

Changes in Chicago: How Board Certification and a Principal's Vision Inspired a Struggling School

By any measure, Mitchell Elementary was a struggling school. Located in the urban core of Chicago's inner city, Mitchell was the type of school many families weren't sure they wanted their child to attend.

That's the Mitchell Elementary Luis Soria found when he became its principal in 2006. But Soria had a vision for his school's future — a vision that would be built on the foundation of his NBPTS certification.

Seeds of Change

Soria became a National Board Certified Teacher (NBCT) years earlier, and said he came back to the classroom "a different person, and everyone saw it." It didn't take long for Soria to embark on a career path that ultimately brought him to Mitchell, and to the idea of creating a school "full of NBCTs, and led by one."

Upon his arrival, Soria found that he was the only member of the school's staff who was National Board Certified. That would change as he began showing teachers the benefits of "developing curricula and getting away from the idea of a teacher's guide." Within his first year on the job, two of Mitchell's teachers earned National Board Certification.

Today, the majority of the staff — eight teachers — are NBCTs, and four others are in the certification process. A full 100 percent of Mitchell teachers who pursue

certification achieve it in their first year — a success rate which is nothing short of astonishing. Furthermore, no Mitchell teacher has ever failed to achieve National Board Certification.

"No one wants to be the first to not achieve at their first attempt," Soria said.

A Culture of Certification

With National Board Certification now deeply embedded in the Mitchell Elementary culture, it has become a very different school.

"As a team, we talk about authentic collaborative learning experiences," Soria said. "We refine, massage and manipulate the curriculum maps every year, and at the same time we're taping teachers, sharing the tapes and having great conversations."

As a result, pursuing National Board certification isn't unfamiliar to Mitchell teachers — it's a natural extension of what they have been practicing all along.

How has the school changed now that it is led and staffed by so many NBCTs? Soria describes it as a type of "utopian place where kids really want to come to school."

"Today there's competition to get into the school. Before, no one wanted to come. We had to beg," Soria said. "Now we've got almost a thousand applications for 15 spots."

Soaring scores

According to Soria, the State of Illinois identifies students at four levels: academic warning, below standard, meeting standard and exceeding standard. When Soria arrived at Mitchell in 2006, only 8 percent of students were performing at the top level. Today, 24 percent are at that level, and 84 percent of students meet or exceed state standards.

As for the lowest end — academic warning — 12 percent of Mitchell students were at that level before Soria's arrival. Today, that number is at 0.3 percent — a remarkable statistic for a school in which 90 percent of students are in free and reduced-cost lunch programs.

"When others hear about the consistent uptick in test scores they ask, 'What's your test prep?' I say it's rigorous, dedicated teaching and learning," Soria said.

Common Core State Standards did not exist when Soria and his staff began changing the culture of Mitchell Elementary, so state standards and other resources were used to measure improvement in student performance.

"We started to look at the way we wanted kids to authentically learn. We created philosophy statements based on what we envisioned kids should know and we aligned them with the standards." All ideas that

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jibe with NBPTS core propositions.

"Not if, but when."

Soria says he no longer has to encourage his teachers to become NBCTs – it's so ingrained in Mitchell's DNA, teachers naturally want to achieve certification.

"It's a matter of not if, but when," Soria said.

"When someone is going through the process, everyone becomes their cheerleader," he said. "On score release day, there are tears and hugs and screaming. We want each other to achieve."

That support extends to the students as well, as Mitchell's teachers aren't content merely to prepare their students for high school, but for college.

"We think about you as a 13-year-old, and how to get you into the best university possible," Soria said. "We are not just looking to meet the standard, but how many can we get to exceed the standard?"

Families appreciate the vision that turned the school around. A literature and writing magnet cluster school, Mitchell Elementary is helping stabilize its surrounding community while giving students – and teachers – the best opportunities to succeed.