Deer Creek Elementary School:
A Story of Competency-Based Education

Principal Bettina Kates and the staff of Deer Creek Elementary in Edmond, Oklahoma began to reexamine their school’s practices two years ago. Principal Kates met individually with teachers to formulate a plan to unpack the Common Core State Standards. They began by spending time learning about essential learnings with Marzano Research Laboratory (MRL) associate Phil Warrick. The staff used the MRL proficiency scales as a resource and worked with MRL associates Tammy Heflebower and Jan Hoegh to create their own school’s proficiency scales. This step allowed them to examine their school’s practice and look at ways to maintain excellent test scores, while also identifying struggling students and increasing the amount of differentiation in each subject area. By approaching their school’s practice from a high reliability perspective, Deer Creek Elementary teachers and administrators began moving to a competency-based model of instruction and assessment. Teachers at Deer Creek now use proficiency scales to individualize classroom instruction and to help students take ownership of their own learning by making them aware of their progress in English language arts and mathematics. Teachers are also able to help students decide on next steps in their learning by helping them track their progress on the schoolwide scales for each subject area.

Deer Creek restructured their schedule to create 250 minutes of planning time per week for collaboration. They use 50 minutes of this planning time to examine their practice, discuss student data, plan interventions, and create grade level common assessments. Deer Creek has also implemented late start Wednesdays in order to work within PLC groups to discuss student achievement and schoolwide practice. The proficiency scales help classroom teachers identify and support students who are not achieving grade-level standards. Teachers track student progress through the use of class data sheets for each subject area. They also use Docs Unlimited, a data application, to graph success with interventions on a weekly basis.

At the beginning of 2011, the staff of Deer Creek Elementary decided to focus on specific reading skills for their third grade students. The staff of Deer Creek formulated a plan to improve third grade achievement in accessing information, research and information, literary elements, and summary and generalization. At the end of 2011, the following percentages of third grade students scored proficient or above for the specific topics on the Oklahoma Core Curriculum Tests:

- Accessing Information 67%
- Research and Information 67%
- Literary Elements 75%
- Summary and Generalization 80%

As fourth graders in 2012, the same group of students achieved the following percentages of proficient or above:

- Accessing Information 83%
- Research and Information 83%
- Literary Elements 100%
- Summary and Generalization 85%

Deer Creek has seen the strongest improvement among their limited English proficient (LEP) students, who have made gains in reading and writing achievement. Teachers at Deer Creek use proficiency scales to differentiate instruction for students at all levels and have taught students to use the proficiency scales to track their own progress. Those students who have met proficiency levels in a subject area move on to enrichment activities. Students must show three data points of 100% or more to demonstrate their proficiency. Specially designed work stations give students the opportunity to access deeper learning in a specific subject area and technology tools, such as the school’s Show Me application, which allow them to demonstrate their comprehension of advanced material about a topic.

Deer Creek has worked hard to keep parents connected with their students’ learning and with the school’s effort toward high reliability. Parent orientation is offered during the first week of school to keep parents informed about grade-level standards and expectations and parents have access to their student’s daily, weekly, and yearly progress. Deer Creek Elementary is developing competency-based report cards to help parents track their student’s progress with Common Core State Standards and is creating a parent video that illustrates how students track their own progress. Parents are aware of the benefits gained when students identify their areas of academic strength and weakness and how students can take ownership of their learning and academic success.

Principal Bettina Kates attributes Deer Creek’s success to the dedication and commitment of the staff to doing all that they can for kids. The strong connection between staff and administration has allowed Deer Creek Elementary to keep the focus on student learning. There is a school-wide sense of pride that students are able to see their own academic and social growth. Deer Creek began the process of becoming a high reliability school not only to improve practice, but to find ways to do all that they can to provide the best learning environment for all students.