

# Flight Initiative – Closing the Achievement Gap Seattle Public Schools Final Report and Impact Statement

## Context

The Flight School Initiative is completing its fourth year. State funding was allocated in the last biennium to support the initiative. The initiative came about as a result of the Collective Bargaining Agreement between the Seattle Education Association and Seattle Public Schools, ratified in 2004. The state funding supporting the Seattle Public Schools Strategic plan and the four Flight School strategies has provided a positive impact on student learning.

The current Seattle Public Schools strategic plan, *Excellence for All*, identifies a theory of action, a set of beliefs around what system-level actions will lead to the greatest change in student outcomes, which is three-fold: **high quality instruction, high quality leadership, and first things first**. The strategies outlined in the strategic plan incorporate and align well to Flight Initiative strategies that incorporate a neighborhood cohort approach (elementary, middle, and high school feeder pathways - "flights") to promote community ownership and support of neighborhood schools. It is built on the concurrent implementation of a set of research-proven strategies that contribute to accelerating student achievement and closing the achievement gap:

- 1) Alignment of Curriculum, Assessment, and Instruction
- 2) Professional Learning Communities
- 3) Family & Community Engagement
- 4) Culturally Responsive Teaching

Central resources continue to support the academic vision with priority given to schools within the Flight Initiative. Data graphs prepared by the Research, Assessment, and Evaluation department of Seattle Public Schools are provided in the Power Point attached to this document. The BERG Group is completing the third year's formal evaluation of the project.

Flight 1 (2004 to 2009) – Rainier Beach High School, Aki Kurose Middle School, African American Academy, Brighton, Dunlap, Emerson, New School, and Wing Luke Elementary Schools

Flight 2 (2005 to 2009) - Chief Sealth High School, Denny Middle School, Arbor Heights, Concord, Gatewood, Highland Park, Roxhill, and Sanislo Elementary Schools

## Strategy Descriptions

### Alignment of Curriculum, Assessment, and Instruction

The Flight Schools Initiative has ensured articulation and calibration of curriculum, assessment, and instruction within and between schools, created a K-12 collaborative culture, and resulted in increased academic achievement and gap closing efforts that are evidenced by grade 10 results in reading, mathematics, writing, and science.

Increased teacher collaboration time provided the venue for alignment activities. Teachers had time to meet regularly together to plan lessons collaboratively. Planning time enabled faculty to thoroughly analyze student work and plan lessons in ways that maximized learning and supported culturally responsive teaching practices. This time also allowed teachers to increase the connections from class to class, grade to grade and within the K-12 feeder pattern. Elementary schools partnered in their mathematics professional development activities. Elementary, middle, and high school teachers visited each other's schools and participated in learning walks. Rainier Beach High School and Aki Kurose Middle School provided students an opportunity to spend the day at the high school bridging their respective programs. Chief Sealth High School and Denny Middle School partnered their music program.

### Professional Learning Communities

Flight School communities embraced in-building instructional learning walks. Teachers participated with administrators in these walks either as a host classroom or observer. The format included debriefing with a protocol for meaningful dialogue around the *Wows* and *Wonders* observed in classrooms. The host classroom teachers were involved during

the debriefing sessions. Flight funding provided for teachers to be released from classroom responsibilities. Teachers indicated via interviews that this was their most meaningful learning opportunity this past year.

With the goal of increasing achievement and student success, Flight School staff also worked together to increase communication between staff and student families through phone calls, home visits, school family nights, and focused community agency resources in support of the academics and the well-being of the whole child.

## **Family and Community Engagement; Building the Capacity of our Staff to Support our Families**

The objectives of Family and Community Engagement in the Flight School Initiative are to increase student academic achievement and attendance, and decrease the achievement gap through meaningful and strategic family and community engagement. In 2008-09 formal governing bodies were created at each one of the Flight Schools called **Family Engagement Action Teams (FEATs)**. Professional development was provided to create School-Family Partnerships One-Year plans to support the key academic objectives of the Continuous School Improvement Plans.

The Flight School Initiative co-sponsored an inaugural *Family and Community Engagement Symposium* for families. The Symposium provided Flight and other Seattle Public Schools' families with integrated professional development workshops on research-based best practices and strategies that help them support student academic achievement at home, at school, and in the community.

The Flight School Initiative also sponsored Family and Community Engagement Institutes for Flight School staff members. These annual professional development opportunities helped our school staff conduct respectful, meaningful and culturally relevant home visits. In 2008-09 418 staff made 4,485 family visits to meet the following objectives:

- Build stakeholder trust
- Create “contact persons” for each family at the school
- Increase awareness among families and students regarding student achievement, high school graduation requirements, and support opportunities at their school: and
- Increase understanding among school staff regarding the needs and realities that our ethnically and linguistically diverse students face

School Social Workers provided support and services to students in their homes and at school sites focusing on community factors that influence their performance in school. Some of these factors included lack of housing, food, clothing, money, gaps in their learning, truancy, and the need for counseling/tutoring resources.

Social Workers also served on their school's Student Intervention Team. They assisted in collaboratively developing strategies and interventions to prevent school dropout and academic failure as well as coordinating agency services and resources to support these efforts.

## **Culturally Responsive Teaching**

Dr. Martha R. Bireda, author of *Eliminating Racial Profiling in School Discipline: Cultures in Conflict*, was the keynote speaker and one of many workshop presenters at our 2008 Flight Summer Institute. Over 425 Flight School staff members were in attendance. In her presentation, Bireda suggested that 50 years after the Brown vs. Board of Education decision, much racial inequity still exists in public education. According to the data that she reviewed, African American students, particularly males receive a disproportionate amount of school disciplinary actions and referrals. She believes that school-related factors such as educators' beliefs and attitudes contribute to misunderstandings and conflict in schools. Bireda provided school staffs with a set of strategies that they could use to reduce discipline referrals and actions involving African American students. Over 60 percent of the respondents “strongly agreed” that the workshop met their expectations and another 25 percent “agreed”. The same percentage of respondents indicated that what they learned would directly apply to their roles and responsibilities in their schools. Participants also provided positive written feedback about new learnings and things they would do differently as a result of their work with Bireda.

## Impact of the Flight Schools Initiative

### 1) Attendance (2009), Cohort Graduation Rate, and Annual Dropout Rate

- Average attendance rate was effectively unchanged.
- Cohort graduation rate dropped by 5.5 percentage points although the Flight schools program would not have been available for students during the entire high school career using a cohort measure.
- Annual dropout rate dropped by 2.4 percentage points (and would have been more like 4.8 points without the impact of one school) compared with a district drop of 1.3 percentage points.

### 2) Discipline (2006-2009)

- Discipline rates dropped the first year (from 2005-06 to 2006-07) and have remained fairly flat since that time across all Flight Schools.

### 3) Student Achievement (2006-2008)

Positive academic results increased in the Flight Schools as a result of better communication with families, student attendance, and staff proficiency.

#### WASL Results (2006-2008)

- In Reading, Flight Schools exceeded district growth across all grades tested by 1.8 percentage points.
- In Mathematics, Flight Schools exceeded district growth across all grades tested by 0.6 percentage points.
- In Science, Flight Schools exceeded district growth across all grades tested by 3.6 percentage points.
- In Writing, Flight Schools' growth was lower than district growth across all grades tested by 0.5 percentage points.
- Cumulative WASL Results: Grade ten students when compared to the district showed the most growth in meeting standards in every subject area indicating a cumulative impact as students progress through the grades.

Grade 10 students showed the following:

- ✓ Mathematics: 6.6 percent differential between Flight students meeting standard and the district
- ✓ Reading: 12 percent differential between Flight students meeting standard and the district
- ✓ Science: 11.3 percent differential between Flight students meeting standard and the district
- ✓ Writing: 28.7 percent differential between Flight students meeting standard and the district

#### STAR Observation Results:

For the most recent evaluation year (2007-2008), researchers conducted observations in a sample of classrooms for 15 of the FSI schools. The STAR observation tool which measures active inquiry, in-depth learning, and performance assessment was used by the BERC Group. A total of 82 classrooms in Flight I and 98 classrooms in Flight II were observed. Grade level, subject area, and time of day were noted, as were specific activities, curricular materials, student groupings, and the like. Most of the observations were of core academic courses (English, social studies, science, and math). At the end of 30 minutes, observers scored all 15 items and calculated a score for each of the five components of the protocol. Scores were assigned based only on the events that occurred during the 30-minute time period. The class session was also given a holistic score of one to four.

During the STAR observations, students were actively reading, writing, or communicating in the majority of the classrooms in both Flights, with both Flights showing improvement from the first to the second year. Students were observed developing conceptual understanding in one-third to one-half of the classrooms, with both Flights improving across the two years of observation. Over the two years of observations, students were developing thinking skills through reflection or metacognition in 38 percent and 42 percent of classrooms with both Flights showing slight improvements. In 22 percent to 26 percent of the classrooms, students were extending their learning into relevant contexts, with no real change between the first and second years. The majority of Flight I and II classrooms were characterized by supportive learning environments in both years. Overall, the 2007-2008 observations suggest that 43 percent of Flight I classrooms and 55 percent of Flight II classrooms were aligned with Powerful Teaching and Learning, the reform movement, and brain-based research, with each Flight showing a slight improvement from the previous year. These numbers are similar to or slightly higher than the state average of 45 percent. The presence of some aspects of Powerful Teaching and Learning observed within schools in the Flight Schools is a positive finding given the last decade of school reform.

#### **4) Closing the Achievement Gap**

- The education gap reduced in reading by two to four percentage points with the exception of Latino students for which the gap was unchanged.
- The education gap reduced in mathematics by two to six percentage points with exception of African-American students for which the gap increased slightly.

### **Conclusion**

State funding for Seattle Public Schools' Flight School Initiative, supporting those schools with a high percentage of students who qualify for free and reduced lunches, has substantially contributed to strides in family engagement, staff proficiency, student performance, and closing the achievement gap.