

Spotlight on Best Practice — Beulah Heights Soars to Success

One of Beulah Heights Principal Keith Owen's proudest moments was meeting with President and Mrs. Bush and Secretary of Education Paige at the White House in January 2003. At a news conference, the President cited Beulah Heights Elementary in Pueblo District 60 for its academic achievements. Under Dr. Owen's leadership of this Title I school, fourth grade reading scores on the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) jumped from 50 percent to 86 percent in three years. Also, CSAP third grade reading scores have climbed from 62 percent in 2000 to 95 percent in 2004.

During the same period of time, this predominantly Hispanic, high-poverty (both 68 percent) school closed the achievement gap between minority and white students by almost half. Beulah Heights third grade Hispanic students achieved 100 percent proficiency on the 2002 Colorado CSAP reading assessment. As a result, later that year Beulah Heights earned designation as a National Distinguished Title I School.

The school also has made significant progress in reducing its special education population from 10 percent to two percent at the end of the 2003 school year. Many of those students have been able to overcome learning disabilities with the intense focus on reading skills. The student mobility rate has dropped from 30 percent to 17 percent. "As parents have seen our success, they want to keep their kids in our school," Owen said.



Keith Owen, principal of Beulah Heights Elementary School

When you talk to Owen about how he has turned around this previously low-performing school in a few short years (he arrived as principal in 1999), he credits an outstanding staff, great students, and strong support from parents and district administration. "Through hard work and focused use of resources, we've learned that it can be done," Owen said.

Intense focus on reading

Owen believes that reading is critical for student success in later grades, so that became the focus when he was named principal five years ago. Through a partnership with the school district, using the research-based Lindamood-Bell (LMB) reading program, Owen was able to focus resources on staff professional development. "My goal was for every teacher to become a reading expert," he said. "As a staff, we agreed to be absolutely focused on reading."

According to Owen, another invaluable resource is lead teacher Gina Gallegos, a literacy specialist, whose job is to guide and coach teachers in their daily practice. "I work with teachers to model best practices and to serve as a mentor," Gallegos said.

As part of the initiative, Owen explained that teachers identified 80-100 students who were most at-risk and targeted them for intensive work using direct instruction. Read to Achieve grant dollars were used to provide extended day opportunities for kids.



Gallegos said that embracing the LMB program, which emphasizes research, collaboration, strong staff, and good communication, has been central to the school's success. In addition, teachers have been empowered to use data from CSAP scores to target instruction. Beyond that, celebrations of incremental progress are vital. "Also we've worked with teachers to instill the love of learning in kids," Gallegos said.

Strong leadership is key

Anyone who knows anything about education recognizes that behind every great school is a great leader. Strong schools don't make themselves. So what leadership strategies has Owen employed to make such a positive difference in student achievement?

IN THIS ISSUE

Messages from Association Leadership	Page 2
Interview with Bob Tschirki	Page 2
2004 CASE Convention	Page 4
Welcome to John Hefty	Page 5
Membership Renewal	Page 6

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(Owen, continued from page 1)

“First, I focused on assembling the very best teachers I could,” Owen said. “That meant some staffing changes. You have to have people on board who have high expectations for what kids can accomplish.

“As I worked with staff, I constantly asked, ‘What do you control and not control? What can we do to help all kids be successful?’ Then, I set about providing the very best tools to staff for teaching reading,” Owen said.

Gallegos was quick to point out Owen’s strengths as a leader. “Keith respects teachers and has created a culture of collaboration. Also, he is a visionary,” she said.

Owen also is a recognized leader in his profession and CASE. He serves on Colorado Association of Elementary School Principals board of directors. He was honored as Colorado’s National

Distinguished Principal in 2003.

Support from the district level

Owen stressed that district-level support has been essential to his success and must be a part of any sustained efforts to improve achievement. He said that Superintendent Joyce Bales and the school board have been committed over time to investing in strong leadership with a clear focus on school improvement.

A role model for others

Beulah Heights regularly opens its doors to visitors from other schools and districts that want to learn more about replicating its success. Also, Dr. Owen will be presenting at the August CASE Convention about the reading success in Pueblo 60. To learn more about how this school has excelled, contact Owen at kowen@pueblo60.k12.co.us or 719.549.7510.

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