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Filling the Equity Gap: A Large Urban High School Takes on the Challenge of Literacy

Janet Clark & Lynn Fair

On June 3, 1979, Aurora Central High School (ACHS) graduate Shelly Edwards stepped across the stage of this predominantly white suburban high school to receive her diploma. After graduating in the top 12 of her class, Shelly was heading off to Colorado State University to major in engineering. Shelly and her fellow graduates, like most of the student body, were college-bound and headed toward a bright future.

When Shelly and her classmates left ACHS, they left a neighborhood of tidy, owner-occupied, traditional homes with middle-class families, where one might picture Ward and June Cleaver seeing Beaver and Wally off to school. African American, Hispanic, and Asian families represented only a small part of the school population. Most of these seniors graduated alongside the same classmates with whom they started kindergarten. Transience occurred mainly through the movement of airmen and their families at Lowry Air Force Base.

Today, Shelly and her graduating class of 450 students would struggle to recognize ACHS as the same school they attended in the 1970s. In 2008, Aurora Central has become an urban school of 2,312 students speaking 48 languages from countries all over the world. Thirty-seven percent of these students speak English as their second language and 64 percent of ACHS students do not hear English spoken in their homes. Many students

are new to the United States, the state of Colorado, or the city of Aurora. Their parents may work two or three jobs, and they are counting on their sons and daughters to contribute to the support of the family. No longer are the neighborhoods surrounding Aurora Central considered middle class. However, the school sits near the highly desirable Stapleton redevelopment area and the burgeoning Fitzsimmons Medical Center complex.

Canging Times, Changing Accountability

When Shelly and her classmates walked into an English literature classroom at ACHS, they sat in straight rows, opened up their weighty literature anthologies, and prepared to take notes as the teacher read and lectured on the topic at hand. Students were expected to learn material and use it to pass tests. And they did. The teacher was the center of the classroom and everything revolved around her. For the most part, students were successful.

However, the neighborhoods, the families, the students, and their needs have changed. Mandates from state and federal governments have changed. Therefore, instruction must also change to meet the needs of this new generation of learners. Over the past several years, poverty has become our largest common denominator and with a high percentage of English Language

Learners (ELLs), equity is a critical issue in our work. No longer can we pretend that everything is okay.

The struggle to learn English and the academic demands of high school left many of our students floundering and failing. The ELLs and students from poverty entering Aurora Central read significantly below grade level. Many of these students disengaged from the classroom. It became easier for them to stay at home.

The demands of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the Colorado State Standards as assessed by the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) spotlighted the inequities facing the majority of students attending ACHS. Data from CSAP and the American College Testing Program (ACT) indicated that the needs of poverty, ELL, Hispanic, and African American students were not being met at Aurora Central. Unless we changed our thinking about students and their academic success, not only would the requirements of NCLB never be met, but we would continue to let the promise of education slip through the fingers of our students.

America's schools need to produce literate citizens who are prepared to compete in the global economy and who have the skills to pursue their own learning well beyond high school. In addition, students need to perform well on their state or local standardized or high-stakes tests, both because these tests act as gatekeepers in increasing numbers of states and because the national emphasis is on improved educational accountability.

(Reading Next, 2004)

Change Is Messy and Difficult: From Literature To Literacy

The demographic changes that were occurring at ACHS were mirrored across the district. Leadership at all levels demonstrated courage to take on the challenge of changing and redefining the vision of literacy instruction to meet the needs of our students. However, change is messy and difficult and we knew that we would be asking English teachers to shift their focus to teaching the process of reading and writing, not English content. Nothing in the teachers' previous educational preparation or professional development had equipped them to make this radical pedagogical shift. To English teachers, this felt like going to bed on Monday night thinking they were content specialists teaching literature and waking up on Tuesday morning realizing they would be literacy teachers.

In order to provide support for teachers, our principal created a plan for implementing incremental change that would, over time, lead to exponential change. In *Leading in a Culture of Change*, Michael Fullan (2001) asserts, "Moral purpose is about both ends and means. In education, an important end is to make a difference

in the lives of students. But the means of getting to that end are also crucial. If you don't treat others (for example, teachers) well and fairly, you will be a leader without followers (p.13)."

As teachers were already doing everything they knew to support the learning challenges their students faced, our leadership's challenge was to avoid, as much as possible, the disequilibrium that would cause the English department to shut down. The dilemma we faced was to balance support to teachers through this change process, while at the same time create a sense of urgency to meet the needs of the students sitting in classrooms. We used data to inform decisions about scheduling, courses offered, support in literacy and math, and placing students in the appropriate classes. We strategically placed students with the greatest need with teachers who had the deepest instructional understanding of the process. District coaches as well as teacher leaders were trained to provide professional development for classroom support. These coaches and teacher leaders were to walk alongside teachers as they developed their understandings of the reading/writing process and to support the shift from teaching literature to teaching literacy.

Changes to Support Professional Learning

- We restructured the school, moving away from individual departments and into four professional learning communities, with department chairs working as instructional leaders. The English Department became "Literacy I," including all English, ELL, and special education teachers who taught English.

- Student data helped us prioritize monies for professional development (PD) centered on the reading and writing process; 25 percent of total school budget was allocated to this PD effort.

- PD is embedded, layered, and tied to assessment of student needs. Twice a week, during the school day, teachers meet in large and small groups to focus on instructional issues. Periodically throughout the year, teachers are released from their classrooms to attend in-building seminars that address questions around classroom practice.

- Teachers have opportunities for one-on-one coaching and are encouraged to visit other classrooms for demonstrations of best instructional practices.

- Money is budgeted to provide teachers with professional libraries of foundational texts to support their on-going literacy development. Also, independent classroom libraries were established.

Incremental changes began with a few teachers in the English department trying small-group guided reading with a few of the students in their classes. At the same time, the district was offering professional development to support the new literacy model. District literacy coaches brought professional development into the building and into classrooms, offering one-on-one coaching for teachers requesting that level of support. Over time, teachers developed their understandings of the reading and writing process and the instructional practices to support those understandings. Confidence grew as teachers began to see their students become more proficient readers and writers. In 2008, many teachers have moved from implementation of readers'/writers' workshop—and the pedagogical understandings that support this model of instruction—to refinement.

Programmatic Changes

- Providing more time for ELLs to develop as readers and writers by assigning 9th and 10th grade students not proficient on CSAP an additional literacy class.
- Increased writing across the content areas as a building-wide focus.
- Opportunities for acceleration including placing 9th and 10th grade students with the most highly qualified teachers and expanding opportunities for all students to select additional honors or advanced placement courses.
- Development of an in-house, summer-school program—not for remediation, but for acceleration to maintain levels of literacy and further develop language proficiency.
- A 21st Century Grant helps provide an after-school reading, writing, and activity program for 9th graders.

These concrete, visible changes became the catalyst for evolving beliefs about teaching and learning. For some of us, our beliefs were confirmed. For others, our beliefs were revealed. And yet for others, our beliefs were changed. These exponential changes were supported through restructuring, allocation of resources, professional development, programmatic changes, and the hiring and sustaining of a highly qualified, professional staff. One hundred percent of this year's literacy teachers meet the definition of "highly qualified" under NCLB. Our ongoing goal is to sustain and hire teachers who are excited by the demands and challenges of our diverse student body. Teachers find our students to be engaged, polite, and culturally interesting, bringing with them a range of strengths and experiences different from the

mainstream. Being a professional development school with the University of Colorado Denver, supports us in our goal to maintain a talented teaching staff. This program enables us to bring qualified teacher candidates into our classrooms to work with our students and alongside our teachers for one to two years. These students have developed understandings of the literacy model prior to stepping on our campus. They often come with belief systems in place that match our own Aurora Central site coordinators (two assistant principals), the clinical teachers, and university faculty share joint responsibility for the development of teacher candidates. Currently, we are fortunate to have placed four of these teacher candidates on the literacy department staff. The presence of these teachers and teacher candidates creates a vibrant connection between the school and university.

Rigor Is Equity

All of these changes were important. However, the real evidence of systemic change for equity is demonstrated daily in the classroom through teacher practice resulting in student achievement. It has taken four years for teachers to internalize the reading/writing process. They have developed confidence in their abilities to impact student achievement. Teachers continue to develop expertise in the use of summative and formative data to plan and deliver instruction. Teachers are engaged in constant conversation about monitoring student learning and yet only now are we ready as a literacy department to address the issue of rigor.

We have come to realize that only through teaching with rigor can we address equity. All students have to be held to high learning expectations. Our teachers are now exploring what it means to teach into proficiency at each grade level while providing rigorous instructional support for each group of learners. To support teacher understanding of the demands of the Colorado State Standards for Reading and Writing, Aurora Public Schools has provided pacing guides, reading and writing continua, and interim assessments to inform and guide teacher decision-making. Teachers are using these tools to make instructional decisions, asking themselves, "What do students already know? Where are their learning gaps? What instruction will bring each student closer to proficiency?"

We are discovering that to understand rigor we must understand the connection between assessment, evaluation, and planning for instruction. Our expectations about students as readers and writers have been too low. This year students are able to choose books from classroom libraries that have been enriched with adult literature, both fiction and nonfiction. Text resources for

Brian Cambourne's Conditions of Learning

- Immersion
- Demonstration
- Engagement
- Expectation
- Responsibility
- Approximation
- Use and response

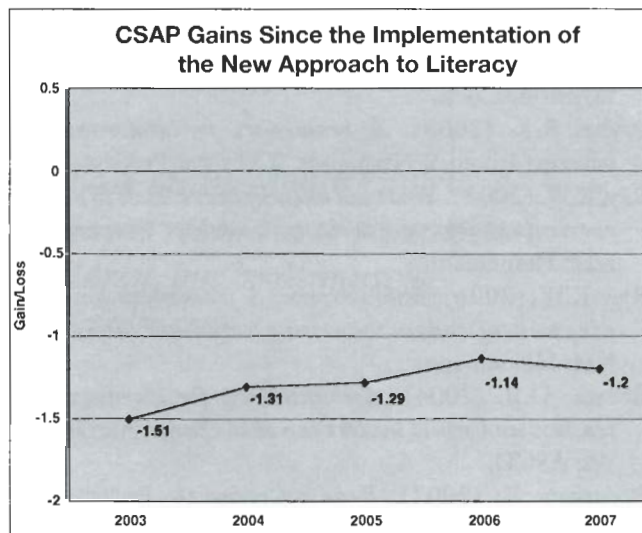
small group instruction are more rigorous because of our new understandings of what students can do as readers.

The cycle of assessment, evaluation, and planning told us **what** to teach. Brian Cambourne's Conditions of Learning showed us **how** to teach. Teaching into proficiency is also teaching into independence. Teachers are beginning to organize their classrooms to support the conditions of learning. Teachers plan for both differentiated whole- and small-group reading and writing instruction. At the same time, students are immersed in independent reading and writing in text-rich classrooms. Except for purposes of assessment, rarely do all students work within the same text. Process demonstrations are routinely provided by both teachers and students. Teachers are realizing that rigor is established through high expectations as students take on responsibility for their own learning. Students have multiple opportunities to practice new learning, receive timely feedback about their approximations, and try again. We have not answered all our questions about rigor, nor are we satisfied with the level of rigor in place in our classrooms. Our conversations about rigor will continue.

Continuing Challenges

Have we arrived at our goal of providing equity for all our students? No. That goal is realized when all of our students become proficient readers and writers. We're not there yet. Although our CSAP scores indicate that over a five year period we have made significant progress in closing the achievement gap, we continue to face challenges. ACHS has one of the largest percentages of ELLs of any comprehensive high school in the state. Over the five years, our ELL population has increased more than 20 percent, our poverty rate has increased by more than 20 percent, and our school accountability report ranking is significantly higher than in 2003. Special education remains a focus each year as we miss meeting NCLB requirements for this cohort by one to three students.

ACHS's 48 percent mobility rate remains our greatest challenge. Often apartment houses offer first and last month's rent free, and when that is up, families move on to another complex. Also, because of the development of the Fitzsimmons Medical Complex, many families who



have resided in hotels, motels, and mobile home parks along Colfax Avenue have been displaced. Because of immigration status, many of our families come and go without notice. Our families are particularly vulnerable to economic downturns, making them among the first to lose jobs. All of these issues affect our ability to provide equity.

Thinking Back, Looking Forward

Our story began in 1979 with Shelly and her walk across the stage to receive her diploma. Shelly's four years at ACHS provided the foundation for her post-secondary education and a successful adult career. We want no less for the students who graduate from ACHS today. Without equity through literacy to prepare students for the growing demands of the 21st century, this will not be possible. APS Superintendent John Barry states, "Every student in Aurora Public Schools should graduate with the choice to attend college without remediation."

The mandate of NCLB created urgency to reform the traditional high school into a vital, energetic, learning environment that supports all students. Many administrators and teachers believe that high school reform, especially teaching literacy instead of literature, cannot be done. We are proving them wrong. We are doing it!

Professional Resources for Teachers

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