

## PROFILE OF LEADERSHIP:

# 5. METROPOLITAN SCHOOL DISTRICT OF WARREN TOWNSHIP

Indiana's Metropolitan School District of Warren Township is an urban education success story. Despite having nearly 60 percent of its students living in poverty, Warren Township, a 12,000-student district comprising the east side of Indianapolis, saw all of its elementary schools make federal Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) standards in 2007. At some Warren Township schools, the student passing rate on Indiana state exams has climbed from 20 percent in the early part of this decade to 70 percent today.

But for the Metropolitan School District of Warren Township's Board of Education and its superintendent, Peggy Hinckley, reaching this point was hardly an easy process.

In fact, the Warren Township success story owes more to determination than it does to innovation. People in the community and employees of the district initially were resistant to the reforms the board and Hinckley intended to enact. It was only after these methods proved successful that public opinion started to turn.

"The only person who likes change is a wet baby," Hinckley says, describing the reform process and the turmoil it initially created.

In the 1980s, Warren Township and its schools generally were considered desirable places to be. East Indianapolis was a middle-class neighborhood with stable families, and the schools reflected that environment.

But, as in many communities, the middle-class, predominantly white residents gradually moved from the city to the suburbs and the eastern side of Indianapolis became increasingly poor. Today, 58 percent of Warren Township's students qualify for free or reduced-price meals. The district's racial demographics also have shifted. The once-predominantly white district now is 44 percent black and 43 percent white.

Academic performance in the school district gradually had declined as well. By 2001, the Warren Township school district was struggling. That year, the school board brought in Hinckley with a mandate to make changes. Those changes included looking at all the district's practices—academic, organizational and financial—and making tough decisions about what to keep and what to discard.

In particular, Hinckley wanted a more data-driven approach to classroom instruction. That desire immediately put her at odds with teachers, who balked at what they perceived as micromanagement from the central office.

"Initially, the teachers resented the lack of flexibility," Hinckley says. "It was very hard in the first year."

## DATA DRIVES DECISION-MAKING

The new emphasis on data might have upset the teachers, but, as Hinckley says, "one of the reasons the board recruited me was because student achievement was declining."

Student performance on the Indiana Statewide Testing for Educational Progress-Plus (ISTEP), the state's standardizing testing program, declined for three consecutive years between 1999 and 2001. The 2000-01 school year saw the district bottom out, as fewer than half the students passed the standardized tests. At the sixth-grade level, the passing rate was below 40 percent. The passing rates at some individual schools was as low as 20 percent. Warren Township had the lowest overall scores among the Indianapolis area townships.

In addition, the district also faced a financial crunch when Hinckley arrived. The district's cash balance had fallen to dangerously low levels, so one of the new superintendent's first duties was to find \$3 million in budget cuts.



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School board member Sue Switzer says the board recognized that the district needed a new direction. Board members were unified in that regard, she says.

"When we hired Dr. Hinckley, the board's number one question was, "What would you do to improve student achievement?" Switzer says.

Hinckley was a well-known, veteran administrator. Before coming to Warren, she served as superintendent in LaPorte, Ind., for 12 years and, in 1995, was named Indiana's Superintendent of the Year. In 1994, the state superintendent of public instruction appointed her to the Committee to Study Systemic Change for Indiana's Policies for Education. Hinckley brought with her a cache of respect from educators within the state.

She also brought a plan, borrowed from the Brazosport, Texas, schools that she thought would turn Warren Township's struggling fortunes around.

In the 1990s, Brazosport gained national acclaim for its data-driven approach to improving student performance. Today, 400 school districts across the nation use the Bra-

zosport model for school improvement. (However, Brazosport is no longer one of them. Changes in that district's leadership led the school system to abandon the reform plan that once made the district famous.)

This eight-step program calls for:

- Data disaggregation;
- An instructional timeline, or pacing guide for teaching;
- Instructional focus, meaning lessons should target the specific needs of students;
- Assessment of student progress, using regular tests;
- Tutorials for students who don't master skills the first time around;
- Enrichment for those who do;
- Maintenance, or "reteaching", to reinforce skills that have been learned; and
- Continuous monitoring of student progress.

"It's a continuous improvement model based on a continuous stream of data," Hinckley says. Nationally acclaimed educational consultant Patricia Davenport, the former director of curriculum and instruction in Brazosport, has helped the district implement and execute this program, which focuses on reading and math.

In Warren Township, elementary and middle teachers are expected to closely follow a carefully designed plan. For example, 30 minutes every day are spent on remediation or enrichment, or a "success period."

Every three weeks, students are given four-item assessments to gauge their progress. The assessments are color-

coded, with red meaning students missed two or more items, yellow meaning they missed one item and green meaning they got all four correct. Teachers and principals also get a class-level picture of student performance.

Students who don't perform well on these mini-assessments are required to attend remedial sessions while their classmates are in physical education or health.

"Assessment drives reform," Hinckley says. "If your assessment data says your students didn't master the standard, rather than wait another semester, you immediately provide help."

### **CHANGING A CULTURE**

Hinckley felt her approach would work. But she also knew that all the planning in the world would be for naught if Warren Township's teachers didn't buy into the program.

Change rarely is easy in public schools. Even the most apparently simple and benign changes often end up scrutinized and criticized. But the resistance Hinckley received from Warren Township's teachers was far more than she or school board members had bargained for.

Many teachers in the district protested what they considered an overly rigid plan. Teachers complained that Hinckley's proposal would take away their decision-making abilities in the classroom.

"They felt we were telling them what to teach, when to teach, and how to teach," Switzer says.

The school board did its best to repair relations with the teachers. They held numerous meetings at the schools to listen to teachers' concerns and solicit input as to how to implement the plan. The board and superintendent also gradually introduced plan by implementing it as a pilot program at three schools. When scores at those three schools increased considerably after that first year, it made the plan an easier sell at the remaining schools, Hinckley says.

But, she says, the most important thing the board did during this turbulent first year was to back the superintendent and the program. Board members told teachers that they were willing to listen to input about the best way to implement the plan, but were firm that the plan itself was going to be implemented, no matter how much consternation it caused among employees.

"They heard the complaints and stood firm," Hinckley says.

As far as the budget cuts, Hinckley considered this an opportunity, not a problem. She, her staff, and the school board carefully reviewed every item in the school district's budget. Items that either weren't working or weren't instructional were cut, and savings were redirected to the classroom.

"There is some money involved (in school reform), but it hasn't been substantial. Mostly, it was reordering priorities," she says.

### **A LESSON IN CONSISTENCY**

The schools in Warren Township began making gradual, steady improvement once the eight-step program was implemented. Schools that once had 20 percent passing rates on state tests now have 70 percent of students passing. And every one of Warren Township's elementary schools met AYP standards during the 2007-08 school year, as did the school district as a whole.

Time—and the district's successes—also have salved the wounds of the teachers who felt undermined in 2001. Hinckley said she no longer hears complaints about the plan from veteran teachers and new hires come in knowing what to expect.

"Now, if we take it away, we'll probably have a mutiny," Switzer says. In fact, some Warren Township teachers now are helping to draft curriculum materials used across the district. Switzer says this is another sign teachers are buying into the program.

However, Switzer says, the program itself, while effective when properly implemented, isn't a guarantee to turn a district around. She says it is far more important for school boards to find a successful approach and stick with it, noting that Warren Township has used the same reform program for seven consecutive years. Consistency, she says, is the key.

"We joke about how we're not doing anything new, but I really do think that's one of the things that has made us successful," says Switzer.

She says the board's strong relationship with the superintendent also has been a strong component in the district's success. The board is unified behind the improvement

plan and Hinckley. Switzer said Hinckley's previous experience and proven track record gave board members a level of confidence from the beginning of her tenure.

Next up for Warren Township is transferring the success the district has seen at the elementary school level to the middle and high school ranks. Hinckley says the model hasn't been accepted part of the middle school routine up to this point, but she intends for that to change. Starting this year, if middle school students do not pass the state tests, they must take a remedial schedule with intensive academics and no electives or vocational courses. District officials also added more academics to the school day. In 2004, they made the difficult, and somewhat controversial, decision to eliminate middle school art departments so that the district's limited resources could be applied to academic areas.

"We have started to dismantle the middle school model," Hinckley says. In taking a more academically oriented, data-driven focus to middle school, Hinckley once again is butting heads with teachers and middle school administrators who favor the traditional middle school approach of exploratory learning in a wide range of fields.

Hinckley says, "It doesn't make sense to give a kid cultural literacy if he can't read at grade level."

Hinckley, Switzer, and the other members of Metropolitan School District of Warren Township Board of Education know that continued reform efforts won't be easy. But they have made considerable progress and are determined to build upon what they have done in the past seven years.

"In an urban environment, you can do this. I'm not going to tell you it's easy, but I will tell you there's hope," Hinckley says. "It's a tough business, but it's the noblest work of all."

