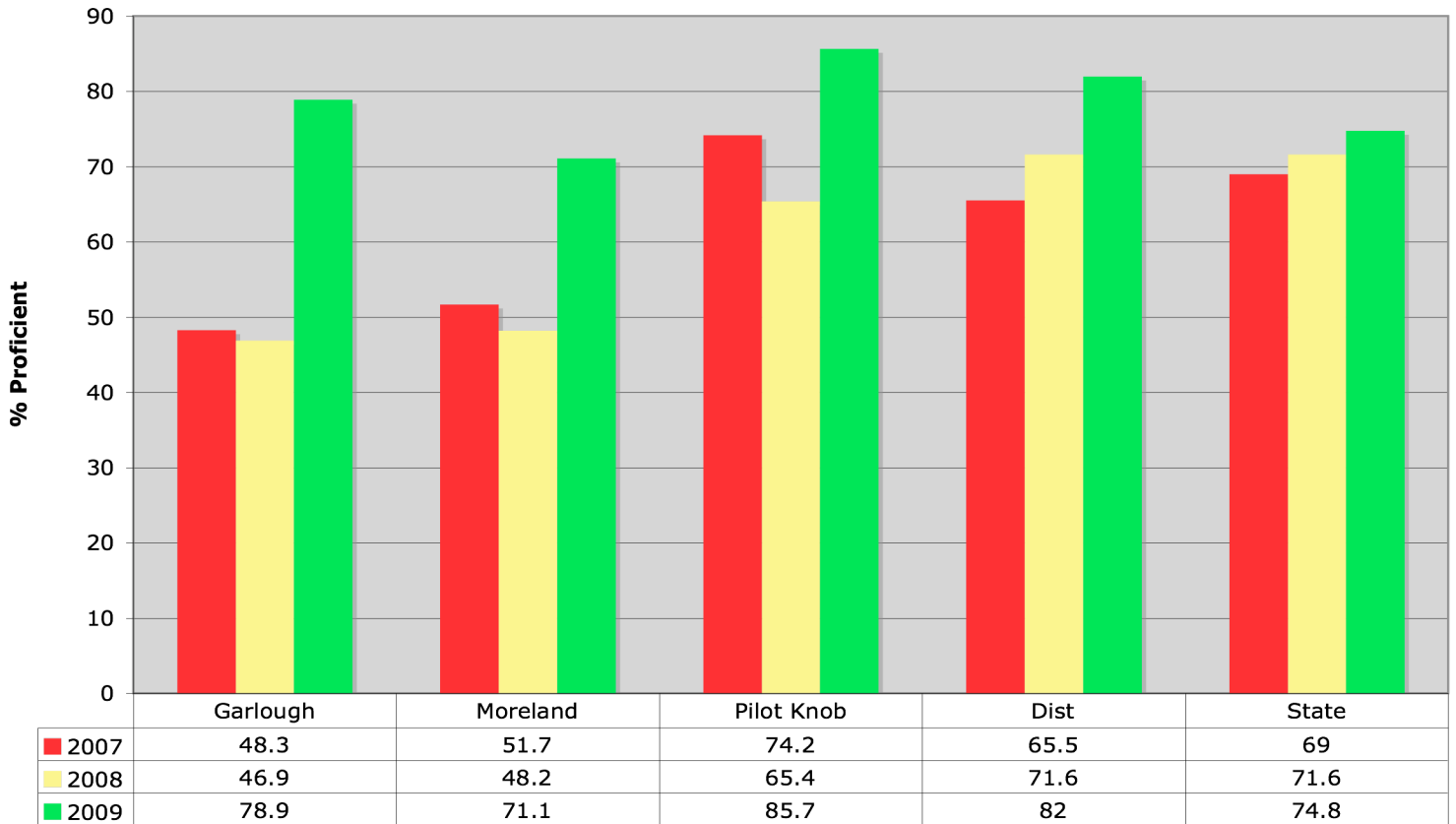
We now have evidence that we are starting to see success system-wide, not just at one or two schools, and we believe our efforts can be duplicated at other levels and in other schools. The lessons we learned and initiatives we implemented in the elementary schools are directly transferable to our middle schools, which is where we intend to focus our efforts this year. We will continue to ride this wave until we achieve success for all ages of students.

To that end, we are well positioned to meet this goal given the recent successes of our high school. Henry Sibley outperforms the average Minnesota high school in every category, especially in math and science. The average ACT (college entrance exam) scores of our students continue to be above state and national averages, and our students' Advanced Placement test scores have garnered national honors and resulted in countless students earning college credit while still in high school. Given the successes we are building on at the elementary and soon to be middle school level, one can only imagine the heights students will reach once our young students reach our already successful high school.

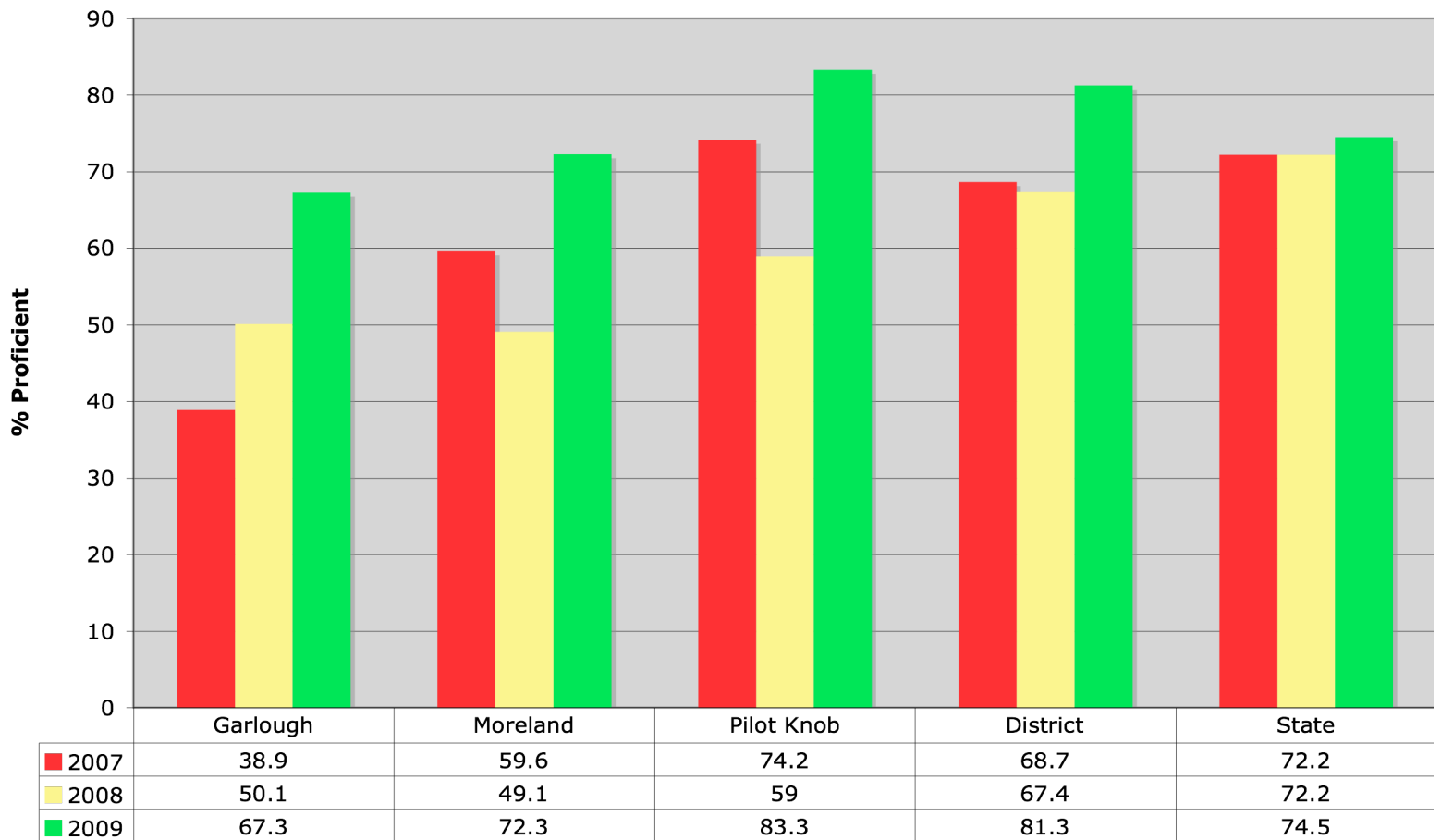
The primary mission of a school district is to prepare students for life after high school.

For District 197, that means ensuring all of our students are equipped with the tools they need to be successful and productive members of society. The work we have accomplished of late is evidence that we are on the right track, and that this wave of success will propel our students forward to help them achieve great things.

Grade 4 Math Trend by Bldg

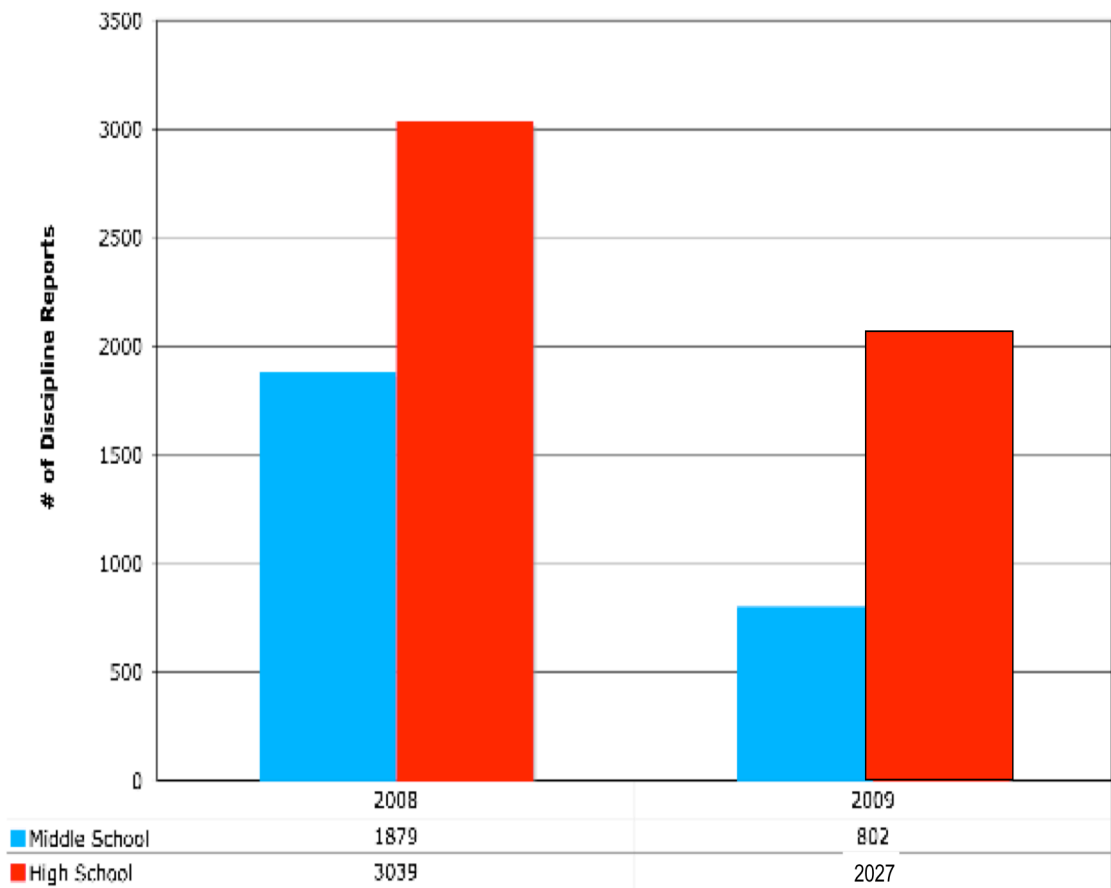


Grade 4 Reading Trend by Building



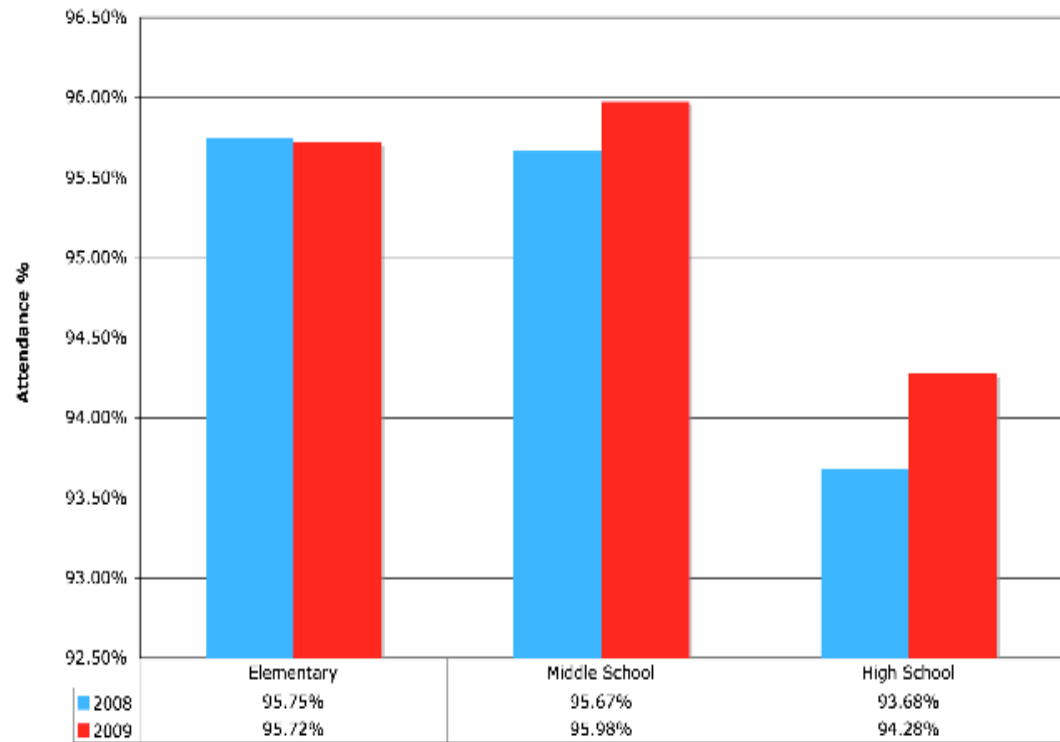
Student Discipline

Discipline 2008 to 2009



Average Attendance

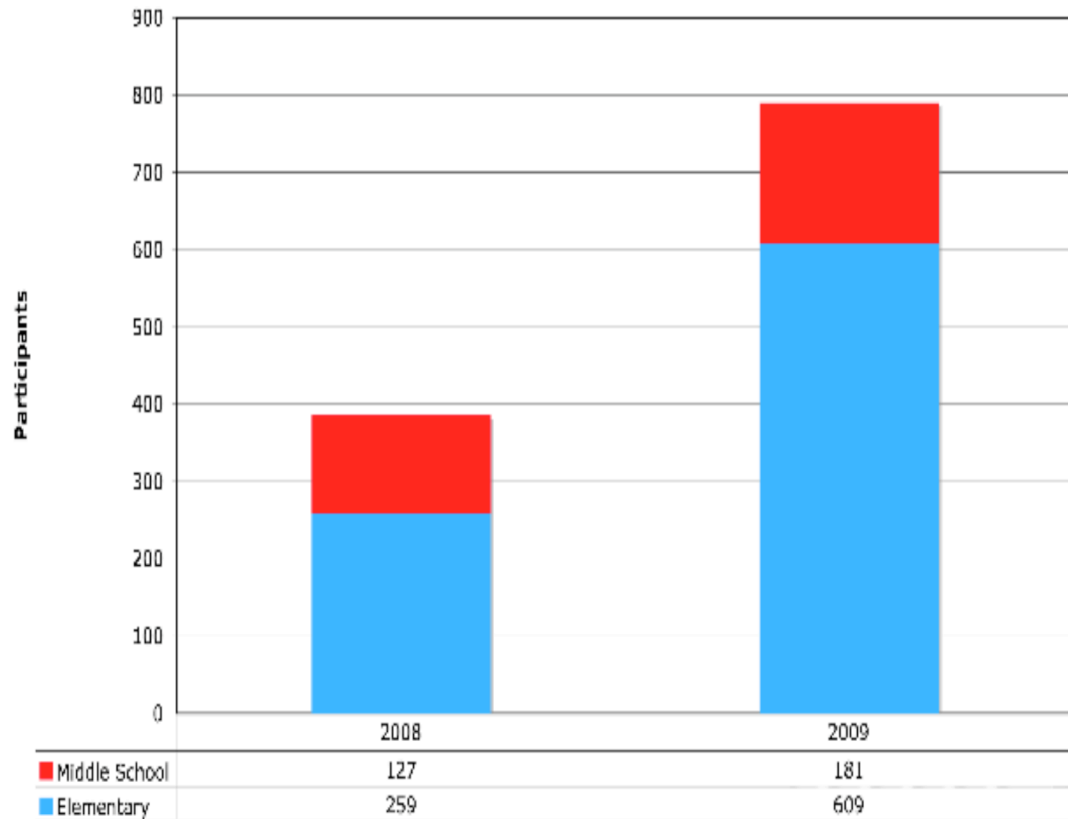
Attendance 2008 to 2009



Targeted Services Offerings

Targeted Services 2008 to 2009 # of Kids Served

** complete numbers for 2009 not yet*

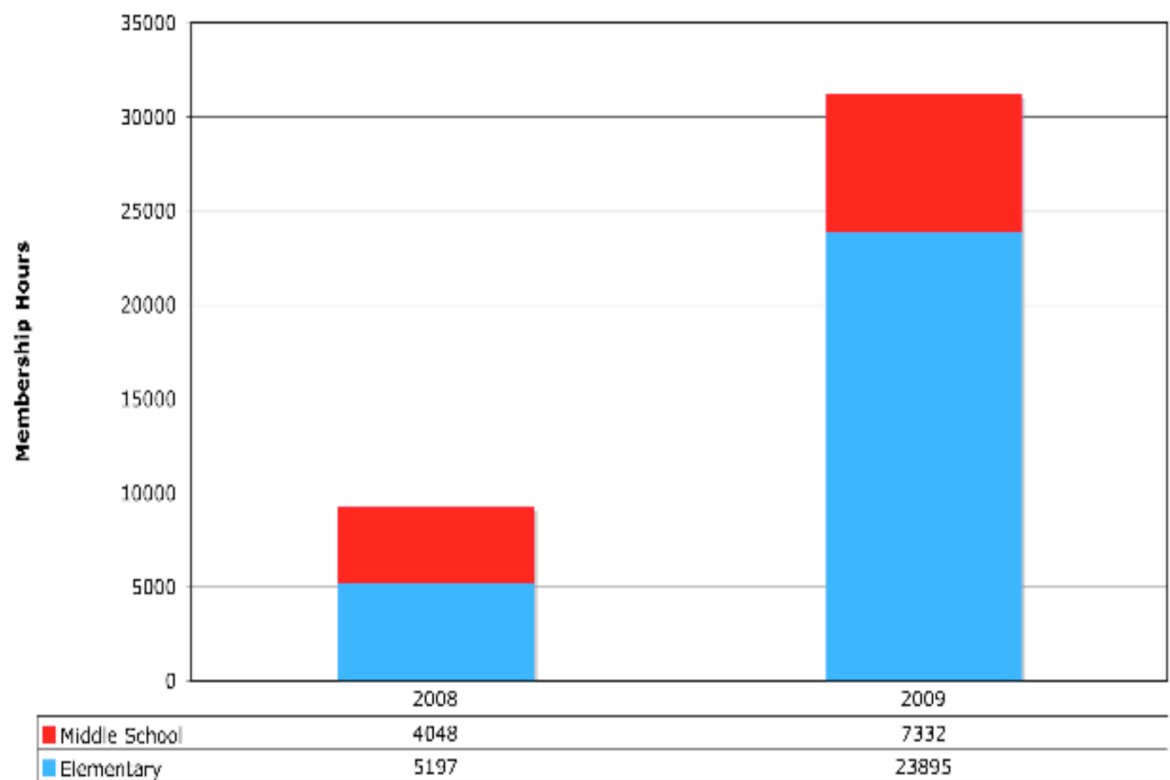


Targeted Services Offerings

Targeted Services 2008 to 2009

of Hours Served

** complete 2009 numbers not yet received*



Conclusion

As research studies go, this is anything but standard. Its foundation is more of a “hunch,” or at best a theory, not based on any identified study or practice. It truly is a “crazy idea.” But I have always put more faith in powerful theories and good ideas than comprehensive strategic plans. And so I readily admit to any bias this may cause.

I do, however, believe that the strong, lock step gains in all three Title 1 elementary schools we recorded, in every grade and every subject, are beyond any system-wide improvement I have witnessed in a school system. It is not uncommon for a single school to have this sort of experience, typically when a principal, and staff, and a supportive community all get engaged by some worthy plan, but to have three, when there is only three, schools make this kind of simultaneous gain appears noteworthy.

One other noteworthy result was the tremendous perceptions this community has of the communication and decision making of its school district. While there is no baseline community survey to compare to, it is obvious that this community feels uniquely engaged with its schools.

Finally, the rate of change, the amount of major change tolerated by this school district and community appear on the surface to be out of the norm. One sharp example of this was the changes in start times. The eight schools changed their starting times by on average one hour and fifteen minutes. This was a major issue for many, many families, with a significant number of families speaking and lobbying against this change. And after it was decided to make this change, the most common message from those still opposing the change was, “while we disagree with this decision, and believe it causes hardship for our family, we know that you have been there, that you have been among us, listened to us, are one of us and care about us and so we give you a pass – this time.”

It appears to me that we have significantly increased our capacity to change, and the rate we are allowed to change to address unmet needs through our campaign for school

improvement. After two campaigns, we are ready to start another, helping our community answer “What if your child’s education was tailored to their unique strengths, talents and abilities and gave them joy?” We are working on a pilot with the Search Institute, and have this idea to have a Personal Learning Plan that includes what the “Spark” is for every student, and challenges everyone of us, our parents, our partners, and the rest of our community to support our students in their spark. I hear a campaign comin . . .

