

The transformation at Taft School

Using intention and determination, a former low-performer emerges as one of the best in its district

By Joan Richardson

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Working in the middle of a school that's in the midst of transformation is a bit like working in a spider's web, said Susan Williamson.

"Change in schools is not linear. Every tiny decision you make has ramifications across that web. Everything that you do, everything that you touch has an impact on something else in that school," she said.

Williamson ought to know. For five years, she has been principal of Taft Elementary School in Boise, Idaho. Once one of the least desirable schools in the district, the 390-student school has undergone dramatic changes to become one of the best in the district. Test scores have soared, discipline issues have declined, the school climate has improved, and parents who were once wary of enrolling their children are now enthusiastic supporters. All of this in spite of a student body that is 70 percent low-income.

"We have not had a 'program.' We have had a 'process.' And it's been a very intentional process," she said.

At the heart of Williamson's work at the Title I school has been a reliance on improving the skills and knowledge of teachers, staff, and parents. One of her goals was to grow leaders in her school.

"I wanted to build a cadre of leaders. At first, I could be the leader. But, over time, if you don't become a leader of leaders, you can't really change a school and certainly not a school system," she said.

Williamson said she had no opportunity to hire new teachers. "I knew from the beginning that I needed to grow the individuals who were here. And that was just fine," she said.

Her belief is that a principal must "take the people you have - unless they just flat out say they aren't interested in growing and that just hardly ever happens - meet them where they are and keep moving them forward."

"I owe it to them to create an environment in which they can learn and improve," she said.

FIRST THINGS FIRST

Taft's transformation began with a focus on the physical environment. The school that Williamson saw upon her arrival in 1998 was a gloomy, dispirited place. Since then, clutter has been removed from the hallways and replaced with small tables where students can work, rugs, and comfortable chairs with afghans for reading. Parents have painted and wallpapered classrooms. A muddy patch behind the school has evolved into an outdoor learning area, complete with a patio built of pavers and a redwood deck. Students have planted 400 tulips on the school grounds. A tiny sign engraved by a homemade woodburning set has been replaced by a massive boulder with a nameplate donated by a local retailer.

"When you walk in now, it's a warm, inviting school," Williamson said.

Williamson also quickly dealt with discipline. Why tackle discipline before achievement? "Teachers have to have time to teach. How can they do that if they're spending their time disciplining children?" she asked. Teachers and support staff

worked with each other to outline expectations for appropriate behavior. The key phrase throughout those expectations is respect for others. During her first month on the job, 60 children were referred to Williamson's office for discipline. Now, such referrals are rare. During her first year, 28 children were suspended; last year, only five.

FOCUS ON ACHIEVEMENT

As she addressed the physical environment and discipline issues, Williamson also introduced teachers to several new practices all at once: studying data, working in grade-level teams, working in vertical teams, and supporting teachers with professional learning opportunities at every juncture.

Williamson found one teacher who was skilled at breaking down the testing data. That teacher led discussions in site-based meetings, with grade-level groups and finally with the whole school.

"Just getting the data in front of them was the first step. The school had the information but it had been in folders. When they did look at it, it was pretty disheartening. Every area was low. We were low in reading, we were low in math. They did not see any solutions for it. They deeply felt there was not much they could do," she said.

"We had lots of mobility, lots of poverty. They felt that kids of poverty just weren't going to do very well. They made a lot of defensive statements. And that was OK. You have to allow the frustrations. You have to allow them to vent. You have to respect the way they feel. But, as a principal, you also have to just keep putting it out there and asking 'what are all of us going to do about this together?' "

Williamson also was putting teachers together in groups as often as she could. "Teachers were very autonomous when I arrived. Even on a grade level, they were not talking to each other," she said.

During the first several years, that meant hiring substitute teachers to free teachers for team meetings. Eventually, she was able to arrange the calendar to provide time for teachers to meet together three times a week.

In addition, staff meetings now focus on professional development. Williamson uses a variety of ways to share the kind of information that is the fodder of many staff meetings. That has freed the Taft staff to use that meeting time to model lessons, to do book studies, and hear presentations from teachers returning from conferences or workshops.

As teachers studied data and met regularly, they began to explore solutions, and Williamson kept introducing them to more and more information through reading, bringing in consultants, and sending them to workshops. As a local newspaper writer phrased it, "schoolwide reforms began tumbling out of the frequent teacher meetings."

As the ideas came tumbling out and teachers began to see the impact of small changes, the attitudes of blame have slipped away. "I haven't heard any of them blame students in quite a while. They don't have all the answers and they still get frustrated when they run into a situation where a child is not learning. But now they are more likely to go out and seek an answer than fall back on blaming," she said.

Today, Williamson believes she has a school in which all adults are learners and educators, she said. "Everyone here sees themselves as part of the team," she said. For example, the school secretary teaches a well-regarded skills course for parents. Paraprofessionals and teachers attend the same professional development opportunities. "Paraprofessionals may not have the breadth of knowledge as the teachers. They may have a small area of expertise but it's in a critical area. Our paraprofessionals provide an invaluable service," she said.

If Williamson has any advice for other principals in similar

situations, it's this: Stay the course. "When people go through change, there is chaos. The chaos is something that you have to go through. Most people go up to the chaos and, when it gets really, really bad, they back off. They won't go through it. They won't see it to the end. But you have to do that. You can't get to the other side until you do."

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Wm H. Taft Elementary School

School Performance Report 2001-02

OUR MISSION

"We educate students to be lifelong learners and contributing citizens"

KEEPING YOU INFORMED

This school performance report is a summary of how your child's school and its students are performing on tests required by the state. No single report, however, can tell the whole story of a school's educational program or the people who work and learn there. We encourage you to find out firsthand by visiting your child's school and taking an active role in your child's learning. Studies show that when parents are involved, students do better in school.



**"Educating Today for a
Better Tomorrow"**

OUR SCHOOL COMMUNITY

Many factors, such as how often a child attends school, moving frequently, and English language experience, influence school achievement. Measuring these characteristics helps us understand our students' needs

ABOUT OUR STUDENTS

School (%)		District Avg.
357	Total Enrollment	
0.8%	English Language Learners	5.8%
71.0%	Free/Reduced Lunch (1-6)	36.8%
5.9%	Gifted and Talented Participants (2-6)	2.4%
20.7%	Special Education Program Participants	11.4%
89.6%	Average Daily Attendance	94.4%

We are committed to ensuring that our students are taught by a highly trained and qualified staff of instructors.

ABOUT OUR TEACHERS

17.5	Average years of experience
52%	Percent who hold a master's degree
100%	Percent who are certified by the state
0	Number who are teaching out of their area of expertise
0	Number of teachers who are mentors or National Board Certified teachers

ABOUT AVERAGE CLASS SIZES

Grade	Our school	District
Kindergarten	15.0	20.1
First grade	18.7	20.6
Second grade	17.0	21.8
Third grade	25.5	22.2
Fourth grade	22.0	24.7
Fifth grade	22.5	23.9
Sixth grade	19.0	25.6
Elementary average	19.2	22.6