

For the past three years I have had the honor of representing the Oregon PTA membership on the Blue Ribbon Selection Panel for the Celebrating Student Success Award. I mentioned this during my President-elect remarks at the convention last year in Portland. Each time that I have attended I am startled at the progress that some schools have made. The most amazing thing is that these schools, by and large, are doing this work with the budgets and standard sources of funding (some grant money) they are given. The success of these schools comes from the leadership of administrators who have a “no excuses” approach, committed staff, engaged parents and supportive communities. It is not magic.

The Celebrating Student Success Award was created by the Oregon Department of Education (ODE), at the direction of Superintendent of Public Instruction, Susan Castillo and honors schools in Oregon who are closing the academic achievement gap, specifically among disadvantaged, low-income and minority students. I challenge each of you to understand how this process works, how ODE evaluates this issue, and then to bring this approach to the improvement discussions at your own school.

First, the data analysts at ODE crunch numbers. Even as someone who has no affinity for numbers, the data analysis is impressive. The first step is to understand your school report card and if further analysis would be helpful, any school can request a detailed analysis of this type. The data we reviewed compared the progress of subgroups of students (American Indian/Alaskan, Hispanic, African American, Economically Disadvantaged, Special Education, Limited English Proficient, etc.) with statewide comparison groups as well as white peers in their own school. Schools demonstrating statistically significant progress were invited to submit an application for the Award.

Next, the applications were reviewed by a community panel representing, business, education, ethnic leaders, parents and educators. The scoring guide that was used is one that each of us could use in our role as parent leaders to discuss school improvement with the administration and staff at our own schools. I have permission from ODE to post the scoring guide on the Oregon PTA web-site so look for a link from the home page when it has been completed. The categories of assessment include:

- Mission and Vision of the school is clear, comprehensive, compelling and developed with community members and other stakeholders.
- Narrative Snapshot - description of the school including school size, demographics, grades, mobility rates, meet/exceed benchmark rates, staff population information, language programs, free and reduced lunch rates, and other special/noteworthy school programs
- Closing the Gap - techniques and strategies used to close the gap in enough detail that it provides a clear and replicable model for others.
- Research and Data are used to monitor and improve results.
- On Track to Graduate - strategy of interventions for students below grade level which clearly links to achievement to student success. Percentage of students exiting school below grade level in math, reading, and writing.
- Leadership/Focus - role of leadership at the school in creating a successful learning environment.
- Professional Development - description of the role and importance of professional development at the school. Description of how professional development is tied to student achievement.
- High Expectations - A clear, comprehensive and compelling description of the importance of high expectations for all students and evidence this a school wide commitment.
- Quality Teaching - Importance of quality teaching addressing issues such as cultural competency, innovative teaching strategies, teacher collaboration, and the role of the school in fostering high quality instruction.
- Family/Community Engagement - Role of the family and community engagement and the means the school engages to bring in diverse families. Multiple strategies are discussed and detail provided on family outreach and community partnerships.
- Accountability - Data-based decision making is evident. Assessment data is used in the school improvement process.
- School Data - discussed earlier. This is an evaluation of the strength of the improvement as demonstrated by the data.

Thank you for the opportunity to represent you on this panel and please plan to attend the 2009 Oregon PTA convention in Salem where we will continue to explore this topic. Our theme this year is Closing the Gap and we will host presenters from education, legislation, minority leadership and others who can lead us to deeper understanding and mobilize action on this issue.