

March 24, 2008

Dr. Bill Blokker
Literacy First PDI
3109 150th Place SE
Mill Creek, WA 98012

Dear Bill,

I know you received the news about our recent award, so I wanted to take a few moments to give you a little more information about our progress toward this achievement that might help other schools that are implementing the Literacy First Process, or thinking about a commitment to implementation.

Though it doesn't seem like we started over six years ago, our very first year of implementation was 2001-2002. We didn't see dramatic gains in achievement that first year, or even the second year, but in reviewing some of our data, significant things started happening from the very beginning. Almost immediately suspensions from school dropped from 66 incidents in 2000-01 to 24 incidents in 2001-02. That number has not increased at all since that time. So what happened? We all started using a common language for instruction that actually focused on academic learning time! Children were engaged, and didn't have time to disrupt classes. They were no longer frustrated, and began to show ownership of their own successes in reading. Using classroom observations to stimulate reflection and generate questions resulted in a dramatic increase in teamwork, and put me, as the instructional leader in a position to really know what teachers and children were doing in the classroom. I only thought I was an instructional leader prior to Literacy First. I have an effective consultant to thank for modeling the behaviors for me that changed the way I approach supervision.

Do you remember the summer the Marshall leadership team attended the Summer Leadership Institute and shared our first really dramatic achievement gains? In 2002-03, after about one and one-half years of Literacy First work, our reading API for all students was only 230. The next year it doubled to 447, and then finally in 2004-05 we reached 743, only a few points below the state reading target of 768. For us, the third year is when it all came together. Instruction was consistent, academic learning time had become a protected asset, and we knew how to use data to plan and teach without even having to think about it. You might say, Literacy First was part of the life-blood of the school at this point.

So today, as we approach our seventh round of state testing since Literacy First came into Marshall Elementary, we know what to expect and have a relatively accurate view of how our students will perform. We no longer have to guess and fear the results. Our school population remains highly mobile, highly diverse at 50% Hispanic and 23% special education. We are still economically disadvantaged, with over 85% of our students qualifying for free lunch. We still train from two to four new teachers every year due to promotions, enrollment changes, program additions, and other factors. Everything around us is like a moving target, but our instructional

focus is stable with a common instructional language that we now apply to all subject areas, and a system of data collection and regular analysis that we use with automaticity. I love to say that we are now consciously competent!

You may find it amusing to know that I am currently in a bit of trouble with a new area superintendent that was unable to find me in the office upon his latest visit to Marshall. The secretary explained to him that I was in classrooms, where I still spend an average of one hour per day, and that he was welcome to find me and join me as other area superintendents have learned to do and appreciate in the past few years. He didn't have time to join me to see instruction and left. Later the secretary reassured me that he was supplied with my schedule for the morning and that in her opinion, his disgust was surely less than mine would have been had anyone used the intercom to interrupt the reading block. She is certain we will have him trained very soon and have nothing to worry about. See, we all speak the same language, even in the office.

Our recent award named Marshall Elementary one of Tulsa's five exemplary schools for 2006-07, based on the Tulsa Public Schools accountability index measurements, unique to Tulsa's eighty-eight school sites. What this means for Marshall Elementary is that even though we have seen steady achievement gains in reading over the past six years, we are now seeing consistent gains in all areas of school effectiveness that place us in the same category as high-performing schools. It also meant a bonus check for every employee of the school. We have not implemented any other school reform measures, so I think it fair to say that Literacy First brought us to this point. To be an exemplary school means that we achieve a high rating by parents on parent surveys regarding school climate and overall effectiveness, we have a very low suspension rate, our attendance rate exceeds the district average for students and teachers, we receive more than an average amount of grant dollars each year, and we do have more than 80% of our students at grades 3, 4 and 5 scoring above the state median, or passing, the state curriculum tests in reading and math. In fact, our passing rate for the past three years spans 85 to 100%, ***and finally last spring there were NO significant differences between the passing rate of our ELLs and regular readers at grade five, something we thought we might never experience.***

In closing, thank you for your steadfast support of our efforts with the Literacy First Process. We had an exceptional consultant, the materials are excellent and well-worth the financial investment, the research base is easy to understand, and I am certain that our commitment to the process will remain alive long past my tenure as principal. Implementation no longer depends on me, it is part of the school and as my teachers say, it is non-negotiable.

Sincerely,

Kayla Robinson

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