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Fwd:

Arresting Insights in Education

Subject:

It's All About the Kids: A glib phrase becomes a driving force for change in inner-city Washington

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"Miracle" is a word you'd expect to hear from people familiar with the Assumption Catholic School story—but don't wait for it. More likely you'll hear a name: Mary Anne Stanton.

Mary Anne Stanton's leadership has been the driving force behind the transformation of these inner city D.C. schools.

In just more than five years, Stanton has led Assumption and 12 other Catholic schools from high-poverty Washington, D.C. neighborhoods into a consortium—the Center City Consortium—that has not only strengthened each school's financial health, but has also greatly improved the academic performance of the children the schools are charged with educating. The 13 consortium schools have achieved remarkable growth in grades 2 through 8 proficiency rates on the standardized Terra Nova test from 2000 to 2005: reading growth of 60.6 percent, 78.1 percent growth in math, and 34.1 percent growth in language arts over those five years. More remarkable, those growth rates include test scores from 2004-05, when 300 high-poverty children from failing District of Columbia public schools entered consortium schools through the new D.C. voucher program.

Stanton's leadership has been the driving force behind this transformation. She installed research-based learning programs, created standards for educational achievement, beefed up teacher professional development, and upgraded the buildings and materials that schools and principals have at their disposal. In so doing, she's creating a model for other urban school systems that want to attack entrenched failures of curriculum, facilities, personnel, and district management, but don't know where to begin.

She will say that making those changes has been the hardest part of her job. Her fellow educators will disagree. "The piece that's hard to re-create" in our success, said Assumption principal Christopher Kelly, "is the leadership."

Learning to Lead

For Stanton, leadership begins and ends with the people she serves.

"It's all about the kids," she said, while driving me from the consortium's offices in Northeast Washington, D.C. to Assumption's campus in Southeast. This phrase, so common among educators and educational leaders, is no glib expression for Stanton.

As an assistant dean at Washington's Trinity College from 1989-1993, she became acutely aware of how schools of education are failing. "I was horrified with what [the teachers] didn't know, and with what I didn't know," she said. Herself a history major and Phi Beta Kappa graduate from Trinity, Stanton said she rarely felt prepared as a teacher for what she was doing.

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Nothing changed when she was named principal of St. Anthony's Catholic School in Washington, a pre-K through eighth grade school with a good reputation. Stanton quickly became aware of the wide divergence between teachers and students. "I was overwhelmed with how wonderful the students and parents were," she said, and intimately aware of how unprepared many teachers were to deal with struggling pupils—a problem that is exposed when they work with the most disadvantaged youngsters. Often, the teachers were unable, and Stanton was unequipped, to diagnose why a child wasn't learning and get him or her back on track. "How," she wondered, "could we do things differently?"

Having just come from a college of education, she knew that waiting on those institutions to produce better teachers was no answer. So she began visiting schools that were working, talking with principals of successful urban schools, and reading a lot of educational research. What she learned was how much she didn't know. The university "didn't equip me to do the work I was now doing."

She took a break from school leadership after 1998 and became director of professional development for the Catholic Schools in the Archdiocese of Washington. It proved a short stint. In 1999, she became involved with a new program, Faith in the City, the diocese's response to the mounting financial woes of its urban schools. The program was born from a committee charged by then-Cardinal James Hickey to find the best method for dealing with the 16 high-poverty schools under diocesan control. The committee's initial suggestion was hardly one that Hickey wanted to hear. It recommended closing eight of the schools, and consolidating the remaining eight into four.

Hickey's reply has taken on mythic proportions in the nation's capital. "I won't abandon this city," he said, and put the committee back to work.

Inspired by the Cardinal's resolve, the committee returned with Faith in the City. Its cornerstone program is the Center City Consortium. "The 16 troubled schools faced the same three problems," Stanton said: financial distress, declining enrollment, and falling test scores.

The first leader of the consortium was Sister Delia Dowling of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, a Catholic order of teaching nuns. In many ways, she faced the toughest task, said

Stanton. Her job was to figure out how to improve the schools' financial bottom lines while establishing operating procedures to make the consortium successful. In the end, eight of the schools entered into the consortium immediately; five other schools would join later. (Another will join at the end of the year.)

In Washington's Catholic schools at the time, the principal was not only the school's academic head, but the financial and administrative head as well. Christopher Kelly, who was principal at Assumption before as well as during the consortium, remembers not only dealing with teachers and students, but also collecting tuition payments, paying the bills, and raising money.

Dowling wanted to take that burden off the principals and allow them to focus on the children and teachers. At the time, Kelly was unimpressed.

"The first year or so, the director created mind-numbing detail [jobs for us]," he recalled. But in hindsight, he sees it for what it was—a necessary evil. The "detail" included developing a new system for collecting tuition (everything now comes through the consortium); establishing policies concerning student behavior, teacher evaluation, etc.; and analyzing the schools' needs. Stanton herself gives Dowling tremendous credit for getting the consortium up and running.

Once these systems were in place, the consortium was ready to turn to curriculum. It was at this point that Stanton took over in 1999 as the new executive director.

As she had done at St. Anthony's five years earlier, Stanton asked herself, "What will work?" Her years of experience and study were about to pay off.

Standards Creation

Walk the halls and classrooms of Assumption school, and standards are everywhere. Writing and art work fill the corridors; in the classrooms, reading books and cards are neatly arranged for easy access, while must-know math terms cover the walls. And then there are the students—always busy, always working, almost always on-task.

This wasn't so just a few years ago. The walls were bare, adding to the dilapidated feel of the school. The quality of the teaching was spotty. And students were not focused on achievement.

Identifying the problem was easy; figuring out how to make a difference was not. Immediately, teachers became a focus of attention for Stanton, but not for the reasons one might think. It's true that there were weak performers and poorly trained people in some classrooms, but Stanton was more concerned that the teachers had no direction, no goals, and no materials. In short, they had operated for too many years with inadequate leadership. And that's for those who lasted. Assumption, like the other schools in the consortium, had teacher turnover rates of 50 percent.

"The kids were using leftover books from the suburban districts," Stanton recalls. Not every child had a book, and it wasn't uncommon for classes to use different texts. "Every year, the teacher had to start on page one," she said, because every year the books changed.

The students themselves presented another problem. The children coming to Assumption were, according to the entrance test they took, intellectually and mentally capable. But they were "instructionally disabled." In plain English—they'd never been taught to learn, much less well taught.

Establishing learning standards would be key, but Stanton knew she had neither the staff nor the pupils to pull it off that first year. Standards require buy-in—from faculty,

students, and school leaders—and in 2000, the environment was too unstable to expect a serious commitment to high standards from any of the three groups.

So Stanton inserted an intermediate step and introduced two new learning tools with proven track records: Saxon math, known for distributing instruction, practice, and assessment evenly throughout the year, and the Open Court reading system, a phonics-based approach to reading instruction. The teachers, Stanton believed, needed to see success. She knew that Saxon and Open Court, followed conscientiously, would provide it.

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For the most part, the teachers were less than thrilled. Time and success, however, changed their minds. According to Stanton, the schools began seeing a bump in test scores the very first year. Most important, the teachers themselves saw the results.

"I was no fan," said Lily Phillips, who teaches kindergarten at Assumption. Today, she could be the principal marketing tool for data-driven curriculum programs.

There is no surer sign of her confidence than my reception in her classroom one recent spring day. Unannounced, Stanton and I entered Phillips' classroom and Stanton immediately asked if there was a volunteer to read to me.

"Who would you like?" Phillips asked.

"Choose your best reader," said Stanton.

"They're all readers, it doesn't matter who you choose."

And so we did choose—a five-year-old African American boy wearing the trademark navy-blue Assumption sweatshirt along with a pair of dark blue sweat pants that didn't fit quite right and had obviously not been purchased in one of the District's finer stores. Without hesitation, this child, who seven months earlier couldn't recite his alphabet, read a one-and-a-half page, first-grade-level story with ease and expression. More impressive, he stuck around to answer substantive questions about the text.

Perhaps most surprising, however, is that prior to Stanton's arrival, this teacher had never graduated a class of kindergarten students who could all read. Now, her students routinely leave kindergarten reading well above grade level. It's rare for a child to leave Assumption reading below level.

How Stanton helped turn a teacher who was vocal in her opposition to the new learning system into one of its most solid supporters provides the real key to how she brought the teachers around. Stanton refused to use the new system as an excuse to clean house. Instead, she used it to gain teacher confidence.

Standards—The Principal Test

But teachers weren't the only source of opposition to implementing a standards-driven curriculum. The principals, too, presented problems. Traditionally, textbook selection is the school principal's responsibility. The leaders of the newly formed consortium schools were reluctant to relinquish that authority.

As with the teachers, Stanton understood that dictating change would make the people she most wanted to buy into her ideas—the principals—openly hostile. So she compro-

mised. Stanton told them that Saxon and Open Court would be used on a one-year trial basis. At the end of the year, she and the principals would sit down together and examine student performance to determine if the materials would be used the following year. Her only stipulation was that the principals would be held accountable for implementation. "I was not going to allow schools to botch implementation, then blame the program for poor results," she said.

The results spoke for themselves, but the real work was just beginning.

With the principals and teachers sold on the efficacy of using data to aid in instruction, she next asked the schools to adopt another new standards-based curriculum. In standards-based teaching, programs such as Saxon and Open Court become resources, not definitive tools. The standards are created and maintained by the teachers themselves. "We want to make the teachers the experts," Stanton said.

Toward that end, the consortium retained the services of Learning 24/7, a Phoenix-based educational consulting firm. Immediately, the resistance from the schools was evident. "Not a few principals and teachers were convinced that the executive director of the consortium was losing her mind," Stanton said with a smile. She understood the concern. She had just asked them to accept Saxon and Open Court, to believe in a curriculum that rests on standards. Now she was pulling that rug out from under them.

"Teachers believed that the textbook was the curriculum," Stanton said "You'd start on page one the first day of school, and try to make it all the way through to the end. If you did, you accomplished your goals." A standards-driven curriculum doesn't allow for this. Now, the textbooks are a resource to meet particular educational goals. To reduce shock and gain schools' confidence, Stanton, at 24/7's suggestion, adopted a "pebbles in the pond approach" to implementation. Starting with just three schools and two grades, standards would be implemented. If they proved effective, it became easier to sell the idea to the rest of the consortium.

But which standards to adopt? Here, the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation became an important ally. Stanton used the Foundation's appraisals of state academic standards to help make her decision. The consortium adopted Indiana's state standards for three reasons: 1) these were favorably reviewed by Fordham, being consistently rated among the three best sets of standards in the nation; 2) the Archdiocese of Indianapolis had already adopted the standards and infused them with a Catholic identity that was critical to the consortium; and 3) Indiana used the Terra Nova exam to measure student progress. That was the test already being employed by the Washington diocese, so the consortium could use existing scores to establish a baseline.

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Learning 24/7 brought in consultants who worked weekly, and sometimes daily, with the pilot schools and their teachers and principals. Their mission was to provide training in teaching methods, assist principals in implementing the new standards, and provide feedback on problem areas. At the end of the 2003-04 school year, student data

were examined to determine what was working and what gaps remained. The curriculum for the affected grades was then adjusted, and the consortium was prepared to launch standards-based learning across all grades and disciplines.

In August 2004, principals and teams of teachers familiar with standards-based instruction gathered together to develop six "power standards" for each grade and to align those standards vertically across the grades (pre-K-8). Power standards are general goals to be met in each grade. For example, the reading goal for kindergarten students may be to understand and apply the basics of phonics to read grade-leveled books. How to accomplish that goal, however, is left to the teachers and principals.

Once principals and teachers are trained in a standards-based curriculum approach, they are able to adjust and maintain it themselves, without the assistance of consulting firms.

With this approach, said Kelly, "the teachers have ownership." He comments that, at Assumption, teachers routinely gather to discuss what's working for them in reaching the power standards. If a teacher is having a problem, she consults with her colleagues. Often, one of them has a good method or resource, which is then adopted and placed in the manual. And if no one in the school can resolve the problem?

"I call other principals," said Kelly, and see if their teachers have other ideas. This is the other benefit of standards-based education—it has greatly improved communication among principals and teachers at the various schools. Whereas before the consortium began, Kelly may have seen other principals once or twice a year at meetings, now he's in contact almost daily with his colleagues.

Implementing standards-based learning was not cheap, but most costs are front-loaded. Once principals and teachers are trained in this curricular approach, they are able to adjust and maintain it themselves, without the assistance of consulting firms. Stanton said the costs of implementing these standards will continue to decline with each passing year.

Testing Students

With the adoption of the Indiana State standards for learning, as well as the school's own "Power Standards," testing took on new importance in consortium schools. Teachers made the decision, said Kelly, "that student performance would guide our teaching."

But neither Stanton nor the principals were interested in heaping test upon test. "Testing for the sake of testing makes no sense," said Stanton. The Terra Nova exam showed teachers where students were upon entering. But how would they track learning?

The consortium, with guidance from the folks at Learning 24/7, turned to an exam called I Know, produced by CTB McGraw-Hill. I Know exams are administered every nine weeks, with results broken down by class, question-by-question. This disaggregation allows a teacher to see how well the material is being learned. So instead of seeing results that tell her that 85 percent of a class is doing adequate work in math, the teacher sees that 90 percent understand measurement, for example, and 95 percent grasp the concept of inches and feet, but only 30 percent can convert inches to feet.

Now the teacher has a roadmap for the work that needs to be done. As important, the principal and teachers have the ability to align the Power Standards to the appropriate grade level.

"We use these tests not to punish, but to teach" both teacher and student, said Kelly, himself a math teacher. And while some teachers still obsess over the tests being used against them, most are coming to appreciate their value. This is not to say the test results can't be used as grounds for dismissal. But it is to say test scores *alone* cannot be used as grounds for dismissal. In consortium schools such a decision is never a reflex one. Stanton is careful to examine trends and pay attention to those teachers who are working with the most challenging students.

"The standards and tests are working because the standards are a live document," she says, and the teachers have real ownership. Now, when an I Know exam shows that one teacher is not getting concepts across to her class, she can turn to a colleague who is having success and find out what's working for her. Far from stifling teacher creativity, the newly adopted standards are helping to increase teacher creativity. "There isn't a teacher here who doesn't try to teach something in three or four different ways," said Kelly.

If any one statistic can show that consortium teachers are buying in to the new system of teaching with established standards, perhaps it's this one: In 2000, the average annual teacher turn-over rate for consortium schools was 50 percent. This year, that number is just 8 percent. In 2000, Assumption lost half its teachers. In 2005, it lost only two. Part of this is because teachers' salaries have improved modestly. But no one who teaches, said Kelly, does it for the money. Instead, they want to change lives. And seeing that change is what makes them stay.

Miles to Go, Before I Sleep

For all her success over the past five years, what impresses this observer most about Stanton is her awareness of the problems still before her. Currently, she is most concerned about the achievement of middle school students. Last year, the consortium brought some 300 middle school students out of D.C. public schools and into its classrooms. Most of these youngsters' achievement levels were far below grade level.

When younger children enter school below grade level, there's an abundance of material to help bring them up to speed. Not so with middle schoolers—at least, not materials that are proven effective. Reading rehabilitation is the toughest task for these children to master. "You can't hold their attention with books geared for young children," said Stanton. So, the challenge becomes finding readings that hold their interest and are manageable as learning tools.

Very often, school systems will look at these older children and say, "When we get our younger kids up to those levels, you'll see results." Stanton refuses to do this. "I won't pass on these kids," she said. One reason she feels so strongly is because of the consortium's ideals for success. Stanton insists that the consortium doesn't measure success by how many students it sends to elite private schools or high-powered universities, but by how many master the skills needed to escape the poverty of inner-city Washington. Every child that doesn't get the basics is another child likely doomed to a low-wage job and a bleak future.

Troubling, too, are the financial realities that lie ahead. Over the past five years, Stanton has raised some $30 million for the schools. Nearly all of it has been used for class materials, building improvement, and scholarships. To this point, Stanton has been able to raise money "based on the overwhelming needs" of the schools. She knows now that she can only raise money based upon "the

results that I'm getting." She would have it no other way. Still, the pressure to sustain and grow can be daunting.

Related to fund raising is the issue of school vouchers. The federally funded D.C. voucher program offers $7,500 to parents to enroll their children in private schools. Unfortunately for consortium schools, students eligible for the vouchers receive only the amount their school charges for tuition—in most cases, around $3,500. This doesn't begin to cover the true cost of instruction and school upkeep. That gap must be funded with private dollars. Stanton hopes to raise this issue with Congress when re-authorization of the bill comes up. Until that time, she'll struggle on. "We cannot consider a dramatic increase in tuition rates because every non-voucher student and family we serve would be negatively affected."

A Common Miracle

Despite the problems, Stanton and the diocese have reason to be confident. And this, perhaps, explains why the word "miracle" isn't used to describe what is happening at Assumption. This miracle did not drop from the sky, nor did it come about through some supernatural display of power. Rather, the miracle came in the form of a 5'4" sandy-headed dynamo with a plan, and the will to make change happen.

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