

Montview Elementary: A Lesson in Sustainability

By Heather Hein

An extraordinary event occurred in 2001 at Montview Elementary in Aurora, Colorado. Montview, known in the community as a school with a high number of low-income students and English-language learners, defied the odds to win a national professional development award and create one of the state's highest performing schools.

Seven years later, and under different leadership, Montview teachers continue to thrive in its “culture of learning,” and students continue to record significant gains on the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP). In 2005, the state of Colorado recognized Montview as a “gain maker” school, that is, a school where the percent of students scoring proficient and advanced on CSAP increased 20 percent or more on average in a subject area over three academic years. Moreover, the state noted that Montview's mathematics achievement scores were 34 percentage points above what would be expected in light of the high number of its students (78%) who live in poverty. In short, Montview has permanently changed people's attitudes, motivations, and perceptions.

Patti Capps, who has served as principal since 2001 and is retiring at the end of this school year, credits the school's staying power to its ability to “self-wind.” She explained, “[My predecessor] taught me, and I'm teaching my successor, that we need to have systems in place that are not person-specific. Whoever's the principal, whoever the teachers are, doesn't change what we believe about schools.”

What they believe is that every person in the building—students, teachers, administrators, parents—is a learner. This pervasive philosophy contributes to staff development that continually evolves. Those elements that work well have been used for years, such as weekly staff dialogues, coaching and mentoring in literacy and mathematics, and a student teaching partnership with the University of Colorado at Denver.

Even so, Montview keeps finding new ways to improve. They've added a lesson study in mathematics and once-a-month, half-day academies, focused specifically on literacy and mathematics.

Capps is particularly proud of the school's extensive professional library, which continues to expand, and the parent community room. With 70 percent of students being English-language learners, it's critical for parents to feel comfortable with the school and their role in their children's education. In the community room, parents talk, work on the computer, learn about the school, and help teachers with projects or to organize events, such as Cinco de Mayo. At monthly coffees, parents receive training on techniques to help their kids at home; they might share learning games or simply discuss reading comprehension questions that will spark a conversation with their kids.

And how do teachers keep up with it all? Capps points to having a common language and philosophy and building in time for teachers to teach *and* develop. “There are two things that really matter: relationships and communication,” she noted. “You have to value and care about people and their personal lives, but you also have to push.”

This blend of pressure and support is a leadership style that has been described as “pinky-finger” leadership. “It's like, ‘Come on, I'm going to take you by your pinky finger; I'm not going to push real hard, but we do have to go.’”

And Montview keeps going—and will do so beyond Capps' tenure. “I have every faith that the school will continue its philosophy,” said Capps. In other words, while the school's *tangible* assets, including its teachers, curricula, and learning programs, may change, its *intangible* assets—namely, its culture of high expectations, will remain. **CS**

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