

D.F. Walker Elementary School: How a Principal's Commitment to NBPTS Standards Turned a School Around

Edenton, North Carolina, is perhaps best known for its historical significance, but thanks to an inspired principal and her passion for National Board Certification, the area is also making its mark in education leadership.

Located in one of the state's poorest areas, D.F. Walker Elementary School is part of a community in which few parents are highly educated and, until recently, children struggled to perform at grade level. Only 25 percent of kindergartners were considered "kindergarten ready," and the school ranked near the bottom of state reading scores for third graders.

A Title I school in which 65 percent of students receive free and reduced-price meals, Walker was on the verge of being designated as a school improvement site by the state when Sheila Evans arrived as principal in 2002. She vowed to change the school's culture through the Five Core Propositions of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards.

A strong core

As a teacher, Evans achieved National Board Certification in 1999. And though she left the classroom to become a principal, her enthusiasm for the program remained strong – particularly her passion for the Five Core Propositions.

When she arrived at Walker Elementary, Evans found that 10 to 15 percent of her teachers were National Board Certified – a figure she committed to increase by implementing a schoolwide approach to improving her school through NBPTS programs.

"We used the Five Core Propositions as the basis of everything we did," she said. "We really committed ourselves to our students, and to knowing and teaching our subjects."

Evans put significant focus on the NBPTS concept of having teachers reflect on practice through formal observations. She or her assistant vice principal observed each teacher in the classroom, and asked them to write about what they learned during the observed lesson, as well as what they would do differently.

The Walker faculty also embraced the concept of using student-by-student data to assess each student's performance along the continuum.

Evans helped her staff form professional learning communities, establishing horizontal teams by grade level as well as vertical teams across grade levels and disciplines. Both types of teams met weekly.

Within the vertical teams was a National Board team made up of teachers who were earning or renewing their certification, or participating in NBPTS' *Take One!*

program.

"Keep the fire burning."

From her first days as principal of Walker Elementary, Evans made her expectations clear.

"I stood up in front of faculty and said, 'I expect 100 percent of you to be National Board Certified. You are working hard, you deserve to show that you are Board Certified and it's an honor to be certified,'" she said.

As an added incentive, teachers in North Carolina who become National Board certified receive a 12 percent salary incentive. In Evans' case, she knew she would leave the classroom to become a principal, but became certified anyway, never receiving the incentive.

"I did it because I wanted to talk the talk and walk the walk," she said.

At the time, North Carolina paid the fee for teachers to become National Board certified. And while teachers are now offered a loan process instead, the state has always been a national leader in supporting National Board Certification.

As a result, Walker teachers were being encouraged at several levels – by their principal, by their fellow teachers, by their district and by the state – to undertake the certification process. Or as Evans puts it, "to keep the fire burning."

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Contagious success

Sheila Evans spent over nine years as principal of Walker Elementary, during which the number of Board Certified teachers on her staff rose to 45 percent. Evans believes the expertise of National Board Certified Teachers is contagious.

"You have teachers who totally understand the standards and are able to showcase them each and every day, and those teachers positively affect the teachers that they work with who had not yet achieved National Board Certification," she said. "So expertise is actually spread across the school."

The impact has been seen on test scores, as well. Despite state-mandated changes to the testing

process and benchmarks during Evans' tenure, Walker's scores have shown steady improvement overall.

At one time, Walker ranked third from last among North Carolina schools in third grade reading scores. Today, the school is at 60 to 70 percent proficiency. And the students continue to improve as they feed into the local middle school, where eighth graders perform above state standards in every category.

While Evans is justifiably proud of her students' improved academic performance, she sees even greater value from the impact of National Board Certification.

"The impact was there on the data, but more importantly it was the

day-to-day operations that I could tell were making a difference in kids' lives," she said.

Evans left Walker Elementary in early 2012 to become a high school principal, but her commitment to NBPTS standards is unwavering. The principal at the middle school where many of her former students attend is now piloting National Board Certification for Principals, and Evans herself recently completed the NBPTS field test for Principal Certification.

"I see National Board as the best staff development that anyone can go through," she said. "I am definitely a cheerleader for National Board Certification."