When the status quo is no longer an option at a struggling school, and the consequence of conformity yields persistent failure, it is time to move to a shared leadership model. Teacher leaders believe that all students can succeed. They also believe that all teachers need collaborative support to help their students realize that goal of success.

Not long ago, this idea was illustrated in dramatic fashion at a Phoenix-area inner city school that had long been struggling with both state and federal academic indicators. All the elements for failure were at work there: A high-density, low Supplemental Education Services population with significant crime and gang-related violence. Students change schools frequently, are 98% English Language Learners, and 94% are qualified for a free lunch program.

Faced with the challenge to improve the school’s performance levels, teacher leaders emerged. They then determined that they needed to work collectively, and formed the Instructional Support Team (IST). Together, these leaders developed a process for sharing decision-making and leadership roles. The key was teamwork, teacher leadership, and collaboration across all program areas. They developed a “Response to Intervention” model, which encompassed:

• Assessment for the identification of risk of failure and bimonthly progress monitoring
• Proportionally appropriate services based upon risk assessment
• Positive Behavior and Intervention Support (PBIS)
• Extended-day programs
• Grade-level coaches
• Instructional specialists
• Teacher/peer coaches

Reference:
At the heart of this team effort was the analysis of the assessments to inform instruction. Too often, it is forgotten that assessment is about the student—and for the student. The IST helped launch a Literacy Lab that was uniquely positioned to translate this belief into action for both individual remedial needs as well as for the teacher and the class as a whole. Literature specifically leveled for phonics, comprehension, and vocabulary formed the basis of guided reading lessons that interconnected to classroom themes and focus skills.

Through the Literacy Lab, instruction can now be targeted for the ever-changing needs of the students. This allows for the application of more personalized intervention, so that social/behavioral problems are minimized—and the academic opportunities are maximized.

This concept is dynamic, flexible, and drives the school’s newfound collaborative decision-making process. Working together, the Instructional Support Team is able to support the school by identifying assessment tools, maintaining the database, and monitoring instructional decisions and subsequent teacher support need for focused instruction.

By providing an opportunity for this type of targeted teacher support and shared leadership, this school was able to jump two levels and move from “Underperforming” to “Performing Plus,” while at the same time reaching “Adequate Yearly Progress”—a feat many thought impossible.

About the authors

Dr. Pam Robbins holds an Ed.D. in Educational Leadership and a Master of Arts in Education/ Curriculum and Instruction, both earned at University of Phoenix, and a BS in Elementary Education. She has over 20 years of experience in both public and private education. Her latest research on reading intervention can be accessed through ProQuest.

Read more about Dr. Robbins in Phoenix Focus, the online publication for University of Phoenix alumni. The article can be found at: http://www.phxfocus.com/2010-01/index.htm.

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