

Nestled in a quiet neighborhood at the base of Squaw Peak Mountain, Madison Heights School has the feel of a small community, far from the bustle of Phoenix, yet it is located in the heart of the city. The school’s one-story design draws teachers and students outdoors as they travel the paths that connect classrooms with other learning spaces. Students wear red, white, or blue uniform shirts as a mark of belonging. The principal, Denise Donovan, knows all of the students and greets them by name.

Madison Heights School Phoenix, AZ

450 students, pre-K—grade 3	
Students qualifying for free or reduced price lunch	47%
LEP students	16%
Special education students	13%
Student ethnicity:	
White	60%
Hispanic	30%
African American	7%
Native American	2%
Asian	1%

Setting Very High Standards

The Madison School District charges its schools to “ensure that ALL students meet or exceed our established educational goals by maximizing the effort and potential of our diverse student population, thus creating life-long learners.” In the pursuit of academic excellence and high expectations, the district set its academic standards higher than the state’s, called for action, and closely monitored academic achievement. Five years ago, with a new principal, the Madison Heights faculty set their sights on becoming more accountable for results. The veteran faculty, with years of experience, was willing to explore reforms for school improvement.

Once solidly middle-class, almost half of the students at Heights are now from low-income families; many are English language learners. The school’s mobility rate tops 60%, with some students transferring in and out within the same year. Still, with a strong, school-wide commitment to high achievement, 83% of Madison Heights’ 3rd graders performed at or above the standard in both reading and math on Arizona’s Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS) in 2003-2004. In reading, 33% exceeded the standard; 41% exceed it in math. On the Stanford Nine (SAT 9), student scores in reading and math tend to increase significantly over time, indicating that students learn and achieve more with each year they attend Madison Heights.



Change didn't come quickly or easily for Madison Heights. With a leadership team of master teachers, the principal charted the course strategically, rolling out change out in stages, beginning with teacher support and motivation and evolving into accountability for high quality teaching and student performance. An important first step was to focus on assessment, rather than instruction. Some teachers were initially hesitant—recalled one, "I was not happy with this data analysis business. I didn't go to college to be a data analyst; I went to college to be a teacher." Now, however, teachers agree that "owning" the ability to analyze data is critical to effective teaching. It gives them the power to identify and understand the learning needs of students whose scores range up and down the learning continuum, especially in math and reading. One teacher said, "Data isn't scary anymore. It is a way of looking at children one at a time. It helps me focus on what's important. Where is that kid right now? Where do I want that kid to be at the end of the quarter? What do I need to do to get him there?"



A Journey of a Thousand Miles Starts with... Data

At the beginning of each school year, the entire staff digs in for "Data Day." The faculty first looks at how the school did against national (SAT 9), state (AIMS), and district norms. In grade level teams, teachers probe for evidence of teaching



Principal Donovan (right) confers with a teacher

strategies that worked, or didn't. They dissect individual student data, charting year-by-year achievement in reading, writing, and math. Using a spreadsheet customized for the school, they identify students who gained at least 5 percent each year, students who made one year's growth, and students who lost ground from the previous year. They distil this information into academic goals for the year, by grade levels, classrooms, instructional groups, and individual students. "We don't dust off lesson plans from year to year," a teacher explained, "With new kids comes new instruction. The data tells us that we can't rely on lock-step lessons."

Assessment continues with quarterly use of the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA in K-3 and the Quantitative Reading Inventory [QRI] at the 4th grade level) to track each student's growth in oral reading, fluency, and comprehension. Teachers struggle to find time to listen to and record each student's oral reading benchmarks, but what they learn about each child allows precise instruction. Similarly, they assess students' mathematics progress quarterly to see how well they are mastering problem-solving and higher-order thinking skills as well as basic arithmetic. A computerized tracking system developed by a teacher and her father allows quarterly assessment data to be translated into charts and graphs for teachers to analyze. Each quarter time is devoted to analyzing data and setting new instructional and professional development goals to meet specific students' needs.

A Major Investment in Professional Development

Just as data analysis was key to student assessment, professional development was key to evoking new teacher attitudes, knowledge, and behavior. The district supports teachers through teacher leaders, a job-embedded professional development model that affords part-time math and literacy master teachers (teacher leaders) for every school. The district has also freed 90 minutes of Teacher Collaboration Time through a weekly district-wide early dismissal. Madison Heights teachers spend about three hours a week on professional development and teacher collaboration. They describe this time as critical to student success, and praise it as organized, focused, and productive, even though it reduces their individual prep time.

The other great benefit to the school has been a five-year Teacher Advancement Program (TAP) grant from the Milken Family Foundation. Through this, the school extended and deepened its investment in teacher content knowledge and teaching strategies. One of the first schools in this program, Madison Heights credits it with providing a highly

effective framework for teacher advancement. Along with district resources, the program funded additional coaching time and teacher release time, so that teachers could refine their new skills.

Professional development also includes individual coaching, its frequency determined by student achievement data. Master teachers observe, model, critique and move teachers to the next phase of their development. As classroom coaches, they advise teachers on curriculum planning and assessment, plan and offer cluster teaching training, and conduct evaluations. Master teachers do not set

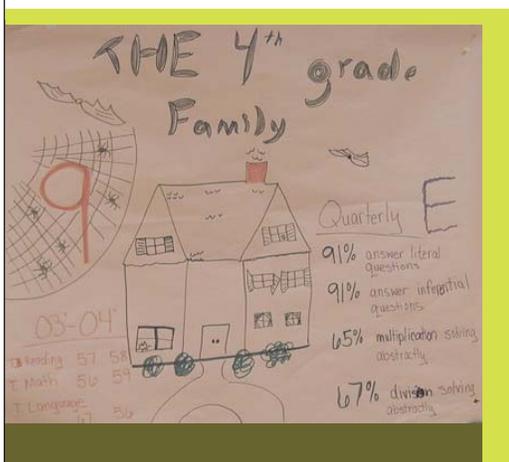


themselves up as exemplars of good practice; they encourage feedback from peers on ideas and methods. One said that her credibility as a teacher leader was reinforced by her role as a half-time classroom teacher. "Because I teach every day, it's not an "us and them" dynamic; we are all teachers. We are learning together."

In weekly cluster meetings, master teachers help teachers analyze student work, review assessment protocols, refine rubrics, identify reading or math resources, or discuss best ways to approach instructional programs. At the end of the meeting, the group decides how to put their ideas into practice and what they want subsequent meetings to focus on. The climate is collegial, with lots of give and take. Twice-monthly faculty meetings engage the whole staff in school-wide areas of professional development, such as reading or writing assessment.

Holding Teachers Accountable

Students aren't the only ones who are assessed. At Madison Heights, teachers benefit from a rigorous evaluation protocol, conducted 4-6 times yearly by the principal and teacher leaders, that uses a detailed rubric of best instructional practices to project professional development needs. Linking teacher evaluations to professional development has supported new practices, teacher leaders said. Each teacher has a personal professional growth plan, based on a model from the Milken Family Foundation. Teachers' weekly lesson plans are scored for alignment to standards, how activities support the learning objectives, how student learning is assessed, and accommodations made for students with different learning



styles or exceptional needs, including English language learners and children with disabilities. The foundation grant offers teachers financial performance bonuses based on student achievement and their own professional growth.

Assessment and instruction are blended within the curriculum. Based on research that indicates that students learn to read at different rates and require varied approaches, teachers identify each child's reading skill along a continuum. A library of more than 30,000 "leveled" books lets teachers choose texts with precision for

emergent, early fluency, and fluent readers. All teachers assess reading fluency with the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA), which shows the skills and concepts the reader needs to learn next. Students are placed in small reading groups for targeted instruction. Students are engaged in authentic writing tasks each day. Younger students are

assessed by the Holistic Writing Rubric and older ones by the Six Plus One Traits Rubric. As with reading, the assessment component drives the Teaching Learning Cycle (TLC): Assessment, Planning, Teaching, and Evaluation.

In keeping with state and district standards, Madison Heights uses Investigations in Number, Data and Space (TERC) with its math curriculum, and the inquiry-based Full Option Science System (FOSS) with the science curriculum. Physical education, art, music, library, and computer classes support the school's reading and math goals and focus on specific content standards.

Consistency is a strength, a teacher noted: "The curriculum is so consistent here, both horizontally and vertically. We use the same assessment tools. We use the same classroom routines. We teach kids the same strategies, building them up, one by one, from Kindergarten." Madison Heights students are eager to talk about strategies they have learned. "Strategies are important so we memorize them so we will always have them," a student explained, "For example, if you are stumped by a word problem in math, you re-read the problem, you underline the question, you decide on what it means, like multiplication, like addition or division. And when we get to the numbers problem, we have different strategies there to work it out. There isn't just one way to solve it. There are lots of strategies!" Students expect to do well in middle school not just because of what they know but because they know many strategies, useful in all subjects.

Beginning in Kindergarten, classroom routines and predictable discipline help students take responsibility for their own learning. A teacher explained, "You can't do small groups with classroom chaos and interruptions. At the beginning of the year, you spend enough time and energy on getting the routines down so kids know how to function in your room, what is expected of them and what they can expect from us."

Madison Heights adopted the STAR system of behavior management. Its five prompts: *Participate, Be Responsible for Yourself, Be Prompt, Be Prepared, and Be Respectful* provide a shared vocabulary for good behavior and standard norms. All students start each week with the same number of stars; they lose stars only through inappropriate behavior. Students and classes who keep a high number of stars are rewarded each week with a special activity.



Small Groups Allow Differentiated Instruction

Teachers arrange the classroom environment so students can work at centers, with partners, and in small groups. "Being able to teach kids in small groups is absolutely critical. You can't differentiate instruction if you are tied down to whole group teaching," a teacher said. Teachers give individual help to all learners, gently pushing them to take responsibility for their own learning. Groupings are always intentional and often match advanced learners with students who need more support. Students learn to view the teacher's instructional groups as "sacrosanct," and to use each other as resources rather than interrupt small group time. A student explained, "We can interrupt only if there is a really bad emergency, never when you just need to ask a question. You can ask three friends for help instead."

A member of the special education team credited classroom teachers for taking responsibility for all of the children in the classroom. A classroom teacher added that "We are supported. Now we look at learning along a continuum, from very concrete to abstract. When the data comes down to the child level, it isn't about kids that are low performing... or high performing. It is about knowing... 'where is this child right now, what is the next step and how can I measure his progress?' We are setting high expectations and seeing results."

The team bases instruction for students with communication disorders and autism on their entry point on the learning continuum. Special education students join classes and small group instruction for up to 60% of the day; teachers help students set goals and understand why they are getting special help in math or in reading. Similarly, English language learners are fully part of their classrooms while getting part-time instruction to strengthen their skills in language arts. An ELL teacher said, "They aren't singled out or given different tasks. Teachers accommodate them by using strong visuals, by simplifying the language or shortening the task. We work together on all these things."

Madison Heights has an active parent organization. Regular school newsletters help families stay informed. Teachers use parent-teacher conferences to explain assessment results and help parents understand their children's progress through student portfolios in reading, writing, and mathematics. The district's volunteer coordinator, housed at Madison Heights, has recruited and trained 45 reading tutors who work with individual students



one-on-one for up to an hour at a time. Along with summer enrichment classes, the district offers three-week sessions for English language learners and students who need extra time to meet learning goals.

Always a New Summit

Strong and shared leadership has guided the faculty, step by step, along the journey. Principal Donovan brings a mastery of K-4 curriculum and pedagogy, and teachers know her first and foremost as an instructional leader, crediting her vision, persistence, energy, and high expectations. A strategic planner, she understood that change needed to be powerful but incremental. Ms. Donovan helps teachers stay the course by holding them to their own strong values but she attributes success to the efforts of leadership team and the faculty. A master teacher said, "We are always climbing. There is always another summit." Another added, "In the beginning, there was a lot to change. . . . Now, we can say: data analysis is what we do first. Small group instruction, classroom management, assessment, quarterly expectations, precision teaching, is what we do next. Now we have. . . to get to the smaller changes, the refinements in individual classrooms. We have to keep climbing, higher and higher, up because any innovation is only as good as its sustaining power."



Almost in unison, school leaders and faculty can name the factors to their success: leadership, high expectations, quality professional development, enough time for real team work, and accountability for results. Like the desert in springtime, Madison Heights blossomed when conditions were ripe.