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Successful Learning Launch

Ocotillo Elementary School

Washington Elementary School District

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Successful Learning Launch By Jenai Ali Emmel

School	Ocotillo Elementary School
Principal	Dr. Steve Murosky
District	Washington Elementary School District
Highlight	General strategy

Narrative	<p>A District Decision</p> <p>With just two days notice, Steve Murosky became the principal of Ocotillo Elementary School. In January 2014, Ocotillo was an elementary school failing to meet the needs of students and teachers. Washington Elementary School District responded by making a principal change mid-year and by selecting Murosky as it’s new leader. Murosky, a former high school teacher and district director specializing in academic supports, had almost a decade of experience, none of which was in building leadership.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>Phase 1: Turnaround Years 1 and 2</i></p> <p>The First Steps as Principal: Addressing Belief Systems</p> <p>Morusky spent the first days as principal meeting with teachers and listening to stories about Ocotillo’s history and challenges. After meeting with every member of the school community, he learned that his new school was toxic, divided, and lacked belief in the students they served. The new principal noted that conversations commonly began with statements like “our students can’t...” and he knew this is where the turnaround strategy had to begin. Murosky devoted the earliest steps within his 90-day plan to addressing belief systems within teachers and by standing in opposition to the idea that students could not achieve at higher levels.</p> <p>Murosky developed a new instructional vision for Ocotillo – keeping students in class and delivering quality tier 1 instruction daily. He knew that while mindsets needed to shift and suspensions needed to decline, teachers also needed to develop new instructional skills and take more ownership over the discipline of the student body. Teachers needed more support and guidance from a stable leadership team. Stability was something that had been missing from Ocotillo – the leadership team had been a revolving door of program coordinators, assistant principals, and student services liaisons. At the end of year one, 22 teachers would determine that the new vision for Ocotillo exceeded their desire and ability.</p> <p>Reshaping the School Leadership Team</p> <p>Murosky also immediately reshaped the leadership team as a mechanism to gain broader buy-in from faculty and staff. In addition to a small administrative team, he created a site council with representatives from each grade-level. Murosky, when reflecting on his vision of distributive leadership said, “I would rather have them own the solution and ideas rather than mandate them.” This approach proved difficult at first because teachers had limited opportunity to develop leadership skills or experience making school-wide decisions.</p> <p>Organizing for “Best First” Instruction</p>
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Distributed leadership and positive behavior incentives were organizing principles for Ocotillo's new vision, but the focus on tier 1 instruction required transformational change. Adult conversations needed to shift from whether or not teaching was possible to discussions on instructional strategies that support standards.

At the start, very few teachers could deliver "best first" instruction. To support teachers in lesson design, the master schedule was adapted mid-year to include professional learning communities embedded into the school day. Over time, teachers began to deliver lessons aligned to standards and to design activities and that engaged students from bell-to-bell.

Leading Culture Change

High quality instruction affected student culture and discipline. However, a student discipline committee was also initiated to develop a plan to address the culture of student referrals and suspensions. The committee decided to implement PBIS as a universal strategy to create positive and incentive-based interactions with students. They also worked with teachers to identify in-class solutions to addressing student behavior.

Teachers began to refer to their own ideas in addressing discipline and to seeing the link between instruction, culture, and achievement.

Early Wins

In year one of the strategy, referrals would decrease from 1100 to 350 and by 70% overall. These results, paired with effective instruction, signaled that Ocotillo was turning around.

After two years of successfully instituting a new vision for leadership, tier 1 instruction and student culture, the leadership team began to tackle the next phase of school-wide improvement - "the Emergency Room" (ER).

Phase Two: Sustainability Year 3

The Emergency Room: First Attempt

The leadership team at Ocotillo established an intervention lab, called the emergency room, to support students performing at the bottom quartile of their grade-level. The strategy anchors on Interventionists who utilize differentiated centers to focus on student-specific skill gaps.

Learning Launch: The Next Level Vision

While the ER is a highly effective strategy for 25% of the student body, Murosky recognizes that the solution does not support the remaining 75% of students at Ocotillo who also need tier 2 interventions. The leadership team utilizes the PLE Learning Launch to address this challenge. As a first response, the leadership team includes "intervention" as one of three specials offered to students, so that all students benefit from tier 2 supports.

Serving 100% of students means that teachers must participate in the Tier 2 intervention process. Ocotillo designs a hybrid-learning model to support teachers and students throughout the learning process. The leadership team selected an online curriculum as a resource for differentiated, individualized learning in each class. As students access tailored, online programming, teachers concentrate on providing small groups instruction for students with shared learning gaps.

After a few days of implementation, Murosky and team conduct walkthroughs to assess the success of the earning launch and the spread of tier 2 interventions. Observations revealed that weak technology and random small group instruction were major barriers to implementation. While teachers were fully committed to the strategy, many were just beginning to develop the necessary skillset. While Interventionists offered Ocotillo a learning lab for data driven instruction and targeted interventions, there was limited capacity to implement the model school-wide. In reflection, Murosky realizes that while the intervention was designed to support students it did not sufficiently consider the capacity of teachers.

That said, the team considers the learning launch a success. The first year of sustainability yielded invaluable insights and reflections that will inform new program designs next year.

As Ocotillo moves into its second year of sustainability, the leadership team will work more closely with teachers to devise a new instructional model. Murosky wonders if teachers can learn to deliver high quality, tier 2 instruction in their own classrooms.

Update

4.16.18 Update from Principal Murosky -

We have continued to work with our tier 2 interventions in the classroom with the other 75% of the students not in the intervention lab. This intervention is very fluid and flexible and serves students K-6. Our interventionist began to work with classroom teachers to plan effective tier 2 interventions in the classroom, group students by skills needed, and provided teachers with research-based intervention materials, depending on the skills taught. This was a welcome gift for our teachers because it helped them, and trained them, on how to effectively provide this intervention. We have seen a gradual release of the oversight from our interventionist and teachers are really taking a greater ownership of this planning. During the Fall individual data meetings, teachers began to ask if they could use the strategies and intervention materials they are now using in their tier2 instruction during their tier I instruction/small group time! This was awesome!!

When Ocotillo began the UVA turnaround project our school was one point away from a D label from the State of Arizona. As of September 2017, we are now labeled a B school for the very first time!