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Allentown Elementary reaches achievement milestone

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For nearly as long as the federal government has been in the business of using test scores to measure achievement, Allentown Elementary has found itself on some sort of list of low performers.

“I was talking to the school board about it. This school or district has been part of every school improvement initiative, program all the way back to – I don’t know, as long as I’ve been here,” said Principal Anthony Blinn, a 14-year veteran at the school.

The semantics have changed over the years. At one point they were a “school in need of improvement.” Most recently, a “focus school.” But after years of retooling curriculums, trying new professional development and applying for grants, the school has proved it found the right formula. It got word late last month from the state’s Department of Education that, by significant margins, it had hit the state’s two criteria to be removed from the list of focus schools.

Focus schools are those where the achievement gap on standardized tests is the widest between low-income and special education populations and the rest of the students. In Allentown, that gap narrowed significantly last year. The elementary school’s low-income students even outperformed state averages in math and reading.

Teachers and Blinn said the school had been making efforts to personalize instruction, grouping students according to specific skills they needed to work on, and giving them more freedom with their assignments.

“It’s looking at each child individually, rather than just a whole group,” third-grade teacher Brigitte Paquin said.

On the technology side, the school used grant dollars to purchase Chromebooks and boost classroom libraries.

But the biggest difference, they said, might have come from changes outside the classroom. Every six weeks, teachers meet with administrators, special education staff and support staff to talk about every child's progress, strengths and weaknesses.

The process, called "data teams," takes about a day. Each team meets for an hour and a half to go over what's working, and what's not for each child.

"Everyone's there," said Kim Clark, a special education teacher. "The reading specialist is there, the speech pathologist is there, and the guidance counselor is there. So we can really talk about the whole child in those meetings, and not just, 'She's having trouble with reading.'"

The process can be tough to balance, because it means time outside the classroom for teachers and special education staff. But Clark said it has been particularly helpful at catching those kids who weren't the lowest performers, but who also weren't progressing much, if at all.

The school also started administering culture and climate surveys to parents and staff. (The results of the parent survey are posted online (<http://aes.sau53.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/AES-Parent-Survey-Results-1.pdf>.) Teachers said the suggestions pushed the school to communicate more with parents and to substantially increase enrichment and extra-curricular offerings. The school now fields a cheer team, offers a recycling club and participates in the New Hampshire Lego League.

"I think it helps them be more interested in being here. They know they're not just coming here and doing work all day," first-grade teacher Kim Foss said.

Lindsay Goulet, the mother of a first-grader, grew up in Bow. She and her husband bought a home in Allenstown before Goulet was pregnant, and were leery of sending their son to the town's elementary school when he was old enough.

"We'd never heard great things about the school," she said.

But based on what she's seen, the school has made big strides.

"The staff around here leads with their hearts," she said.

Her son comes home energized from school, and never frustrated, she said. They asked parents for ideas about extra-curriculars, she said, and she suggested the Lego League.

"I'd always hear people say, 'Communication isn't very good.' But they've really changed that," she said.

For many who have long worked at Allenstown Elementary, the school's low ranking has been a double-edged sword. It offered some extra funding, incentive to think about ways to improve, and motivation to get off the list. But it also became a stigma that affected the way people viewed the school and the efforts of the staff.

"I had a parent in my classroom that went on and Googled our school when they moved to this town and was ready to pull her kid," said Foss, who grew up in Allenstown and has worked at the school for 15 years.

"Do I think it means something and forced change? Yeah, I think it did," said Clark, who has worked at the school for 21 years – and who attended herself. "But I think just in our minds, it didn't really mean anything because this has always been a school to celebrate."

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