

## SMARTER NOT HARDER



Thanks to a partnership with SFA that reaches back to 1998, a Kansas school district's academic pace is still going strong.

## THE CHALLENGE

Almost two decades ago, Ruth Heinrichs was principal at Riley Elementary School, in Great Bend, Kansas. She helmed a diverse, economically disadvantaged school that faced many challenges and lagged behind. “It was

typical for Riley to be significantly lower than the other schools,” she recalls. “That was very disconcerting.”

At the time, only 23% of sixth graders were reading on or above grade level. “With that kind of data, we knew that our students were not going to be successful in middle school,” Heinrichs says, “so it became very real to us that we had to do something.”

More than 90% of the staff voted in 1998 to

implement SFA with the help of a grant. Before this, Riley teachers worked hard to help students but were frustrated by a lack of progress. “As we analyzed what we were spending our time on, there were things that really didn’t make a difference,” Heinrichs says. She knew that teachers needed tools to help them work smarter, not harder. SFA’s whole-school approach fit the bill.

## THE SOLUTION

Heinrichs quickly found SFA’s extensive support network invaluable. “They will work with you very, very closely,” she said. “They talk about being a phone call away, and that’s what it was.”

Riley used the Leading for Success Parent and Family Involvement team to increase parental participation. With a large population of English-language learners at home, securing kids’ reading support was a challenge. “Riley has a large percentage of Hispanic students, and their parents, for the most part, unfortunately had not had the opportunity to graduate high school in Mexico,” says Heinrichs.

So Riley implemented the Read and Respond activity (a short story assigned to the children to read and discuss with their parents at home) in both English and Spanish. “Parents were excited about that because they began to see how important they were in their [children’s] education, even if they had not received an education themselves,” says Heinrichs.

While some teachers were skeptical of SFA methods at first, this faded as they began to see exciting results. For example, Heinrichs tells the story of a student who really struggled with reading. After SFA was implemented, the student was seen walking home from school “reading a book!” “Once we started seeing the success, we were excited about it, and it was almost like the talk of the town,” she says.

As she moved out of her role as Riley’s principal in 2005, Heinrichs had concerns that SFA might become less effective over time. But trusting the program’s systemic approach, she accepted an offer to become the Grand Bend school district’s curriculum director. She was reassured to discover that her trust was well placed, with the program’s continued success and the school’s commitment to full and proper implementation.

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## THE RESULTS

It is clear that the longstanding relationship with SFA continues to foster student achievement in Great Bend. Riley has sustained improvement and has even reached new heights in recent years. In 2009, 85% of sixth graders scored proficient on the Kansas Reading Assessment; 86% scored proficient in 2010; and scores increased to 92% in 2011.

“We were ecstatic about student achievement,” Heinrichs says. “Teachers could tell stories that were positive, and it just kind of helped all of us get excited about it.”

Buoyed by Riley’s example, other schools in the district have also built successful partnerships with SFA. For example, nearby Lincoln Elementary was struggling with its reading scores. After a visit to Riley, Lincoln’s staff voted to implement SFA, in 2004. Since then, Lincoln’s performance numbers have been climbing. In 2009, 97% of Lincoln’s sixth graders scored proficient on the Kansas Reading Assessment; in 2011, that number increased to 100%.

Grand Bend schools are also impressed by SFA’s drive to stay abreast of education’s ever-changing climate. For example, incoming Common Core State Standards (CCSS) will place higher demands on students and teachers. But with SFA’s already rigorous standards, Heinrichs feels that Riley Elementary is equipped to meet these new challenges. “I think we are well prepared,” she said. “Common Core aligns better with SFA than our old standards.”

Just as they did in implementing SFA, other schools in the district are following Riley’s lead in preparing for CCSS. Says Heinrichs, “It was typical for teachers to look at Riley teachers, and [Lincoln’s], realizing that they were already using many of those strategies at that grade level.”

## Dollars That Make Sense

Funding for schools today is often sparse. So it speaks volumes that Riley Elementary School spends precious Title I funds on Success for All and the corresponding professional development. “We bring in the training that we need for updates. I think we can afford all of that because that is our main goal,” says Ruth Heinrichs, the school’s former principal and now Grand Bend district’s curriculum director. “That’s where we put our money, because we have seen the results.”

As well, the school fully utilizes the many resources that SFA makes available. “Probably the greatest savings is that we use all of our materials. None go to waste, whereas I think previously we purchased resources that lacked the focus we needed for instruction.”



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