

BY SHIRLEY J. STILES AND SEV BYERRUM

CENTRAL STAFF CLIMBS ON BOARD

Seldom do central services departments become involved in districtwide school reform efforts. Yet in Yakima School District No. 7, the business services department staff learned key lessons about the schools they serve and became a model for learning when they participated in the district's literacy initiative.

In summer 2001, the Yakima leadership became concerned that students' academic achievement had not shown significant improvement over several years. Reading and writing were particular causes of concern.

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After analyzing the achievement data and consulting with school principals, administrators decided to focus on literacy through developing instructional leadership.

All district principals, senior central administrators, and the teaching and learning department were involved in an initial three-day workshop that focused on setting goals to improve student achievement. After these sessions, the assistant superintendent of business services decided

that his department should be an integral part of the district's reform effort, and all business department supervisors and managers should join the principals in their professional development. In this way, he thought, the business office staff would know what schools hoped to achieve, would understand their challenges, and would learn the language they used.

The business staff took advantage of professional development sessions with the principals to further the department's work. Business staff learned about the schools' attitude towards central services and what schools perceived as roadblocks from central services. They were surprised sometimes by what they learned.

Requests that they made of the schools that they deemed reasonable were apparently not so reasonable from the schools' vantage point. For example, they learned that schools found September a bad time for requests for data. They learned that the schools' staffs felt pressured by some requests and did not think that central services understood schools very well.

"It has been quite a revelation for me to discover the challenges facing schools today," one business staff person noted.

While school teams were planning improvements during their monthly professional training sessions, the business services department group



met with a consultant to discuss what they had learned and how they could support the literacy initiative. They discussed ways to streamline their services.

A STARTING POINT

Group members decided they needed to make a dramatic statement about their support for the district initiative. Because the bus transportation system falls into their area of responsibility and impacts all schools in a visible way, they decided to begin with the bus drivers.

The department staff met with all

the bus drivers and shared the district's literacy goals with them. They encouraged the drivers to think about how bus drivers could support the initiative. Together, they decided that each bus would have a box of books, arranged by grade level, next to the driver's seat. If children did not have books of their own when they got on the bus, they were invited to take a

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book to read. The teaching and learning department provided some books for the project, and others were donated. The bus drivers all wore buttons that declared, "We Love Reading." The plan caught the community's attention. It was featured in the local newspaper. Awareness of the district's effort was high. A cab driver talking with a consultant visiting the district told her with pride about the bus drivers and the books.

The transportation department was on board with the literacy initiative. With the heightened awareness from the bus drivers' effort, the transportation department then took another step. The department each year sends staff to the elementary schools to discuss safety. The staff decided to focus the next message using literacy and chose Winnie the Pooh as their theme. They scripted a school play about bus safety using the Pooh characters to tell the story. They created costumes and a mobile bus. The play was a tremendous success

with the younger grades and reinforced the districtwide focus on literacy. Media coverage again added to the community's awareness of the district's effort.

The business services staff also took note of the perception that they did not understand the schools. The assistant superintendent of business services invited his administrative staff to visit schools and provided time for these visits. He encouraged staff members to do some of their work in the school buildings. Because of the more positive relationships being built, staff found it easier to discuss issues with site-based staff and were able to avoid many potential problems. For example, the business services department avoided giving schools forms that were not user-friendly and were able to avoid some additional unnecessary work for schools.

As the business services department members continued to attend monthly principal and teacher workshops, they had additional opportunities to strengthen the relationships that had developed. In their own monthly planning meetings, the members of the business services department focused continuously on ways to streamline their service and

The business staff developed a customer satisfaction survey.

reduce paperwork and other demands they made of their "clients," the schools. They tried a variety of ideas; some worked and others did not, but schools appreciated the efforts.

As their understanding of the schools' daily work grew, the business staff decided to develop a customer satisfaction survey, a first for the district. Business office staff chose to conduct the survey themselves rather than imposing more work on principals. They asked for 10 minutes at school staff meetings, explained the survey's purpose, and asked teachers and staff for honest answers. Questions related to the central office

Yakima School District No. 7
Yakima, Wash.

Grades: Pre-K-12
Number of schools: 14 elementary schools, five middle schools, two high schools, a technical high school, and an alternative high school
Enrollment: 14,396
Staff: 907 teachers
Racial/ethnic mix:
 White: 40%
 Black: 3%
 Hispanic: 54%
 Asian/Pacific Islander: 1%
 Native American: 2%
 Other: 0%
Limited English proficient: 29.52%
Languages spoken: English, Spanish
Free/reduced lunch: 76%
Special education: 12.2%
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department's efficiency, effectiveness, and customer orientation. The survey was specific by area (i.e., transportation, accounting, technology, food services, and maintenance) to provide more focused results.

A total of 1,014 of 1,400 staff members responded. The results were generally positive, but highlighted some areas for growth, particularly related to promptness and quality of service. The business staff reported the results to the school board and all principals. To follow up, business services staff members decided to set up small focus groups in schools to get more information about those departments within business services that did not score as highly. Those departments selected a representative to attend the focus meetings to find out more about concerns and take suggestions for improvements.

Suggestions were followed up, and processes in payroll and accounting

were streamlined as a result. The supervisor of maintenance services now visits principals regularly to address problems proactively.

The school principals and staff appreciated the department's effort to gather honest information about their service. In the words of one principal, "The survey is a wonderful opportunity to provide information and suggestions to the business department, and I really appreciate their effort to follow up."

The business department also decided to develop its business plan on the model of school plans. Staff laid out the results they hoped to achieve and the success indicators they would accept as evidence that they had achieved the results. For example, with a goal of improving services, staff tracked the number of service complaints and found a reduction. Staff members also measured the timeliness of services, which improved.

The Yakima business services department demonstrated a variety of ways to become an integral part of the district's reform effort. Staff have streamlined their services, surveyed their client's satisfaction levels, and actively promoted the district's literacy thrust. By becoming an active part of the district's professional development, they became aware of what the school staffs hoped to accomplish and the roadblocks schools faced.

The department staff got to know one another well, despite their varied responsibilities, through the challenge of continually trying to improve their services, and they became a service-oriented team that tackled issues together.

"I think the fact that we have visited all of the schools and asked how we can help them has really improved our relationship with the schools," a staff member commented. Another said, "Even our phone conversations with the schools feel different now." ■