When Students and Teachers Take Responsibility for Learning

by Karen Chambers

Continuous improvement is an idea that Sue Cleveland Elementary (SCE) has cultivated and embedded into the academic and learning climate of the school. As Peter Scholtes, in his book, *The Team Handbook*, states, "People don't resist change, they resist being changed."

As we began to move toward a systems-based approach, the leadership team realized that we could quickly make progress toward achieving our yearly goals only if our colleagues were willing and ready to think differently about our challenges.

Early in this journey we began with a systematic flow chart. The chart was posted to the right or left of the classroom door. The flow chart basically provided teachers a strategic method for establishing morning routines so that students began their day with clear expectations. This was important because the decision was made to teach direct instruction to all students during the first 30-minute block of time after student roll call. The time was blocked so that all students received instruction in English Language Arts (ELA) and math according to the prior year's state assessment or pre-test data.

The 30-minute block of time was very intense. Students moved independently across grade levels to receive necessary instruction seemed to enjoy the movement and instruction. The need for a system of established routines enabled our school to be faithful to the early morning schedule. We were on a three-week schedule for ELA and math all year. The results were powerful because the ELA scores increased by 19% and there was 7% increase in math. Today, we call this process Response to Intervention (RTI).

As we became more confident in our systemic approach, we developed smart goals. The goals were driven by our summative state assessments and formative tests like Rigby Running Records and Pre/Post Test, which were developed by our talented teachers. The assessments were administered using a specific time frame, and everyone agreed to practice fidelity. In order to assure the test fidelity, the leadership team and teacher tested students using a blitz approach.

We established the goal of achieving 80% meeting standard. This may seem low, but as a school, we had nowhere to go but up. The process included:

- Studying the test results.
- Identifying the top three problems.

- Defining precisely the root causes using our professional judgment.
- Studying testing trends.
- Establishing a plan of action.

By synergizing our efforts, we were able to galvanize a plan of action to make continuous progress. We established goals with our children as individuals, as a classroom teacher, and collectively as a grade level. The administration met three times during the year to monitor progress using unit test results to drive instruction and 30-minute blocks of direct instruction to attack the learning issues. During the mid-winter period, we identified problems, barriers, and expressed concerns for students who needed more intensive assistance and support. We categorized students into three basic categories:

1. Requires no assistance.
2. Requires continued support.
3. Requires intensive support.

This past year, SCE utilized the plan-do-study-act (PDSA) system. After analyzing state results, we concluded that writing scores were dragging the overall results in ELA down. While gaps between subgroups were getting narrower, the score for ELA at certain grade levels was weak and not consistent with past trends. Utilizing the PDSA, grade levels were able to identify certain areas of weakness. From there, a plan of action was implemented by the grade level, as well as by the teacher and her students. The process was posted on the wall so that students could refer to the system and monitor their progress using run charts and percentage charts of cumulative class data. The students and the teacher began to study the trends each week and made comittments to improve.

If you can get a classroom teacher and the students to take ownership of their learning, positive results will be achieved. SCE has learned that using the PDSA approach to attack our issues in writing can provide us a life-changing tool for success. Quality tools and processes are meant for any individual who strives to improve him or herself academically, professionally or personally. It is understood that cultivating a habit of using systems and processes in decision-making and accomplishing a goal can lead to successes beyond the classroom walls.

When students and employees take responsibilty for their own learning, evaluate and assess the quality of their work, maintain a record of progress using charts and graphs, analyze and investigate root causes for best results and learn to quickly monitor and adjust, positive

results will happen. Students are more than a test score. They need to have a system stamped in their brain that enables them to achieve a continuous level of progress throughout their life with respect to their social and emotional well-being. It is not always about achieving the right answer, but recognizing that I have a toolset in my mind and heart that can lead me to the best way to solve a problem. The correct answer is just one piece of the reward.

In his book, David Langford calls life's challenges "probletunities."[1] As educators, it is our responsibility to train ourselves and our students to view the problems and challenges we face daily as an opportunity to grow and learn. If we truly want respectful and responsible individuals in our society and workplaces, we must be systems-based in our thinking processes, and know clearly how we are going to overcome life's setbacks, hurdles, and, yes, low test scores.

References:

1. D.P. Langford, *Discover a New World of Learning*, Langford International, 2007.

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See below for examples of systems developed by teachers at Sue Cleveland Elementary.

Example 1: Making Connections. Systems for assisting students in making connections in reading from multiage teacher, Shannon Lyles.

Text-to-Text Connections

Think about the text you're reading and what it reminds you of in another text…

This book makes me think about the poem I read about turtles!

Text-to-Self

Think about the text you're reading and what it reminds you of in your own life…

This book reminds me of my dog Skippy!

Text-to-World

Think about the text you're reading and what it reminds you of in the world…

I saw a frog at the park like the one I'm reading about in the book!

Example 2: System of rules for math processes from multiage teacher, Shannon Lyles.

Addition Strategies

- **Add 0 – The number stays the same.**

Example: 9+0=9

- **Add 1 – Put the big number in your head, count on 1.**

Example: 9+1=10

- **Add 2 - Put the big number in your head, count on 2.**

Example: 9+2=11

- **Doubles – They are in your head (Think about the DOUBLES RAP!)**

Example: 9+9=18

- **Doubles +1 – You know the doubles, add 1 more!**

Example: 9+10=19

- **Make Ten – Use a ten frame to make 10, then add.**

Example: Instead of 9+5, think 9+1=10 and 5-1=4, so 10+4=14

Example 3. Flow charts developed by physical education teacher, Nathan Stewart.

2) Walk Into the Gym Silently and Sit Silently on the Black Line as Coach Stewart Gives Instructions

ENTER

When My Class Arrives at the Gymnasium Doors for P.E. Class, I Should…

1) Stand Silently on the Far Blue Line with My Hands By My Sides until Coach Stewart Invites My Class In

2) Think Silently about the Choices that I Made until Coach Stewart Asks Me to Return to the Group

If Coach Stewart Asks Me to Go Sit in the "Peace Place", I will…

1) Walk Silently to the Peace Place Spot and Sit Down in the Direction Facing the Wall