

“ESEA Reauthorization: Addressing the Needs of Diverse Students”
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Good morning. Chairman Kildee, Ranking Member Castle, Mr. Ehlers, and members of the subcommittee thank you for this opportunity to speak to you today. I am Arelis Diaz, Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum/Instruction and Human Resources in Godwin Heights Public Schools District located in Wyoming, Michigan. This work is quite dear to me since I am a first generation American with hard working parents from the Dominican Republic. I was raised in Puerto Rico and returned to the states during my third grade year. My immigrant experience gave me a desire to train for and teach diverse English Language Learners. I was privileged to teach ELL students for 5 years, lead teachers primarily as a principal for 5 years, and most recently have led instruction for the district as a central office administrator for the last 5 years. I am honored to share some of the work we have been successful with at Godwin Heights over the past 10 years to improve instructional practices and achieve positive academic gains in addressing the needs of diverse students.

BACKGROUND OF GODWIN HEIGHTS PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICT

Godwin Heights is an urban district located on the border of Grand Rapids. We have experienced a great deal of diversity growth in the past two decades. In 1995, I had 36 students in my English Language Learners class whose native language was other than English. Fifteen years later, although our students' prominent first language is still Spanish, that same school has 155 ELL students who come from 16 different countries. The changes in poverty are similar. In 1995, Godwin's community was comprised primarily of strong manufacturing employees working at GM and Steelcase plants. Today, the GM plant has closed and Steelcase is a skeleton of the healthy and hearty company it used to be. As a result, 84% of our students now qualify for free and reduced lunch.

Godwin Heights Public School District serves 2,212 students at our 3 elementary schools, one middle school, one high school, and one alternative high school. All of our schools qualify for and receive Title I Program funding. We also provide ELL and Special Education services at all of the schools.

CHANGES IN INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICE – AS PRINCIPAL

When I became principal of North Godwin Elementary School in 2000, only 50% of our students were meeting or exceeding Michigan's Reading and Writing expectation. Only 46% of our

students satisfactorily passed the Math assessment. Our Social Studies results were even worse – with only 6% of our students meeting or exceeding expectations. Why were some students making progress and others not? We had to face our brutal facts – quickly!

I knew that facing our brutal facts meant looking at our data to truly discover who was learning, what they were learning, when (what grade level) they were learning it, how were we vertically aligning the curriculum, and most importantly, why were some students not learning. My mantra became “we will do whatever it takes” to effectively educate all of our students! During my tenure as building principal, I continuously focused on the following 5 principles:

- ✓ Give teachers time to analyze past and present data
- ✓ Develop specific and measurable School Improvement Team goals (from data analysis)
- ✓ Create a positive, efficacy-based culture -- “If you believe it, you will see it. If you don’t, you won’t.”
- ✓ Develop a continuous learning environment with book studies and collaboration
- ✓ Parent Involvement – embracing and educating them

Analyze past and present data:

Teachers need to be given time to be intentional about looking and analyzing data. I was surprised to discover that most needed to be taught how to analyze data. I found that teachers could not/should not be expected to do this most important work on their own time.

Administrators needed to give them time and support. Providing this time during the school day, by obtaining substitutes for their classroom, works best in my experience. This process must be done in teams, by grade levels and include the ELL and Special Education educators with the administrator for optimum results. The findings must be documented and shared with the School Improvement Team, then finally with the rest of the staff members. Ownership of the achievement must be embraced by every staff member in the building including custodians, food service and paraprofessionals.

As I studied our data and compared it to our programming, there was a glaring observation. Many more students needed more time and support with literacy than we were providing. We were servicing a limited number of students with Reading Recovery. Many more needed services. I concluded that it was time for a literacy revolution!

The reading teacher and I made an executive decision to modify the reading program to maximize the number of students that could be serviced. We initiated our own program which we named the *Backpack Reader* program and utilized the reading staff as a team that in addition to the classroom teacher would go into every K-2nd grade classroom daily. Every day students chose an appropriate level book to read with a team member. During that time, the team provided mini lessons and reading strategies. The student took the book home to read, and a parent/guardian signed daily when they read with the student. The book is brought back to school and read with a team member for the third time. The students progress up in levels until they are reading independently and can check out books on their own from the library. The *Backpack Reader* program produced amazing results and increased reading growth such that every first grader was reading at grade level by the end of the year, including ELL and Special Education students.

School Improvement Team Goals:

The data analysis findings from each grade level must be presented to the School Improvement Team (SIT). Since each team includes one teacher representative from each grade level, an ELL teacher, a Special Education teacher, an elective teacher representative and the Reading teacher (if applicable), the analysis of the data is comprehensive. The key to the success of this team is that the entire school is represented and is part of the decision making process for the yearly goals. This ensures that special populations are addressed.

The SIT then develops the yearly goals based on the data analysis. Each goal has to be specific to every grade level and measurable by marking period. For example, once we realized graphing skills were a deficiency throughout our student population, we set a goal that every grade level would include one graphing activity per marking period. We were specific: 1st marking period would be a Social Studies graphing activity, 2nd marking period would include a graph from the science content, 3rd marking period from Language Arts and 4th from Math. Integration of the subject areas was important and based on research, for higher level learning and retention.

I then incorporated the SIT goals into my teacher evaluations. During observations, I requested each teacher conduct a lesson that easily identified and emphasized a SIT goal. This included ELL and Special Education classrooms.

Create positive culture:

This is an area that is underestimated in schools. However, every highly effective school that has overcome diverse challenges understands that it is essential to believe that all students can learn regardless of their individual needs.

During my principalship, I was intentional about creating a positive culture. I implemented the FISH philosophy that focused on being there for one another as staff members. That also included supporting teachers when their student's demonstrated unacceptable student behavior and following through with consistent corrective discipline. Increasing and maintaining student achievement is hard work. Teachers need to feel safe, empowered and appreciated. Remembering birthdays with treats, sending Thanksgiving letters to family members and notes of acknowledgement in mailboxes all helped in establishing a positive climate.

Continuous Learning Environment:

It is enlightening to realize that most veteran teachers with continuing certificates have not returned or taken a college credit class since they graduated from college. The best way to learn new strategies and be inspired by others is to read and study from them. I introduced the staff to book studies, both at staff meetings and afterschool. I read a chapter of *The Essential 55* by Ron Clark to my staff at every meeting and then we implemented its strategies for diverse communities. They worked! Afterschool, we read *There Are No Shortcuts* by Raffe Esquith, a teacher from inner city Los Angeles. The success of his ELL students motivated us to go above and beyond.

Finally, I modified the schedule to provide each grade level common collaboration time during the day. There was some resistance at the beginning because traditionally teachers had always worked in isolation as individual experts. However, as they started sharing activities, lessons

and strategies, that worked slowly. The collaborative teams realized they each had individual natural strengths and weaknesses, that they could help one another, primarily in the area of ELA/SS and Math/Science. Then, vertical alignment started taking shape. As the teams discussed gaps in learning, they realized they needed to talk with the grade levels above and below them. Finally, they sought out all of their resources, including the ELL and Special Education teachers for assistance.

Parent Involvement:

When parents are surrounded with poverty, it complicates things for educators. Our parents are working two and three jobs. When they are sleeping, their children are in school. When they are awake and working, their children are at home. And many do not know or understand the English language. Parents need to feel welcomed into our school environment and need to be educated on the importance of being involved as a part of the school.

We initiated Family Reading and Math Nights where we demonstrated strategies that parents could easily implement at home with commonly used products. For example, we showed them that shaving cream is a fantastic way to learn spelling or sight words. We translated everything and we provided dinner every time because if you feed them, they will come!

Remember the Backpack Reader program? This is a perfect example of how we had to educate our parents. When we initiated this program, we had very little support from the parents. They were not reading with their children, not signing that they read with their children, and failing to return the books. Instead of stopping the program, we educated the parents instead by incorporating the importance of reading into every opportunity we had: classroom newsletters, building-wide newsletters, PTO meeting presentations, family nights, drop off and pick up time, at breakfast, etc. It worked so well that by the end of the year, the parents were calling us if the book was not in the backpack!

The results? In 2005, when I left North Godwin for the Central Office our achievement was simply outstanding. We were recognized as a Top Performing School by the Just for the Kids Foundation. Our students, including ELL and Special Education students, were and still are, outperforming similar students throughout the state. 85% of students met or exceeded state reading standards and 87% met or exceeded state writing standards in 4th grade (compared to 50% in 2000). 75% of students met or exceeded state Social Studies standards in 5th grade (compared to 6% in 2000).

CHANGES IN INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICE – AS ASSISTANT SUPERINTENDENT

In 2005, I packed the lessons I had learned from being a principal brought them to the Central Office.

Analyze past and present data:

I instituted district-wide early release once a month where students are dismissed at 1:30 p.m. and teachers stay until 4:15 p.m. for collaboration. It allows all teachers, including Special Education and ELL teachers to collaborate not just as a building, but as a district and we can align the curriculum vertically as well. The Professional Learning Communities (PLC)

philosophy and practice has dramatically changed the way our educators teach and virtually eliminated the teaching in isolation practices. Teachers are sharing what works and modifying their instruction based on their discussions with one another, and most importantly they are incorporating the SIT goals. The result? Increased achievement for all students including diverse subgroups.

School Improvement Team Goals:

At the district level, the school improvement team goals have to be woven with the Board of Education goals. Our board has consistently focused on improved reading goals. As the new curriculum leader for the district, I knew what worked from my work at the building level. We had to implement successful programs such as the Backpack Reader and *Accelerated Reader* district wide at all three elementary buildings. We provided training for all teachers and set minimum usage expectations per grade level. On a weekly basis, I check the *Accelerated Reader* Dashboard for individual teacher participation and success index (how well the students performed on their reading quizzes) for all K-8 classrooms. Additionally, we incorporated another software component specifically for ELL students that focuses on vocabulary building called *English in a Flash*. The results have been increased reading scores on the MEAP state assessment district wide for all students, including our diverse subgroups.

Continuous Learning Environment:

Most recently, we have incorporated the Response to Intervention (RtI) program in all of our schools. It has proven to be extremely successful due to the daily intense, targeted lessons and the progress monitoring built into the program. It has allowed us to identify the foundational skills necessary for long term proficient readers. Prior to RtI, our reading revolution produced good readers, but we noticed that we saw a drop in third grade reading skills. We now realize, thanks to RtI, that we were missing some steps in the continuum critical to long term reading success. At any point in the school year, we know exactly where all of our students are on the reading continuum. As a result, we have seen a decrease in Special Education referrals.

When we analyzed our data, our ELL students needed more time and support. District wide, we implemented before and/or afterschool tutoring for our ELL students this school year, utilizing Title III Immigrant Funds. We are focusing on targeted areas where they are not meeting expectations in their content areas. Classroom teachers re-teach lessons not mastered utilizing a variety of differentiation strategies to master the content. The teachers have already provided feedback that confirms the extra time and support is working. Pre and post assessments prove that the students are obtaining mastery on a weekly basis, simply by receiving more time and support.

Teachers and administrators also need time and support to maximize their effectiveness. Although as a novice administrator, I sent teachers to conferences and workshops as they requested, now I send only teams of new teachers to a conference each year. The remainder of our professional development practice involves:

1. Training all teachers (including ELL and Special Education staff) at the same time
2. During the school day
3. Based on needs from data analysis
4. With an implementation plan and clear expectations articulated and

5. With follow up training throughout the school year(s).

During the past several years our district's professional development has focused on writing and literacy. We have discovered that teachers working with consultants that come to our district for building wide or district wide training is very effective; much more effective than the singleton conference approach. For our administrators, the professional development has focused on instructional leadership versus management utilizing Marzano's research. We emphasized that leadership is not about us as administrators, but rather about empowering others.

Results, Reflections, and Recommendations:

I have attached our MEAP state assessment results from 2005 to the present. Longitudinally, you will see that we have made significant gains. Keep in mind that the growth has occurred during financially troubling times of yearly budget cuts, yearly increases to our free and reduced lunch counts, and a growing ELL population. This type of achievement is not easy when you consider the expanding challenges facing our district every year. However, what I have tried to explain to you is that **effective teaching can close the achievement gap in any diverse group!**

Now that I have made it perfectly clear that it can be done, allow me to identify some recommendations that would assist us in the field to continue to make it happen. Understanding that life is not fair, please, please, please acknowledge the fact that districts with diverse populations must work twice as hard to produce the results that are expected. Consider for a moment a fourth grade teacher that welcomes several new refugee or immigrant students into their classroom at the beginning of the year. Even though the new students have no prior knowledge of the English language, the teacher goes above or beyond to teach the students on a daily basis. The school provides ELL, RtI Tier 1, 2 and 3 services, Backpack Reader, Accelerated Reader, Accelerated Math, English in a Flash, before, lunch and after school tutoring. The students make miraculous gains of 2 to 3 year gains...but they are still at a second or third grade level! We understand and welcome accountability, but modifications are necessary to acknowledge of schools and students working hard to close the achievement gap.

As I have a special place in my heart for English Language Learners (ELL), allow me to make three final recommendations for this population:

- Permit states to include growth in their accountability systems, rewarding districts and schools who are making progress. This is an important tool for measuring the success of English Language Learners.
- Increase resources for the Title III program to help states and school districts provide English language instruction programs for English Language Learners and provide more professional development for the teachers working with these diverse learners.

Thank you for the opportunity to share some of the successes we have enjoyed at Godwin Heights Public Schools. It is indeed a tribute to all of the hard work and dedication of our excellent teaching and staff members. You may contact me at diaz@godwinschools.org with any further questions.

Attachment: MEAP (Michigan state assessment longitudinal data)