

Data Reveals Real Progress in Closing the Achievement Gap

Administrators, faculty, staff, and students at Stevens Elementary have something to smile about. Data collected at the end of the last school year shows a significant improvement in efforts to close the achievement gap in grades K – 5.

The data, known as Virtual Comparison Group (VCG) data is collected at the end of each school year via an assessment tool provided by the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA). The data compares a school, as well as an individual student's performance to other schools or students who are similar or 'like' them in terms of demographic indicators.

"Our data indicates that over the past three years we have continued to improve our growth and performance so much so that in Kindergarten alone we are less than one point below the national recommended norms in math and 2.5 points above the national norms in reading," said Dr. Angela Pollock, principal.

"When you look at the school wide data, in grades 3 – 5, we beat all of the national benchmarks in language usage assessments. In grades K – 5, we beat all benchmarks in both math and reading," added Thomas Knepper, assistant principal.

"Also, the data shows that we are growing all of our children – even the highest achieving students. Sometimes these children don't show growth because efforts are more focused on the lower achieving students," noted Mr. Knepper.

How do they explain this growth and these positive numbers?

"We have an intense coaching focus at our schools. We have a full time literacy coach and a part time math coach who work very closely with our teachers. The coaches have built trusting relationships with the teachers. They seek out the coaches. The teachers ask them to help with planning, to model best instructional practices for them, and to provide feedback on their own teaching so that they can grow and improve," said Dr. Pollock.

"In addition, we were named a Focus School four years ago based on our low performance on PSSA tests. As a result of that, we have a professional coach from the Success for All Foundation, who comes and coaches in all grades and subjects. She also provides important professional development for our teachers," Dr. Pollock explained.

This coach knows exactly how to 'push' teachers to improve their practices, according to Mr. Knepper. She asks tough questions and encourages them to analyze their data constantly. As a result of work with the Success for All Foundation, Foundation administrators have asked that Stevens Elementary participate in their Blueprints for Healthy Youth Development website (<http://www.blueprintsprograms.com/>) as an evidence-based program that helps young people reach their full potential.

"The district does assessment testing, known as MAP (Measure of Academic Progress) three times a year, which also is an NWEA program. As a result of this data, we are able to develop strategy groups and target small group instruction in such areas as guided reading and math that targets very strategically what skills each child needs to learn," explains Dr. Pollock.

"This approach, along with the coaching, has proven to help significantly. We also have a Director of Early Childhood Education in the district, and when we have problems with behavior in our primary grades, she helps us develop specific behavior plans to help these students become more successful in the classroom," Dr. Pollock noted.

"It's a team effort and it is a constant work in progress. Our school counselor gets involved and we have an elementary student assistance program that we can also access if needed," Dr. Pollock said.

"We are extremely encouraged that we are moving in the right direction and we are seeing growth in our students. We still have many challenges; most notably, 50% of our student population is transient which we know is a function of poverty. But, we couldn't be happier that we are making a positive impact on the lives of our students," Mr. Knepper underscored.

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