

Creating a Rigorous and Relevant Learning Environment

SCHOOL PROFILE

Metro Status: Rural

Grades: PreK–7

Total Enrollment: 815

English Language Learners: 15%

Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch: 68%

“ICLE came in and coached us, helping us to tighten our instruction and set realistic goals. Once we had some early victories and we saw our students reaching goals, that’s when the momentum shifted. We started thinking, ‘This is actually possible. We really can do this.’”

GOALS

- Raise rigor for students to increase academic outcomes.
- Organize and tighten instruction.
- Support staff through professional development to help implement change and drive student success.

CHALLENGES

Owl Creek School is a Pre–K through 7th-grade building which, from 2009–2011, had been designated as a NCLB School in Need of Improvement, even though it had only been open since the fall of 2006. The school faced challenges related to its diverse student population, a lack of clarity in expectations, and inconsistencies in classroom instruction. According to Principal Kristen Champion, “We had many challenges, we had low expectations, excuses for the children, inconsistency from classroom to classroom. We had parents wanting to bolt, basically. So, it was pretty much a soup of worst-case scenarios all in one.”

SOLUTION

- **Develop a Team Infrastructure to Support Change and Utilize Instructional Facilitators to Strengthen Core Instruction and Student Engagement**

Owl Creek set forth on tightening instruction across the curriculum. The faculty came to agreements on the best teaching practices and learning outcomes, as well as what expectations were to be implemented. Collaboratively, Owl Creek’s faculty developed units, which have overall learning objectives and integrate high-level questioning, content, and process work that results in the completion of relevant assessment-based projects.

■ Clarify Expectations for Both Staff and Students and Identify Best Practices to Initiate a Framework for Change

Collaboratively built units now culminate in project-based assessments, and work is scored based on common rubrics, which are shared with students at the beginning of their assignments. This allowed students to set goals and then reflect on their accomplishments. Teachers integrated the Big 8 high-yield literacy strategies and graphic organizers, and scaffolded learning ensured students engaged in content that is meaningful and impactful.

■ Develop and Implement a School-Wide Positive Behavior Support (Pbs) System

Distributed leadership was the foundation for the school's rapid improvement, with teacher-leaders working on building initiatives and student-leaders creating service clubs and after-school programs that worked toward school goals. By creating teams to monitor students' academic progress and discipline data, Owl Creek was able to establish a safe and positive environment for learning to take place. Utilizing a Positive Behavior Support (PBS) system, the school reduced its number of office referrals and suspensions by 50%. Through their efforts, Owl Creek has seen a 100% increase in parental involvement and an attendance rate of 97%.

“Now there is tight instruction, bell-to-bell instruction. Teachers assigning work that has relevant questions, that raises the rigor for the students and engages them in learning.”

■ Implement a School-Wide Focus on Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships

To raise rigor for students and increase academic outcomes, Owl Creek implemented weekly team meetings which allowed them to return to the goals they had set, and consistently look at data and student work to compare where they were against where they wanted to be. This was the initial step in supporting their capacity for change.

The International Center for Leadership in Education brought in instructional facilitators to complete training and provide all teachers in the building with an arsenal of engagement and collaboration tools. With a building-wide focus on student engagement and collaboration, students are encouraged to talk throughout lessons to reflect, predict, make the learning personal, and share opinions with a partner or group. This has led to increased engagement, stellar overall growth percentages, and better oral language skills for all students.

■ Transition in 2012 to Common Core Units and Quarterly Assessments

When ongoing changes in instructional expectations threatened the rapid progress Owl Creek had made, the school developed integrated Common Core units. These teacher-developed units utilized formative and summative assessments, real-world applications, and shared rubrics, all based upon the Common Core Curriculum.

SUCCESS

In 2012, Owl Creek was named a National School to Watch by the National Forum for Exemplary Middle Schools—a far cry from their School in Need of Improvement status just four years earlier. In 2013, they were the top middle school in the state of Arkansas.

