

The work behind the glory - being named a Blue Ribbon School

With coffee mugs at hand, Chanute Elementary fourth grade teachers sit in student desks, eyes focused on a Smartboard as they digest student math scores during the first nine weeks.

Shannon Finley asked her peers what they might do for a student who does well in a small group, but gets lost when she's teaching a whole group lesson.

Data from weekly assessments show she did well, but "then on the quarterly report she was assessed again and didn't retain anything," Finley said.

"If she has all the time in the world, can she do it?" Debra Bearden asked. "Can they assign someone to help her with testing?" asked another.

Finley and Bearden agreed to share an aide who helps individual students with testing and to not test on the same dates.

These are the kinds of discussions that take place in all Chanute Public Schools, when teachers meet in their Professional Learning Communities (PLC) to evaluate what they're teaching, review how their students are doing, what they can do for students who don't understand what they're learning, and what they can do for those who've already mastered the material being taught. These essential questions are the driving force behind the weekly PLC meetings for each grade level at the elementary school, said Principal Gary Wheeler.

"No longer are teachers an island," he continued. The seven fourth grade teachers are not teaching their own students. Rather, there are seven teachers responsible for all the fourth graders.

It takes time to make changes within a school that move it from being a good school to one that is highly exemplary in regards to student achievement. CES was recognized with a Blue ribbon award this fall, given to schools that perform among the best in their state, or as schools that make the fastest progress closing achievement gaps. CES is one of four Kansas schools and among 329 others recognized by Education Secretary John B. King. A total of 279 public schools and 50 private schools from across the nation were recognized.

The changes which resulted in Chanute Elementary being nationally recognized as a Blue Ribbon Award Winning School this fall began more than a decade ago. First, the Chanute community recognized the need to update its schools and worked to pass a bond issue to build a new elementary school and high school and remodel the middle school. Secondly, the school board hired Kathryn Taylor as the new Assistant Superintendent, and she introduced Professional Learning Communities into all the school buildings.

Together, those factors allowed new possibilities at Chanute Elementary.

A new elementary attendance center combined four elementary schools into one, a decision that proved to be "critical in the improved success of our students," Wheeler said. "Bringing all the teachers together in one building means we have all the resources we need here to provide interventions to kids. We don't need to send any one of our kids to another school" for Chapter I Reading or special education services. Likewise, it became possible for all the teachers from each grade level to meet together and coordinate teaching and testing.

"The PLC has been the driving force to make our achievement scores increase. They have helped to shape and create a culture of systemic processes for all of our kids, instead of single classrooms and single teachers being responsible for everything," said Matt Koester, Assistant Principal at CES.

"PLCs are very valuable because as professionals you are able to talk about strategies with other professionals and teaching ideas," Kathi Emling said.

"We are able to look at data that is kept to determine not only the strengths and weaknesses of our students, but also to look at the strengths of our PLC," Peggy Myers said.

Over the past several years, the teachers evaluated their curriculum in each subject area and identified 10-12 essential outcomes that the students must master to be successful at the next grade level. They also became experts at testing and data collection. Then they were trained in RTI, response to intervention.

"The process of RTI is where we have a common assessment within a grade level. Teachers give the same directions and have the same expectations" through the testing process. "Then we look at that data to

determine which kids need an intervention to be successful with that objective,” Koester explained. “Within the PLC, the teachers spend time discussing who is best to provide that intervention, strategies that have been used in the regular classroom and what other methods can be used in the delivery of instruction.”

Each child at CES gets 90 minutes of reading every day, a whole group lesson taught by the teacher, then Tier II and Tier III groups for students needing help with a concept, such as vocabulary or fluency, or more help with the prerequisite skills to be successful in their grade level.

“So some students are getting English or math twice a day, depending on need,” Wheeler said. Crystal Golay shared in PLC that she was concerned about her “bubble kids” who appear to be floundering and asked for suggestions.

“I don’t know how many of you are using the IStation (software) but it’s really helpful,” Shannon Sommers said. “It will tell you where kids are at, tier I, tier II, or tier III, and prints out lessons.” There is a webinar that shows how to use IStation for differentiation and “you can like IStation on Facebook and get more educational info,” she added.

Sommer’s fourth graders use the IStation for reading and math each week. It provides enrichment to those who need something at a higher level and remediation for those who need something at a little lower level.

“I think the students like IStation because it allows them to work at their instructional level and it is designed in an interactive game format,” she said.

MaKayla Becannon and Jacob Frese were enthusiastic.

“Of course we do,” Frese said about liking the program. “You get to learn math and defeat villains with superheroes all rolled into one.”

“Math is my favorite,” Becannon added.

Principal Jim Goracke suggested the fourth and fifth grade teachers have their students keep a log of their progress on weekly tests.

“Teachers in the 4-5 pod use data folders for students to track and report their progress for themselves and their parents,” Sommers said. “We have learned from Mr. Goracke that students graphing and keeping track of their progress has more impact than any instructional strategy a teacher could use their classroom.”

As student achievement rises, the teachers and administrators continue to look for holes, revise strategies and collect more data. One area targeted for improvement is that fourth essential question, how to maximize learning and increase expectations for students who have already mastered the material.

“I don’t think we’re ever satisfied with the results that we get,” Koester said. “(We do not think) now we’re a blue ribbon school and we’ll be good forever. We really need to take it and use it as a springboard to continually increase our expectations and continue to work for increased assessment scores.”