

## **Serenity Intermediate School: A Scenario**

Serenity Intermediate School is one of nine schools in ABC Independent School District, located in the great state of Texas. The district serves approximately 6000 children in an agriculture-based community that is about 40 miles from a large city. Serenity School currently has 832 students enrolled; the ethnic breakdown includes 48% Hispanic, 14% African American, and 38% Whites. The intermediate school is Title I schoolwide, as are about half of the schools in the district.

In recent years, the school has seen an increase in the Hispanic population, especially from migrant families. Many of the parents in these families are young and have limited formal education. The children tend not to become involved in extracurricular activities, and they are not tracked when they leave the district.

The district has a system that tracks failing grades and absenteeism to help identify students at risk. Although it is not set up to do so, this system could easily be adapted to include demographic data. The only data that have routinely been disaggregated are the TAKS/STAAR results for AYP purposes.

Serenity School has a mixed faculty of experienced and novice teachers that serves the children of the diverse community surrounding the school. A new program in the near-by college has provided incentives to new teachers who work in low-income schools, so student/teacher ratios have remained fairly stable; however, there is a decreasing percentage of teachers who are Hispanic. A recently hired ELL specialist spent a considerable amount of time in ABC District last year. However, she will be responsible for additional districts this year and will not be able to devote so much time to individual schools.

### **Student Performance at Serenity School**

Serenity School emerged 3 years ago from stage 1 school improvement for both reading and math. Last year (2011–2012) it was one of three schools in the district that failed to make adequate yearly progress (AYP). Serenity's students in special education did not meet the AYP target for reading performance. Students qualified as LEP did not meet AYP for reading in 2010–2011 but showed considerable improvement this past year. Even so, they were barely above the AYP target. Although most students performed adequately in 2012, there were across-the-board declines in academic achievement for reading compared to the previous year, except for the LEP group mentioned above. Math scores have been relatively constant for the past three years.

### **Leadership at Serenity School**

The principal at Serenity is beginning her third year at the school, and she has hired approximately one-half of the current teachers. She also hired both a mathematics and a reading coach. When she hired the coaches, she explained to them her vision for the

school and the role they would play. She emphasized that a large part of their work, in addition to working with teachers, would be to collect data in reading and mathematics.

When she began working at Serenity, the principal made sure that all teachers had a copy of the district curriculum. However, last year the state adopted new ELA standards and the district curriculum has not yet been updated. Because of this, it is not possible to align literacy instruction to state standards using the curriculum on hand.

The principal organized a campus leadership team last year. She schedules monthly meetings, although job duties occasionally prevent her from attending. On those occasions, she asks her assistant principal to fill in for her. Usually the principal calls the district to try to get their representation on the committee; several times, someone from the curriculum department has been able to attend.

The agenda of the campus leadership team is often hastily created the day of the meeting and is based on the most immediate concerns. The reading and math coaches occasionally bring data for the team to review. The reading coach has noted that few teachers are implementing research-based literacy practices.

The teachers and staff who serve on the campus leadership team change each year. In order to avoid showing favoritism, the principal asks that team members be elected by their peers. The principal has noticed that those elected are often the staff members newest to the school.

### **Professional Development at Serenity School**

The district usually decides on the focus and content for about half of the professional development received by the staff of all schools in the district, as detailed in the district improvement plan (DIP). Professional development for Serenity's staff has been ongoing, with a focus on cooperative learning, mathematics, reading, and science. Training has been provided by the district and their regional education service center (ESC) on topics such as accountable talk; higher order thinking skills; numerical fluency; guided math groups; examining student work; graphic organizers; inquiry-based science instruction; the 5E model; differentiation of instruction; rigor, relevance, and relationships; positive behavior systems; and professional learning communities. Teachers enjoy being able to self-select staff development, but this has resulted in numerous substitutes in classrooms each week.

The principal and assistant principal have completed a few of the above trainings, as well as training in the current appraisal system. They have also been developing a schedule to visit every classroom at least once a week. Teachers report seeing the principal often, but they are unsure about the focus of these visits and how they will help them improve their teaching.

## **Culture and Organization at Serenity School**

Serenity School students, parents, and staff completed a school survey in August. The results revealed that many students do not enjoy coming to school. The students felt that administrators and teachers showed a lack of respect for some students and were not very fair when handling discipline problems among Hispanic students. Teachers and administrators felt that parents and the community failed to understand the importance of supporting their children's schooling.

Parents and teachers felt that the school provided little or no opportunity for them to share their ideas about decision making and school policies; they had minimal input into developing the school's vision and planning goals. Parents—and the community as a whole—felt that they had very little support from the school in dealing with a recent increase of drug abuse in their community.

Parents, teachers, and students agreed that technology had not been a high priority for the school. The teachers and students would benefit from a computer lab and individual computers in the classrooms to assist with teaching and learning. Also, more up-to-date software and hardware, as well as faster internet accessibility, would support high-quality instruction.

## **Campus Improvement Plan at Serenity School**

The campus improvement plan (CIP) currently in place at the school was agreed upon by all school leaders. The plan was developed by conducting an analysis of the data collected by the mathematics and reading coaches to identify areas of need and establish measures of progress towards improving student achievement. It resembles the previous year's plan, and all the required components of a comprehensive schoolwide plan are addressed. However, the principal and campus leadership team have difficulty identifying progress made towards meeting the plan's desired outcomes when asked by district staff or community members. The district improvement plan was not reviewed when Serenity was creating their CIP. All staff have individual copies of the plan, but there has been no review of the plan since the final draft was completed at the end of the previous school year.

## **What Actions Are Needed at Serenity?**

Everyone at Serenity works hard and wants their students to be successful. However, teachers are not able to determine why scores are dropping for most student groups. They also have difficulty describing specific campus initiatives that have been adopted to address the areas of need.

Campus administrators work long hours but are unsure why the students are not performing better. District administrators review Serenity's data and visit the school monthly, but they do not know what else they can do and they fear the school is heading once again into school improvement. ABC's superintendent wants the TAKS scores to improve and told the school staff to do whatever is necessary to make this happen. They ask the ESC to provide a school support team to help them.