

‘Corrective Action’ School Defies Stereotype

Daisy Solis started school at age six and attended a three-room schoolhouse on the outskirts of Chihuahua, Mexico. It is a poor community and students in her school share aged books in class with each other; the school serves no food. The school’s record-keeping is spotty, making placement in U.S. schools uncertain.

In 1999, Daisy Solis and her family moved from Mexico to Albuquerque where Daisy was enrolled as a 6th grader at Washington Middle School. Now an eighth grader, Daisy is quick to point out one big difference between schools in Mexico and the United States; “If you go to school in Mexico and you don’t know Spanish, they wouldn’t help you. Here if you don’t know English, they always help you.”

Daisy’s background and experience is hardly unusual, reports Washington Middle School Principal Benigno Chavez, who has enrolled many students like Daisy in the school’s Dual Language program in the last three years.

The Dual Language program at Washington enables Daisy to receive instruction in both Spanish and English, providing her with opportunities to acquire a second language without falling behind in her academic studies. She maintains a 3.4 grade point average, is active on the school soccer team, and her teachers say she is a prompt, polite, and attentive in all her classes. She’s made great strides in learning English, and her parents are fiercely proud of their daughter. They’re happy their daughter is in a Dual Language program and believe their daughter is fortunate to be at Washington.

Even though Washington has been identified by the New Mexico State Department of Education for corrective action, you’d be hard pressed to convince Daisy or her family that she goes to a failing school. Studies have shown that Washington Middle School students made 200 percent of the expected growth benchmarks established by the NM Department of Education. In plain terms: between the time they enter 6th grade and finish 8th grade, Washington students doubled their scores in language arts and reading, and their growth rate in math was 182 percent. This was true for English proficient students, special education students and those that are limited English speakers.

So why does the school find itself on the state’s corrective action list?

Terra Nova test scores that compare the scores of New Mexico students to a national control group, plus other factors like dropout and attendance, are used to determine which schools are placed on the corrective action list. In order for a school to receive a ‘Meets Standards’ rating, Terra Nova scores must be above the 40th percentile. Washington’s scores are just below the 40th percentile.

The testing process itself is part of the problem. Over the past three years a different version of the Terra Nova examination has been given to New Mexico students, making year-to-year test score comparisons inequitable. School districts across the state are asking for a more consistent examination, and one which is tied to the content standards established by the state.

It must be noted that all 15 schools across the state designated in need of ‘corrective action’ are schools with a high proportion of children learning a second language.

Washington Middle School is a relatively small middle school in the downtown area of Albuquerque. More than 94 percent of its 670 students are eligible for free or reduced lunch (the district average is less than 50 percent). Sixty percent of the students are limited in their English proficiency and the school serves 120 monolingual Spanish-speaking students.

A new academy structure was introduced to the school three years ago, and staff are upbeat and enthusiastic about the changes in the school. Each academy, organized by grade level, is headed by an academy leader who works with an instructional coach to improve curriculum and to create new professional development opportunities for teachers.

The reorganization helps teachers and students to know each other better and also makes for more frequent contact with parents. Each student has a Student Accountability Card to track their homework assignments and even their behavior on a daily basis, giving parents a daily written record of their child’s day. Through the accountability card, parents know if an assignment is missing; they know if a student fails to turn in an assignment; they know if a student misses a class. The academies are paying off in improved test scores and attendance.

Teacher turnover is down and morale at the school is up. Since becoming principal there three years ago, Chavez has cut teacher turnover by half. He has helped increase the number of bilingually-endorsed teachers---there are now 20 in a staff of 47---a great boon for their monolingual and English-as-a-Second Language students. (Bilingually-endorsed teachers have had special training to teach curriculum in two languages).

Did you know Washington was recognized for its exemplary gains in student academic achievement for the 2000-01 school year and received a \$36,000 award from the state as an incentive to continue program development?

Like other schools designated ‘corrective action,’ Polk Middle School and Whittier, Lowell and Emerson elementary schools are not ‘failing’ schools. These schools are staffed with hard-working, competent teachers. They have intelligent students with great potential. They are, however, schools in need of additional resources to meet the special circumstances of their students.

Know these schools and students and be proud. Know that students like Daisy are receiving their chance to succeed.