

# Three-Way Partnership Transforms Arizona District

In 2008, the struggling Creighton Elementary School District in Phoenix was offered a unique opportunity for comprehensive improvement. Now, two years later, student achievement exceeds expectations, and the district itself has transformed the way it operates.

Creighton was approached in May of 2008 by WestEd and the Ellis Center for Educational Excellence, a Phoenix-based philanthropy, to participate in a districtwide reform initiative. Ellis and WestEd formed a partnership in early 2008 aimed at building capacity in Arizona's underperforming and underserved districts, particularly those with high poverty and large minority populations. Ellis provided the funding and a multiyear commitment to the initiative; WestEd has provided district- and school-improvement expertise, experience, and assistance teams.

Creighton was selected as the third partner based on the district's student population and achievement data. The central Phoenix district has nine schools that serve roughly 7,200 K-8 students, 85 percent of whom are Hispanic. "Nearly half the students are second language learners," says Superintendent Charlotte Boyle, "and 90 percent are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch."

For WestEd, the well-funded, multiyear, flexible commitment from Ellis brought a unique opportunity to effect change. Through the initiative, Creighton district staff developed a collaboration with WestEd's DistrictsMovingUp (DMU) program, whose instructional and administrative coaches offer Creighton a systemic, sustainable approach to improving student achievement.

By the fall of 2010, the partners' intensive efforts had produced significant change. "From a failing district," says Ellis Center CEO Steve Mittenthal, "Creighton has moved to a 'performing plus' district, with all nine of its schools relabeled. If you look at reading proficiency scores, Creighton outpaces the state average by three-fold, which is extraordinary."

## **Gathering Stakeholders to Assess Needs**

Creighton's reform initiative was built on a foundation of school, district, and community input. As a first step in the reform project, DMU staff conducted a districtwide needs assessment in August of 2008, gathering data on district operations from all its stakeholders.

DMU staff presented the results at a four-day workshop convened in mid-September with a district leadership team that included the superintendent, principals, instructional coaches, teachers from all nine of the district's schools, parents, and Arizona Department of Education staff. Among the findings:

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- Only 13 percent of building-level administrators strongly agreed that all students had opportunities to learn rigorous content.
- Only 30 percent of teachers strongly agreed that all teachers understood or implemented a rigorous curriculum.
- Only 31 percent of principals and assistant principals strongly agreed that the district had well-defined learning expectations for all students.

In addition, the results showed that the district's instructional coaches spent less than 50 percent of their time in classrooms; principals had inadequate on-site time to observe teachers; and education practices differed widely from school to school.

Damon Twist, principal of Creighton's Excelencia School summed it up well: "Our district really operated as nine separate islands, as far as how we defined effective teaching, how we determined whether or not students had learned, and what we did with that information once we had it."

Workshop participants used the needs assessment findings to develop an action plan that would have the maximum impact on student learning. What emerged were three core goals to be implemented districtwide:

- improving instruction,
- aligning curriculum with state academic standards, and
- developing common formative assessments so that principals, coaches, and teachers at each school could analyze each student's learning needs, plan interventions, and track their progress toward mastery.

That summer, the partners learned that Creighton had become the first Arizona district to be labeled failing by the Arizona Department of Education, underscoring the urgency of their reform effort.

## **Focusing on the "What" and "How" of High-Quality Education**

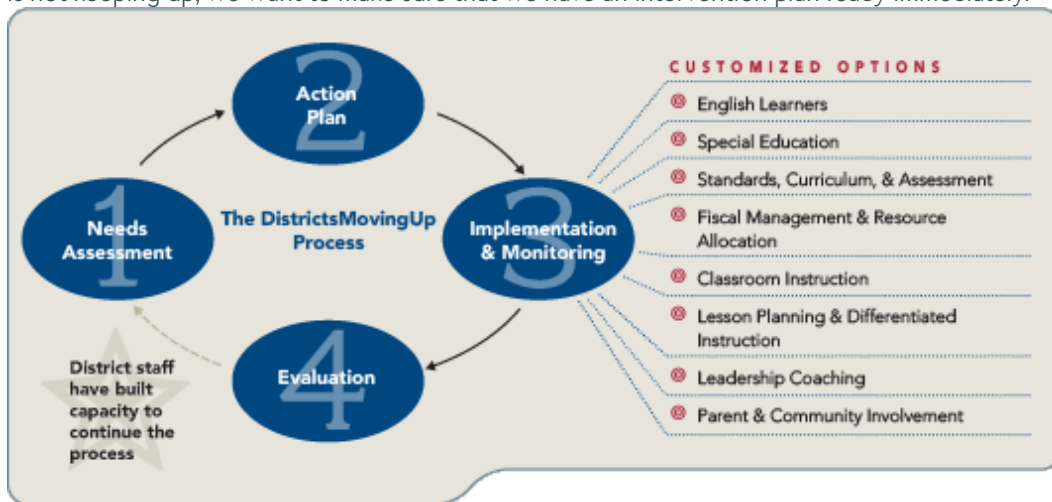
Based on ten evidence-based principles that characterize highly performing districts, WestEd's Districts Moving Up (DMU) project developed a customized plan to meet the district's particular needs, goals, and culture. The DMU improvement process aims to build district capacity and is structured around a four-phase cycle of needs assessment, action planning, implementing and monitoring, and evaluation.

In the first nine months of the initiative, DMU instruction and curriculum coaches logged a total of 2,616 hours in the Creighton district with trainings, site visits, and meetings. Creighton's Director of Curriculum and Instruction, Connie Witte, worked with DMU and the district leadership team to develop a standards-aligned curriculum, the first-year focus of which was essential standards and performance objectives in reading and math. "We began by analyzing what was really happening in the classrooms," says Witte "and we found there were many disconnects. We needed to align the work that all of us were doing."

As the district improvement effort moved forward on several fronts, high-quality curriculum and instruction remained the focus. "Although WestEd's approach to district improvement is of necessity multifaceted," says WestEd Senior Program Director Fred Tempes, who oversees the Creighton

initiative, "there are two essential features that inform all improvement efforts. One is: defining what kids learn, the core curriculum, the knowledge and skills they will master by the time they leave the Creighton Elementary School District. And secondly: improving how it's taught – training faculty in instructional practices that the research tells us are effective. We work collaboratively with the district and the site-based staff on those two features over and over and over again to get steadily better."

Establishing a "guaranteed and viable curriculum" is how Joe Sassone, who directs WestEd's curriculum and assessment coaching team in Creighton, describes the work. "We want to make sure that at each grade level students are gaining the knowledge and skills in reading and in math that they need in order to be ready for the next grade," he explains. "Every week or two, we measure each student's progress in attaining the guaranteed curriculum. If the assessment shows that a student is not keeping up, we want to make sure that we have an intervention plan ready immediately."




No less intensive has been the coaching in high-quality instruction geared to accelerating student achievement and learning, an effort led by WestEd Director of Field Services, Huck Fitterer. By the end of the fall of 2009, every principal, instructional coach, and teacher in the district had received training in classroom strategies designed to improve student engagement, understanding of learning objectives, and key academic vocabulary. For the instructional coaching, WestEd combined components of its Teach for Success (T4S) and English Learner and Literacy Acceleration (ELLA) programs.

### Building District Capacity To Sustain Reforms

Now in its third year, the reform initiative has brought profound changes to the role the district plays in overseeing the development of common goals, standards, and practices across all schools, and supporting site-based faculty and staff to implement them.

"In the last two years," says Superintendent Boyle, "our collaborative improvement effort has become focused around the use of student performance data to inform instruction. We've also come to understand the importance of principals spending more time at their school sites so that they have time daily to be in classrooms with their assistant principals and the coaches. And every Friday afternoon, we schedule time with one of the principals to look at data and talk about what's going well and what support the site needs from the district office."



The district's 2010-2011 focus is on increasing academic rigor, addressing ongoing instructional needs of the district's ELL population, and building district capacity to sustain the reform.

Creighton is now a district on the move. "The culture and spirit that the district is displaying is very positive, very upbeat," says WestEd's Tempes. "This is a transformative process. They are closing the achievement gap with the state, and they are closing it for all of the different subpopulations in the district – in a much shorter time than we anticipated."

The change in culture is also evident from reforms the district has initiated on its own. These include extending the school day by 70 minutes and revamping the roles and responsibilities of the district's instructional coaches. Beyond the Ellis Center's support, the district allocated \$250,000 of its federal stimulus funding to expand WestEd services and training from T4S and ELLA in Creighton schools.

In addition, a new family engagement program reorganized parent-teacher conferences to focus on student performance data, parent-student goal setting, and study skills to practice at home. Community Education Director Maria Paredes developed the program. Her research, published last October by the Harvard Family Research Project, showed that Creighton parents were more interested in attending academically oriented activities than other types of events such as potlucks or family-fun nights. Creighton Superintendent Boyle presented Paredes' work on November 9 at The National Policy Forum for Family, School, and Community Engagement, hosted by the U.S. Department of Education.

Ellis plans to expand the Creighton project by adding early childhood and high school transition components, and to conduct tracking studies to document the progress of Creighton students once they leave the district.

"We are focused intensively on district-level, comprehensive reform," says Ellis CEO Steve Mitten-thal, "and we are in it for the long haul."