



Using Continuous Improvement to Close the Achievement Gap

By Brenda LeBrasse and Patti Pierce, Colorado Springs School District 11

The administration and staff at Holmes Middle School in Colorado Springs, CO, is proud of the performance and achievement of its students and have consistently demonstrated a quest for excellence in education. At Holmes, the data from the last five years speaks for itself. From 2002-2003, Colorado State Assessment scores didn't show significant growth, so Principal Brenda LeBrasse implemented an instructional framework called "Response to Intervention with a Behavior Component Woven in Called Positive Behavioral Support" (see Figures 1 and 2, below).

LeBrasse and her staff soon discovered the best practices implemented at Holmes through the three-tiered pyramid of instructional framework resulted in all students' needs being met. Holmes was named a John J. Irwin School of Excellence, a recognition given to the top 8% of Colorado schools based on overall academic performance from 2006 to 2008.

Holmes Middle School has 782 students in sixth through eighth grade. Approximately 29% of students are economically disadvantaged. Ethnic diversity is reflective of the area with 1% of students being American-Indian, 2% Asian, 5% African-American, 15% Hispanic and 77% Caucasian. Eight percent are students with disabilities, 1% are English language learners, and 20% are in the gifted and talented program.

Organizational processes

Holmes follows the principles of the Malcolm Baldrige education criteria for continuous quality improvement (CQI). CQI has given the school the tools to help staff focus on learning, results and school improvement, an initiative the district started several years ago. Since then, all staff has been trained in the CQI process, which is used throughout the building. It's a systematic, problem-solving approach to improving any system. All programs, activities and processes are aligned to achieve common goals that are focused on results to bring about continuous improvement.

Some of the core values of CQI—learning-centered education and focus on results—are the same as those of a professional learning community. The problem-solving process of the plan-do-study-act (PDSA) cycle is used schoolwide, as well as individually by teachers and students. This process is used to write the school improvement plan, propose policy changes, organize special student or parent events, look at cafeteria usage, adjust the master schedule, plan for parent-teacher conferences and explore the instructional focus of the essential skills class. Everything at Holmes is cycled through this problem-solving process.

Other CQI tools widely used throughout the school are the issue bin, plus/delta, consensogram and affinity diagram. These are used in team meetings, staff meetings and professional development training. In



addition, students are trained to effectively use all of these tools, especially the PDSA cycle. To begin, the teacher models a weekly PDSA process with his or her class, and then it is implemented by individual students. By using this process, students take greater ownership for their learning and realize their important role in the learning process. The school has moved from being a teaching system to a learning system, meaning the teachers are focused on evaluating student results, and students are engaged in continuously assessing their learning as they seek improvement.

Another example of CQI in the classroom is student data folders. At the beginning of the school year, students determine their strengths and weaknesses by analyzing their Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) scores (see reading, writing, math and science CSAP scores from 2004-08 in Figures 3-6, below). This establishes the foundation for setting personal achievement goals in reading, writing and math. They learn to write strategic, specific, measurable, attainable, results-based and timely goals. Data is collected and monitored in a timely manner and students identify the root causes of their failure to meet certain goals. All of the information is kept in the student's personal data folder.

Meeting the needs of all students

From 2002 to 2004, Holmes did not meet adequate yearly progress (AYP) on the CSAP. As a result, the school was placed on academic watch. One subgroup in particular—students with special needs—did not meet AYP standards three years in a row, and gaps still existed in other minority subgroups. The entire school community began to look for ways to improve test scores and raise the achievement level for all students. The school's leadership emphasized the importance of moving students from one CSAP proficiency level to the next. Students who were on the cusp were identified and targeted for special instruction. The building leadership team began to look for ways to supplement and support instruction to move the gap kids to the next level.

To meet this need, staff began providing supplemental tutorials during the second semester of the 2004-2005 school year. To receive this additional help, students were identified by academic achievement data, not by socioeconomic status, ethnicity or gender. Later that spring, the district asked for volunteer school sites to pilot the response to intervention (Rtl) model during the coming school year. Realizing the district needed to do business differently if it was going to make a difference in the achievement of all students, the staff and administration applied for and was accepted to pilot this initiative for the 2004-2005 school year.

The Rtl framework was initially developed as a more logical and proactive response to the traditional special education services discrepancy model. But it has become much more than that. It provides interventions and support to all students performing below grade level. Rtl is a framework that promotes a well-



integrated system, connecting general, compensatory, gifted and special education and providing high-quality, standards-based instruction and intervention that is matched to students' academic, social-emotional and behavioral needs. The overarching purpose of school-wide RtI implementation is to improve education outcomes for all students.

RtI is a proactive, three-tiered approach to address academic and behavioral difficulties, whether a child is working below grade level or is gifted and not being sufficiently challenged. The major components of RtI are:

- Universal screening to identify students who are not making expected academic progress.
- High-quality, standards-based instruction and intervention matched to students' individual needs.
- Evidenced-based, tiered interventions with increasing levels of intensity, frequency and duration.
- Collaborative educational decisions based on data derived from frequent monitoring of student performance and rate of learning.

RtI relies on ongoing data analysis to inform instructional interventions, flexible use of building personnel who work with students, as well as collaborative problem solving among staff and parents to enhance all students' performance. The move to implement RtI was aided by the many processes already in place, such as collaboration, data-driven decision making and high-quality instruction.

Tier-two intervention

The first step was to use a standard protocol system to identify students for supplemental tutoring in math or reading. In fall 2004, all students who scored partially proficient or unsatisfactory on the CSAP test given the previous spring were automatically scheduled into a math or reading tutorial, which is considered a tier-two intervention. This class, which is in addition to their regular language arts or math class, was scheduled daily for 45 minutes in place of one of their exploratory classes. Math and literacy tutors were hired using grant money to teach six (two at each grade level) tutorial classes a day.

Each class of 10-12 students uses SuccessMaker, a computer-based software program. Half of the students work individually on the computer for half the class period, while the other half has direct instruction. Then, the groups of students switch. Students track their progress weekly and set personal goals for reaching grade-level benchmarks. Each student knows exactly how many sessions are needed to reach their grade level target. When those targets are met, students "graduate" from the program and re-enter their exploratory class.



Other tier-two interventions used at Holmes besides SuccessMaker math and reading are Study Island, Jamestown Critical Reading, Advancement via Individual Determination, 9 Good Habits, Proficiency by Design and Scholastic Reading XL.

The next step was to establish a problem-solving team at Holmes. This team uses a problem-solving process to meet the academic and behavioral needs of students who are not making sufficient progress. The problem-solving process includes a structured format for analyzing possible reasons for a student's academic or behavioral needs and planned interventions. Using this approach when exploring, defining and prioritizing a teacher's concerns helps the team make efficient use of time and increases the probability it will select the right interventions. The team meets weekly and is composed of a variety of educational staff, including regular-education teachers, special-education teachers, a literacy-resource teacher, a social worker, a psychologist, administrators and parents.

The process begins when a teacher collects data about a student's performance—including information gathered from his or her parents—and brings this to the problem-solving team. To analyze the problem, the team may need to gather additional data, conduct observations in the instructional setting or perform focused assessments. Once the problem has been defined, the team, with input from the student's teachers and parents, develops an instructional and behavioral intervention plan that matches the identified student's need and has the most likelihood of success. At this point, the individual student plan may include a tier-two intervention for the first time or, if the student is already receiving a tier-two intervention, the recommendation could be to increase the intensity and duration or to implement a different intervention. Another option is to begin a tier-three intervention.

Additionally, a major part of the plan is to establish how the progress monitoring will occur, what measures will be used and who will be responsible for gathering that data. Holmes uses DIBELS, AIMSWeb, Curriculum-Based Measurement and data from SuccessMaker for its progress monitoring. During the process, the problem-solving team establishes a timeline for collecting the data, and a date is scheduled to re-evaluate the student's progress.

Moving on to tier-three

The tier-three interventions, like those in tier two, are in addition to the regular classroom instruction in reading and math. These interventions are scheduled during exploratory or essential skills class time. Tier three intensive supports are intended for students with significant or chronic deficits, as well as for students with significant underachievement, whether above or below grade level.



Moving to a tier-three intervention is determined by the problem-solving team after several individualized interventions have resulted in limited progress. This is based on the achievement gap between the student's progress and the expected benchmark. The interventions in tier three are skill-specific and can be delivered by a variety of providers. This is a smaller group of students (three to five per teacher). Examples of the tier-three interventions used at Holmes are LANGUAGE!, SIOP, SuccessMaker Math/Reading, Barbara Wise Linguistics, Corrective Reading/Math and Lindamood Bell, as well as Double Accelerated Math and Proficiency by Design for GT students.

The positive behavior support (PBS) model implemented at Holmes is complemented by other programs that were already in place, such as Bully Proofing, Holmes Life Skills (a behavior modification program), Project Wisdom (for character education) and Where Everybody Belongs. The final components necessary for implementation of PBS are procedures for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of the discipline system regularly and frequently.

To ensure the effective, efficient, relevant and sustainable implementation of the schoolwide discipline system, administrators make sure staff members receive information that is accurate, timely and easily available to guide decision making. The data is reviewed regularly, and data-based action plans are written. The RtI/PBS integrated instructional framework is working to increase achievement for all students with a variety of academic and behavioral needs.

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(Scroll down for more figures)

Figure 1

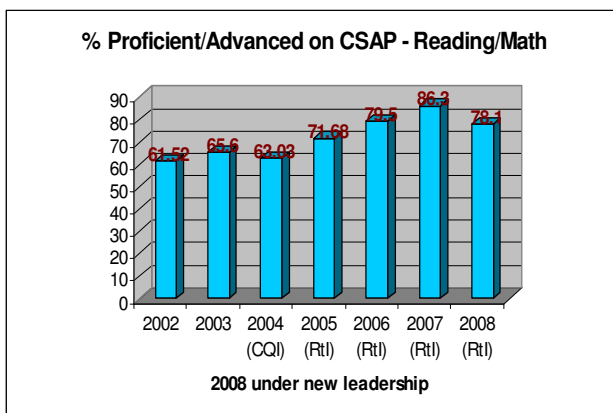




Figure 2

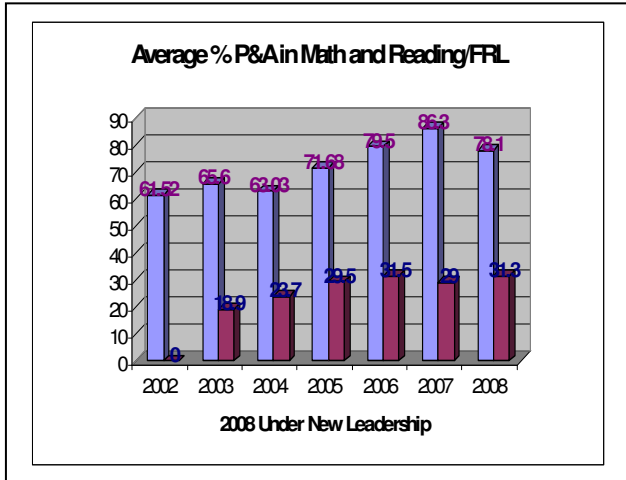


Figure 3

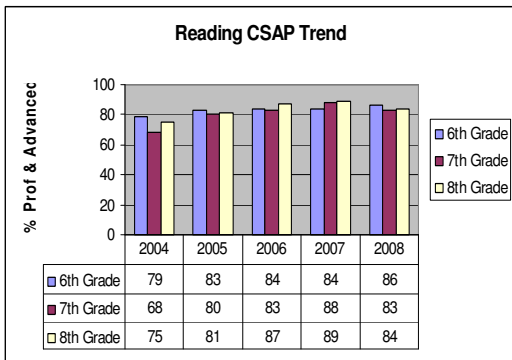


Figure 4

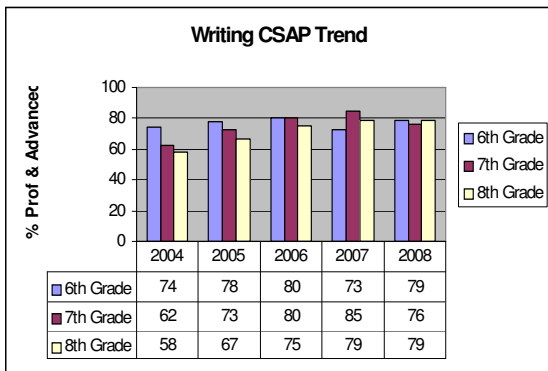




Figure 5

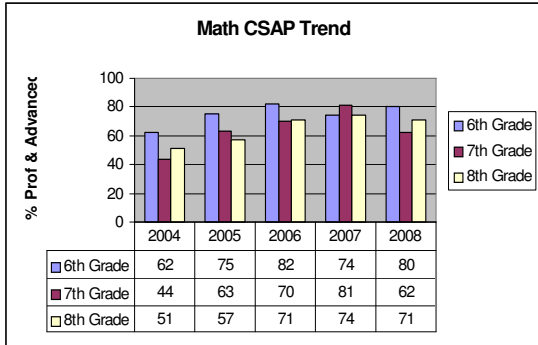


Figure 6

