

Julius Corsini Elementary School: How National Board Programs and a Principal Transformed a Struggling School

Beyond the luxury hotels and country clubs in the desert paradise of Palm Springs, Calif., is a community better known for gangs, drugs and violence than golf, shopping and spa resorts. In its recent past, Desert Hot Springs held the region's highest per capita crime rate, and was home to a struggling school known as Julius Corsini Elementary.

Not surprisingly, student academic performance levels at Corsini ranked lowest in the Palm Springs Unified School District and were among the lowest 10 percent in the state. Compounding the problem was a teacher turnover rate of 50 to 75 percent per year, and a revolving door of principals who never stayed longer than three years.

Corsini had no culture of learning. Professional learning communities did not exist among the faculty. Teachers did not have adequate planning time. Parents looked across the freeway to find other schools for their children. Teachers wanted out.

The Metamorphosis

Enter a new principal, Kiela Bonelli, who had been National Board certified in 2000 as a first grade teacher. In 2007, she decided that she had seen enough.

Determined to face her school's challenges head-on, Bonelli discarded one-size-fits-all professional development and led the entire staff – 43 teachers, one reading coach and two

administrators – on a professional journey that included the National Board Certification process and one of its components, *Take One!* With her faculty focused on improving teaching and learning schoolwide, the transformation had begun.

As the staff's enthusiasm gained momentum, the school environment shifted to a culture of learning. The faculty began collaborating in professional learning communities. Corsini became one of only four California schools to exit Program Improvement Year 5, meeting annual yearly progress benchmarks and achieving an increase of over 100 percent in the state's Academic Performance Index.

In the 2007-2008 school year, Corsini student test scores on California's Academic Performance Index (API) increased by 55 points, and by 49 points the following year. Proficiency levels in English language arts and mathematics increased from 17 percent to 30 percent in 2007, and the following year, 60 percent of students performed at proficient or above in mathematics and 46 percent in English language arts.

These achievements motivated parents to become more involved in the school's success. Within one year, back-to-school night attendance jumped from 15 percent to 90 percent, and attendance at parent-teacher conferences has more than doubled from 45 percent to 95 percent.

Just as impressive, the teacher turnover rate during the 2007-2008 school year was just 5 percent, a 40 percent improvement from the previous year. The following year, the school lost only one teacher, and that was due to retirement.

"When I walk through classrooms now, I can see meaningful instruction going on," said Bonelli. "Teachers are not afraid to go away from the curriculum because the curriculum was not written for high-need students."

"I have the neediest kids in the district, and they need the best teachers," she added.

The Impact of *Take One!*

At the heart of Corsini's transformation is the inclusion of *Take One!*, administered by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS).

Take One! provides standards-based professional development to improve teaching practices by linking student learning to effective instruction. Used schoolwide, the program enables teachers and principals to build professional learning communities that foster a spirit of collaboration and partnership.

Through *Take One!*, teachers and principals advance student success not only by demonstrating content knowledge, but by using tools such as video technology to analyze teaching practices based on NBPTS standards. Additionally,

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student work is analyzed on multiple levels to focus instruction more effectively, and assessment tools and student data are utilized to positively impact learning.

Corsini's Climate Change

Today, Julius Corsini is an award-winning school – one of only six nationwide to receive the National School Change Award from the National Principals Leadership Institute, co-sponsored by the American Association of School Administrators and Panasonic.

"I truly believe that National Board (programs) developed the level of instruction at the school that I

would not have seen otherwise," Bonelli said.

The environment at Julius Corsini remains markedly positive. It's no longer the school teachers avoid, but the school that attracts quality educators because of the level of professionalism and collaboration among its staff.

Parents appreciate the change as well, leading families to become more passionately involved in the school's success. Communication between teachers and parents is at an all-time high, creating a shared partnership to help each child succeed.

As a result of National Board programs and a determined principal, Corsini is no longer seen as "that school" avoided by parents and teachers alike. It is now seen as a leader in the district.