

Indistars

WILLIAMS-SULLIVAN ELEMENTARY, DURANT, MISSISSIPPI

by Maureen M. Mirabito

When Amanda Smillie (pronounced Smiley) was promoted from lead teacher at Williams-Sullivan Elementary School to principal, the school was the sixth worst performing school in the state.

“We were under tremendous pressure to improve or else the state would take over and replace the staff and the principal,” explained Ms. Smillie.

Five years later, Ms. Smillie is still in charge. In fact, during her first year as principal at Williams-Sullivan Elementary, the school increased its Quality of Distribution Index (the growth model used by the state to measure achievement and academic growth) from 81, which is considered failing, to 132, which moved the school directly into the achieving/successful column.

Williams-Sullivan Elementary serves students in PreK through Grade 8. It is located in Durant, Mississippi and serves four communities in a rural area, with students com-

muting to school anywhere from 10 to 40 minutes one way.

“We have faced, and continue to face, some unbelievable challenges in our school. We’ve overcome some of them and continue to persevere through others. We’ve shot up in scores and then regressed a little, it’s peaks and then some valley’s. But we’ve changed the minds of teachers and we’ve brought parents on board and, every day, we push through. We look at our data and determine what is right for our children.”

The school continues to improve, meeting its federal annual measurable objectives and working to attain the schoolwide, classroom, teacher, and student goals it sets at the start of every year. Driving their improvement journey is the work of a strong, high-functioning leadership team.

“The first thing I did as principal was to establish a leadership team. I was very strategic and methodical in the selection. I had to put people on it that supported me but I also wanted to include others that weren’t as certain about what we needed to do and how we would do it. In swaying those individuals to buy into our vision, I believed that we could sway others too.”

The leadership team began their work by identifying those areas that needed to change that would have the greatest impact on student learning. They identified three areas: classroom instruction, which resulted in immediate changes to scheduling; discipline, which resulted in restructuring the process for discipline and establishing a commit-

tee to determine what the exact problems were; and parent engagement, which included establishing a parent ambassador program.

“We created subcommittees outside of the leadership team to give everyone a chance to participate in our planning and direction, as well as to build buy-in for the vision. My goal was to get 80% on board and then keep going.”

Ms. Smillie took her campaign outside of the school building as well, reaching deep into the communities that Williams-Sullivan served.

“When I first got here, the school was working in many silos—in the building and in the community. We were not all working for the same school vision. Now we are,” said Ms. Smillie.

Ms. Smillie began to build trust and a shared vision in the community with the help of a long-time teacher who serves on the leadership team and who is also well respected and trusted in the communities that Williams-Sullivan serves. “I am Caucasian, and we are a 99% African American school. The support I received from Sherry Reeves was critical to the success I had in building trust among the African American community,” said Ms. Smillie.

To start, she and Ms. Reeves went to churches within the communities.

Ms. Reeves explained, “We value church immensely in the African American community. And because we are ru-

ral, church is the hub of our communities. It is common for friends and neighbors to only see each other at church. In that friendship-type setting, you can engage with them where they are comfortable and they are not threatened or intimidated and they feel as though you are a part of that.”

“When community members saw me with Ms. Reeves, they trusted and believed in me too,” added Ms. Smillie.

The two visited with parents and attended community meetings. They shared their vision and ideas for how they would realize it. They asked for ideas, too.

“The community members saw that we were invested in their children and in their communities,” explained Ms. Smillie, “and they gave us their full support.”

Ms. Smillie has kept their support by being accessible and following through on her word. “I give my cell phone out to parents and teachers. I’m always available for parents, and if I tell them I am going to do something, I do it.”

Parents were not the only school community members Ms. Smillie went out of her way to involve and build and maintain trust among. She did the same with her teachers and support staff as well.

“When Ms. Smillie came here, teacher morale was really low. She did an awesome job making teachers know they are an integral part of our community. She celebrates a teacher of the month, she leaves candy in their mailbox, offers them teacher coupons to cash in. That alone went a long way in

raising morale; the gains are significant. We work together and with a genuine sense of camaraderie,” said Ms. Reeves. “We lean on each other all day long.”

It also helps that Ms. Smillie is fully engaged with teachers the majority of her day to improve instruction and even deliver it, even if it means taking work home at night and on weekends.

“I call offices black holes. If I stay in my office too long, I know I will get sucked into the day-to-day operations. I make it a priority to spend at least two hours per day in classrooms. I conduct daily classroom observations and attend professional learning communities (PLCs); I hold data meetings with teachers to look at achievement data, formative assessment data, and behavioral data. I pull small groups of students for instruction—this year the lowest achieving groups in fourth and fifth grade—to build up their weaknesses. I don’t ask my teachers to do anything that I am not doing myself, including delivering great instruction.”

Instructional planning and improvement happens most often in PLCs, also referred to as instructional planning meetings, which meet weekly at Williams- Sullivan. Typically, an administrator from the leadership team attends to take minutes and to also share outcomes from the twice-monthly leadership team meetings.

Hannah Rowell, third-grade teacher and chairperson for Grade 3–5 PLC, described the work of these teams: “At the beginning of each year, we use data to set ‘big goals’ for the

school, for our classrooms, and with each student. The ‘big goals’ we set with our students are what drive our conversations in PLCs. We share data and talk about what we can do to help those students that haven’t ‘gotten it’ and what we can do for those that have achieved mastery. Professional learning is always a component of our meetings—whether it involves teachers’ sharing of strategies or book readings.”

Ms. Rowell explained one of the best things about the PLCs is the time set aside for questions or concerns. “We are able to problem-solve together, with a leadership team member present, by sharing resources, asking for leadership team support, or collaborating on ideas and strategies. That is a huge opportunity for us to get involved in decisions and improvements at the school.”

Another teacher added, “Because we meet every week, we build in follow-up to the previous week’s work. We can ask if a teacher needs anything else, if a student might need the expertise of a different teacher, if what we tried worked. We don’t waste time on what doesn’t work.”

When you listen to this leadership team and these teachers talk about what they are doing in their classrooms and collaboratively as teams, the indicators of effective practice within Indistar ring out loud and clear.

“We monitor 48 indicators of effective practice in Indistar. I believe that if you do all of those well, you will turn around a school because that is what good leaders do, it’s

what good teachers do, it's what good schools look like," explained Ms. Smillie. "We always aim to do what is right for children. We live and breathe the indicators of effective practice. To make sure that we've monitored them is something that we have to constantly stay on top of."

Our time is nearly up, but there is so much left to discuss. I asked the team which indicators of effective practice they are working toward fully implementing right now.

"We are always working on using data to drive instruction. We are always making sure that ALL of our teachers are using engaging techniques and are differentiating their instruction. We are always making sure that our teachers use higher order thinking strategies to get students to understand and connect more deeply with their learning. That is our main focus. However, we know there are lots of other things that have to happen first—a culture and climate where teachers feel supported, where they can have honest and open conversations, where students have ownership of their learning and are invested in it. All of that needs to be in place in order for us to improve our instruction," added Ms. Smillie.

And it is improving. Ms. Reeve's shared the moment that she knew things were getting better: "I have been in this community a long time. Never before have we seen an influx of students from other schools wanting to come here. Parents are doing whatever they can to get their kids into this

school. That is a BIG indicator of the changes that are taking place here at Williams-Sullivan."

As any great leader will tell you, though, their work will never end. Ms. Smillie said, "We have overcome many challenges, but as a leader, we are not where I know we can be. We are in the trenches overcoming challenges every day, and sometimes it is heartbreaking because you fight forces you can't control, but we are always raising the bar and we are never slacking on what we're doing. Otherwise, our children will suffer. We work every day with a sense of urgency so that our kids get the best from us for every minute they are with us."

And when they are not with them? Williams-Sullivan has worked hard to strengthen meaningful parent engagement and build their capacity to support their children inside and outside of school.

"We have an open-door policy here and we invite parents to help out in the classroom with their children. We hold parent academies and workshops to help them know how to help their kids outside of school. We have an awesome parent liaison that communicates so well with parents, gives them rides to events, keeps them informed and involved," explained Ms. Smillie.

She told a quick story of an exchange with a parent that confirmed the efforts were paying off. "We offer one particular assessment four or five times a year. Students that

meet their achievement goals are rewarded with a dress-down pass, which is a big deal because we are a uniform school. One parent in particular called me when her child had earned this reward and asked me to tell her specifically what it meant that her child had grown and what could she do at home to make sure the growth continued. This was a parent I had had some really tough conversations with in the past, and now we are talking about her child's learning and she is asking for resources. That was a great moment for us."

Our conversation ends with an honest summary about what it means to be a leader of a school that must get better.

"Sometimes adults are not going to be happy with your choices. But if you remember that every choice revolves around children, then you are making the right one. You have to keep your eye on the prize, pick yourself up quickly when there is defeat, because there is defeat. You have to pull yourself up, create a plan of action, an act on it," explained Ms. Smillie.

Ms. Smillie will tell you that she doesn't have to do that alone, either. She has a united team—inside and outside of the school—to help her.

Because when you take the time to build trust and you demonstrate your commitment to children and their families in words and especially in actions, you don't have to convince them to believe in you when there is a problem. They already do. And they just do what needs to be done. ★

Indistar®

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Indistar® is a web-based system implemented by a state education agency, district, or charter school organization for use with district and/or school improvement teams to inform, coach, sustain, track, and report improvement activities.

Similar to a global positioning system (GPS), Indistar® tells you where you are and helps you get to where you want to be—every child learning and every school improving. Indistar® is stocked with indicators of evidence-based practices at the district, school, and classroom levels to improve student learning. But Indistar® is also customizable, so that the client (SEA, LEA, or charter organization) can populate or enhance the system with its own indicators of effective practice. The system also accommodates rubrics for assessment of the indicators.

The client can differentiate the system to accommodate "zones" of districts or schools. For example, the system will allow for a "rapid improvement" or turnaround track that includes different indicators than a "continuous improvement" track.

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