

## The Three Elements of Success

We often hear that success is achieved through hard work and persistence. Achievement and success in the school environment is no different. Yet, there are some characteristics of successful schools that are unique to the school environment. Schools require focused collaboration between the teacher, student and the parents to achieve success. Truly exceptional school districts are centered on what matters, the student.

In small school districts, it is easy to become distracted by all the state mandated reports, multiple overlapping plans, facility repairs and improvements, Board agendas and policy updates and sometimes, even natural disasters. While an argument can be made that each of these is important and contributes to the accountability of a school, they do not directly result in student learning and success. Rather, these requirements distract us from the work and efforts that produce student learning and achievement. The key to staying focus is asking yourself, "How do we insure students are learning and continuously progressing?" A successful district like **Cold Spring Elementary School District** can answer the question because of three key characteristics: (1) the implementation and effective use of formative assessments, (2) the integration and collaboration among all staff of the essential standards, (3) shared ownership supported by personal relationships.

Using formative assessments to plan instruction and motivate student learning works. This is by far one of the most powerful tools a teacher can use to plan and modify instruction based on the identified student need. Teachers who use student data to plan instruction and motivate learning achieve remarkable results.

Three years ago, the Cold Spring School District did not have a district-wide common formative assessment system. It should be noted that the school was not a poor performing school. This is attributed to the fact that Cold Spring does have an exceptional group of teachers. In my first year, we immediately implemented a common formative assessment system district-wide. In addition, we created a year-long assessment calendar that included assessments every 4-6 weeks. This allowed us to monitor individual student data. This allowed the entire teaching staff, including our intervention teachers and specialist teachers, to monitor what was working and what was not working. We could then determine whether our intervention and enrichment programs were effective. Most importantly, it allowed students to monitor their monthly goals and their progress toward their year-long goals. Immediately, we observed

students taking ownership of their own learning. This progress was supported and encouraged by the entire school community.

Formative assessments alone however will not improve the academic program. Schools must work hard to integrate the academic program horizontally and vertically across all subject matter areas. Cold Spring, like many other schools, had a number of excellent programs, like Visual and Performing Arts, PE and STEAM, that operated in isolation without any cross-pollination of content. These programs are so much more powerful when the curriculum is fully integrated based on the individual needs of the student. Combining the power of formative assessments with the integration of learning through collaboration results in an exponential growth in learning.

To take advantage of this opportunity, Cold Spring restructured its schedule to create time for the Music/Drama/Theatre teacher, Visual Arts teacher, PE teacher and the STEAM teacher to plan and work in collaboration with the regular classroom teachers. This time was used to build upon and support the essential standards/core concepts being taught in the regular classroom. It is essential at the beginning of each school year for the specialist teachers to work with each of the classroom teachers to align and integrate content standards into project-based learning units. Only then is the students' work closely aligned to the learning occurring in the regular classroom. The lessons are then periodically revised based on student benchmark formative assessment data.

Finally, how a school responds to the needs of each student as a staff is essential. Effective teams understand the value of shared ownership in the needs of each student and his or her potential. At Cold Spring, that shared ownership of student achievement was most notable during the recovery efforts after the Thomas Fire and January 9th Debris Flow. After the debris flow, the school community came together and worked around the clock to search for missing students, parents and grandparents. The debris flow killed 23 people in our community, including two of our students, a kindergartner and a sixth grader. We also lost 2 siblings, 2 grandparents and one father. We had a sixth grade student and her mother fighting for their lives in the ICU for 31 days. There was massive destruction and our community looked like a war zone.

Fortunately, the Cold Spring School campus suffered minor damages. However, teachers, staff, students, parents and the community experienced serious emotional trauma. The greater community came together to aid in healing the hearts and minds of our community. Each classroom teacher was provided a school psychologist, hospice worker or mental health professional to support both the teacher and students. For the remainder of the school year, there was always a counselor on campus to support

students, staff and parents as needed. This support paid immediate benefits. Teachers incorporated creative projects into the student's day to begin the healing process. This permitted students to reflect, process, and grow.

Every teacher within the Cold Spring Elementary School District served as a pillar of strength for the entire school community. The teachers demonstrated how essential it is to meet the individual needs of every child both emotionally and academically by fostering a family atmosphere. The District recovered and grew stronger through the strong leadership of our teachers. The school community reflected unity and love.

At the end of that traumatic year, the students' summative scores on the 2017-2018 California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) proved to be the highest test scores in the state of California with 92% of the students meeting/exceeding the standards in English Language Arts and 90% of students meeting/exceeding the standards in mathematics. A year later, the students' 2018-2019 summative assessment scores on the CAASPP ranked the Cold Spring School District as the highest performing district in the state in both ELA and Math.

At Cold Spring, the implementation of formative assessments and integrated lessons along with a culture of shared ownership resulted in immediate improvements to student achievement. These results are consistent with schools throughout the country that have used this approach to improve student achievement.

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