

The Ketchup Solution

How an Iowa school district confronted its challenges, made significant changes, and worked its way to improved student achievement

Stories about dramatic improvement in student results often spark skepticism. “Grade inflation” is the most frequent accusation, along with charges that improvements in student performance are probably related to the lowering of standards. Indeed, the immediate reaction of some critics to test score gains is that any significant improvement must be the result of cheating.

Skepticism is a good quality, provided it is due to a search for truth and not a cynical refusal to consider the evidence. When skeptics ask tough questions, they can distinguish between grade inflation and “work inflation”—the admirable result of students working harder, respecting teacher feedback, and earning improved results.

That is precisely what happened in Iowa’s Cardinal Community School District. After Cardinal High School was labeled as persistently low achieving in 2009, its leaders confronted their challenges. They didn’t fire everyone and start over. They didn’t close the school and privatize. Instead, they confronted the data, made significant changes in teaching and leadership practices, and worked their way to improved performance.

The program, called “Ketchup,” focuses on work ethic, persistence, and resilience. As the name suggests, it gives students meaningful and appropriate consequences and the chance to catch up

on their academic work by taking personal responsibility and working harder.

Jumping in

“We didn’t have time to do pilot projects or consider a long-term plan,” explains Cardinal Superintendent Joel Pedersen. “We just jumped in and did the work.” In the past, it had been too easy to let students dig a hole so deep that it was impossible to get out. The small high school had 138 class failures last year. This year, the number of failures has been reduced to five—a whopping 96 percent reduction.

In the past, the consequence for missing work or failing a test was an F—failure. This year, more than 60 percent of students improved their overall grade-point average. Teachers and administrators recognized that, if the F really had been an effective strategy for threatening students into better performance, then failure rates should be declining. Instead, failures had been increasing. Why? Because an F is actually a reward for some students. The F sends the message: “You don’t have to do the work, and there is not much point in doing any future work, because you are going to fail anyway. You might as well party.” It’s certainly not what the teachers had intended.

Building student work ethic

The fundamental change in the Cardinal approach was an improvement in the

consequences for late and missing student work. Fs were not working, and only reinforced poor behavior by students.

By contrast, an “incomplete” created an immediate consequence that hit students hard, restricting their free time. While in the past students could choose to accept a failure and avoid doing homework, now students were required to do the work before, during, or after school. If students failed to get their work done, they lost privileges during the school day and had to attend the Ketchup Room. “We no longer allowed students to choose to avoid work with a zero,” Pedersen says. “Their consequence was a requirement to do the work. When our teachers assign homework, students must get the job done.”

Teachers displayed an exceptional degree of collaboration in Cardinal. They used Google Docs, a free Web-based service, to identify students who were missing any homework. Every teacher in the school knew the names of students and the work that they were missing. This allowed students to make use of all available time—study halls, advisory periods, down time in other classes, and of course, the Ketchup Room.

The daily focus on helping students succeed changed the consequences of poor organization from failure to hard work. In addition, the school opened on Saturday mornings and provided transportation for students to come to school for additional help. Teachers and administrators called parents and insisted that students come to school and get their work finished.

Improved morale

The dramatic reduction in failure—and the improvement in work ethic—at Cardinal has led to more than an improvement in achievement. Student morale is better, Pedersen says, and parent-school relationships also have improved dramatically. Students who never completed homework in the past are now on track for graduation. They are learning the disciplines of time management, organization, and personal responsibility—lessons they did not receive when the consequences for missing work had been F's and zeroes.

Higher standards

Whenever failures are reduced dramatically, it's natural for the skeptic in all of us to suspect that the school has reduced

standards. But the evidence at Cardinal suggests the opposite. Students are demonstrating high levels of ability to take upper-level classes. Students who were previously facing failure now are taking college-level classes in mathematics, business, zoology, art, and automotive mechanics. Their success also is opening the door to well-paying jobs as electricians and plumbers, opportunities that never would have been open to students who did not finish high school.

Cardinal remains a challenging educational environment. More than 60 percent of the students in this rural district qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Pedersen also credits middle school and elementary school teachers with making dramatic changes to improve results.

The story of these exceptional teachers, administrators, and community members demonstrates that school improvement does not depend upon finding different students, teachers, and administrators. Improvement depends upon changing professional practices and demonstrating results. ■

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