The Renton Way: Launching Learning to Last a Lifetime

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Education is a global enterprise that serves an evolving, diverse community of students. It is the universal differential and is bound to hopes for economic prosperity and fulfilling lives. Success in this enterprise requires everyone to contribute and to work together; schools, communities, business and government must develop effective partnerships to address our students' needs. Success in this enterprise is about social justice and has been accurately identified as the civil rights issue of our time.

America, do we have the will to make the necessary sacrifices and bring our full attention and adequate resources to bear on this challenge? Do we share the moral imperative to secure the future for our children and ourselves? Do we believe it can be done?

I do! And I have the honor of leading a district that has demonstrated that, with the support and commitment of dynamic community and business partnerships to this work, breakthrough performance is possible and student achievement can soar. Eliminate excuses--recognize, acknowledge and remove barriers, making sure that students can acquire needed skills--and students will meet and exceed our expectations.

The Renton School District is a richly diverse, urban/suburban school district located south of Seattle, Washington serving 14,527 students who speak 87 different languages. Of the student population, 52% qualify for free/reduced lunch with the following diversity: Native American 1%, Hispanic 18%, African American 22%, Asian/Pacific Islander 24% and White 35%. The district has three early childhood facilities that serve multiple pre-K programs, thirteen K-5 elementary schools, three middle schools, three comprehensive
high schools, and three alternative high school programs.

I joined the Renton family in July, 2006. The district had and maintains a uniquely strong sense of ownership and pride in their schools, vital community partnerships, a hard-working staff and a culture of caring and support for students and their families. The community has supported bonds and levies over many years resulting in phenomenal learning spaces (school buildings) for students and staff.

However, in 2006 achievement results were lagging. Achievement and opportunity gaps were evident. Systems were not in place to support district-wide improvements. Graduation rates were below 75% with an 8 to 10% dropout rate annually.

We are now celebrating the closing of some achievement gaps (i.e., middle school boys closing the gap with girls in literacy, and complete closure of the gap between African American and Hispanic performance and white student performance in literacy). We are celebrating a 93% graduation rate over the last two consecutive years and have reduced the dropout rate to below 3%. We are getting closer each year to our ultimate goal of graduating 100% of our students, eliminating dropout as well as achievement and opportunity gaps for our students.

Assessing my new district, I came to the conclusion that Renton was capable of significant and relatively rapid change because so much support was in place. “Readiness to benefit” from new information and systems and willingness to improve were evident. I focused first on validating many of Renton’s past efforts over the years and capitalized on existing strengths. Then, I set out to drive home the message that we could truly go from having good schools to having great schools in Renton based on my passionate belief that the student achievement gap could be eliminated by eliminating the gap between what we know about teaching and learning and what we do. Renton has made huge strides toward this goal and we will continue to work to extend our successes. We can do this. It is a matter of courageous system-wide leadership, collective will, and community support.
How have we come this far?

Three Actions:

. Established a clear vision of what we want to achieve. Our vision is worthy, provides hope, and validates the culture of the community and the needs of our students.
. Established goals, ambitious but reachable goals, with celebrations for incremental gains along the way . . . 74% to 79% to 82% to 93%...96%...98%...100%.
. Communicated and enlisted support. We empowered people and built a committed team.

In order to achieve the district’s long-term vision and short-term goals, staff collaborates and works on perfecting their skills to successfully meet the diverse learning needs of every student in the district. The Renton team is committed to the mission of the district and our service to students, thereby complementing a relentless focus on measurable results and a willingness to continuously improve.
Data

A specific strategy effectively employed to address the changes needed and close the gaps in student achievement in the Renton School District (RSD) is the use of evidence-based data to inspire a powerful sense of real urgency about the inequity achievement gaps represent, as well as to establish a sharp focus on improving learning for all students. Access to and analysis of data – reliable, transparent information – is a critical foundation to our on-going successful reform efforts. A data "warehouse" has been built to provide teachers, students, parents and administrators easy access to critical information that informs instruction and interventions, and supports the personalization of learning for every student.

Engage Community – Face Facts – Hold Courageous Conversations

Over 300 stakeholders (School Board Directors; Mayor and City Council members; leaders in civic organizations (i.e., Rotary, Kiwanis, Lions' Club); staff, students, and parents from throughout the district; staff from the state office and state professional organizations for administrators and principals;
and local business partners) participated in a "data carousel" process to review demographic and contextual data, as well as results of perceptual surveys from staff, students and parents, and academic achievement data including state assessment results, local benchmark assessment results, and classroom grades (GPA). Data was also provided regarding graduation rates, drop-out rates, number of students in Advanced Placement classes, and behavior referrals, suspensions and expulsions. Adherence to a common protocol as the data was examined provided a safe, non-judgmental approach to discussion of “the facts”. The intentional focus on analyzing and responding to data produced the urgency for change because the process generated an undeniable “current reality” regarding the degree to which we were – and were not - meeting student learning needs.

Under or over representation of groups in particular programs; stark differences in behavior referrals, suspensions, and expulsions among groups of students; and detailed aggregation and disaggregation of student achievement data made existing inequities abundantly clear to all stakeholders. Additionally, perceptual results on the surveyed belief of staff, students and parents regarding teachers, schools and the district provided critical information guiding the district’s work and further confirmed the profound need to raise achievement for all students and close the identified achievement and opportunity gaps. Analyses of these indicators are now used regularly to determine progress and to drive instructional changes, changes in support to teachers, and all district level decisions.

**Mission, Vision, Beliefs**

Early in my tenure I felt it was important to strengthen a connection among all constituencies with a deep understanding of our mission and the planned future accomplishments of the RSD. As a result of the data analysis process and follow-up efforts, newly energized mission, vision and goal statements were developed. To further convey this fresh vision, a new logo was designed and incorporated in district communications; it visually represents our aspirations for our students, with a focus on graduation and beyond. A tag line was also developed—*Launching Learning to Last a Lifetime*—and this is used to further "market" the message to Renton staff, students and the community that our responsibility for providing excellence in education is for
all Renton students.

As superintendent I also facilitated sessions where stakeholders identified a set of "foundational beliefs" essential to the achievement of our goals. These include: commitments to hard work, eradicating the achievement gap, a "no excuses" approach to low achievement, and an evidence-based approach to our work as well as a belief in the potential of all students. These foundational beliefs are frequently communicated to staff and community and revised with their input. I promoted "courageous conversations" regarding accountability for student achievement which led to a reinvigorated sense of shared purpose and commitment throughout the system.

Professional Development

Professional development (PD) to enhance the practice of teachers and leaders has been a tremendous endeavor in Renton. New curriculum adoptions providing teachers with material aligned to the new Common Core standards were necessary and required effective PD to implement them with fidelity. Training on research-proven instructional strategies (e.g., Powerful Teaching and Learning) and reflective practice, effective Professional Learning Community protocols and the effective use of data to drive instruction are a few of the critical areas in which PD has been focused.

While there has been very positive feedback on the value of the "initiatives" undertaken and the associated PD, an outcry for "take something off our plates" was also strong. Efforts to find an existing protocol to identify what could be taken away were unsuccessful, so I wrote (and copyrighted) "Gaining Back Time to Teach". I went to schools throughout the district and used the protocol to help identify efficiencies at the individual teacher, school and district level that could provide time back to classroom teachers for instruction and learning. The outcome of hundreds of staff participating in this protocol was a significant body of creative, insightful feedback, and changes were made at the school and district level that have increased efficiencies and reduced or eliminated some time-consuming tasks that took teachers away from their primary responsibility, teaching.

During my first two years in Renton, we could not fill math positions in our
high schools with certificated teachers endorsed or with degrees in mathematics in spite of extensive recruitment efforts both within and beyond the state. Substitute teachers had to fill those positions. Through my serving on the Professional Education Advisory Committee for Seattle University (S.U.), a unique program was developed to address this need. The Renton Mathematics Endorsement Academy was initiated collaboratively with S.U. professors and the RSD curriculum/professional development team. Reduced tuition expenses were offered, and RSD staff were identified and approved as adjunct professors, with S. U. staff monitoring. The Renton Chamber of Commerce developed a “sponsor a teacher” program so that teachers were individually supported by local businesses. We presently have 72 teachers K-12 who have participated, successfully passed the state assessment and are now endorsed in mathematics. Innovative thinking, willingness to support teachers and strong partnerships targeting a specific need delivered positive solutions that contribute to the content knowledge and skill set of all RSD mathematics teachers.

**Alignment**

The RSD aligned its mission, vision, beliefs, policies, curriculum/assessment adoption cycle, professional development and the effective use of information and data to complement a keen district-wide focus on academic achievement. While Renton’s culture of care and support for students and their families has been preserved, the shift toward our ACHIEVE culture has solidified and provides the structure to guide our annual goal setting:

- **Achievement Opportunities**
- **Community Partnerships**
- **High Expectations**
- **Implementation of Best Practices**
- **Engaged Students**
- **Vision shared and lived**
- **Effective Parent Partnerships**

This alignment is the direct result of the processes that galvanized the vast network of stakeholders in the district and throughout the community to analyze data, understand the value of research in making choices, and build
agreement and support for the direction of our work. Annual goals are set in each ACHIEVE area, monitored and evaluated, setting new achievable goals as results are reviewed, analyzed using “root cause analysis” to determine changes or continuation of strategies to meet each measurable goal.

The district developed a “Vision of Instruction” (VOI) framework, a project that came out of our district-wide needs analysis that has resulted in a shared understanding of what effective instruction demands for every student, every day in every classroom and environment. We have common language, clear understanding and deep conversations about what quality instruction “looks like”. Developed collaboratively by teachers, administrators and other instructional support staff, Renton’s VOI includes the following components: relationships, knowledge, skills, thinking, application and assessment. For each component, descriptive sub-components are accompanied by examples of teaching and learning activities that address the topic. These examples are specifically linked to district goals and initiatives. The VOI forms the foundation for classroom walk-throughs and a teacher reflection tool, and is the basis for current and future professional development as well as recruitment and hiring.

**Leadership**
Members of the RSD leadership team:

- Communicate and live our shared vision and mission
- Provide clear and transparent focus on student achievement
- Establish a sense of urgency to improve student achievement and raise standards/expectations
- Set personnel, instructional and resource priorities based on student learning goals
- Provide leadership in instruction and professional development, empowering others
- Emphasize the use of data for instructional improvement and decision-making
- Align operations on all levels to common goals and build coherence within the system
- Maintain a powerful guiding coalition of key community and school stakeholders
• Celebrate successes at every opportunity

We operate from a theory of action that is directly related to improving student learning: if we improve the quality of instruction in the classroom and the quality of leadership throughout the district, then student learning will improve and the achievement gap will close. I am unwavering in my belief that all means all and each means each. I am relentless in my pursuit of equity and excellence for each student.

I meet individually each year with every one of the 80 leaders in the district (those who supervise staff and/or budget) to discuss expectations, progress and successes, and to learn what more I can do to support them. These one hour sessions provide a connection, personally and professionally, with each of the leaders in the district; they also model our purpose at the district level, to support schools and student achievement. We are also engaged in Central Office Transformation, using the research about leadership at the district level, and targeting restructuring of our time and efforts to directly support the work happening in Renton schools.

I conduct "Listen and Learn" meetings monthly open to all staff in the district. There is no formal agenda; I answer questions and dialog with interested employees from throughout the system, working toward creating an even greater sense of unity of purpose. This provides a forum for all voices to be heard, and for learning and teaching to be discussed directly with the superintendent.

**Take Care of the Team**

Renton is blessed with “wrap around services” for students through strong partnerships with the community and organizations. Examples include:

- Communities in Schools of Renton, who provide school-based family liaisons to support students in need of access to the clothing and food banks, medical care or other support services;
- Renton Rotary, who provides “coats for kids”, dictionaries for every third grader to own personally, and grants for teachers for classroom supplies and innovative projects;
- Business partners, who provide books for our district-wide “book buddies” program and financial support for programs like robotics, after school tutoring and field trip learning
experiences for students.

Wrap around services are also critical for staff. I enjoy a photography hobby and have been able to use it in my work. When I do presentations, one of my photos is up on the screen to “match” the message and link to the concept – visually–creating a special connection with participants. I start every morning with a “Happy Birthday” message to staff on their special day, accompanied by a photo to wish them a great day and elicit a smile. Before summer, winter, spring breaks and upon each return, I send a poem or a message of gratitude for the work staff does and the difference they make with student achievement. I find one of my “favorite” photos to match the message. This has become a “trademark”. I carry “reflection cards” that have one of my photos on one side with my name and district – and on the back a message to bring a smile (i.e., "You have to dream anyway, so why not dream big?"). Pictures speak a thousand words and these help in some small ways to build and support the team.

Each winter holiday break my cabinet leadership team set aside a week after work to make cookies for our district staff. We make 4,000 cookies and deliver them before break with a photo of all of us “in the kitchen” and a strong message of being appreciative for the hard work staff does every day to make a difference in student success. What started out as “just an idea” using my mom’s cookie recipe from my childhood has become a “tradition” in the RSD.

High expectations and urgency about outcomes must be accompanied by lots of support, both professional (in such realms as developing and applying new skills to achieve stronger achievement), as well as personal. I am guided in this belief by the widely used quotation, "No one knows how much you know until they know how much you care."

America – we can do this. Each leader in every community has the responsibility to step up and make a difference in public education.

Additional Resources

