



Overcoming Growing Pains

Arizona Elementary School Achieves Excellence in Record Time

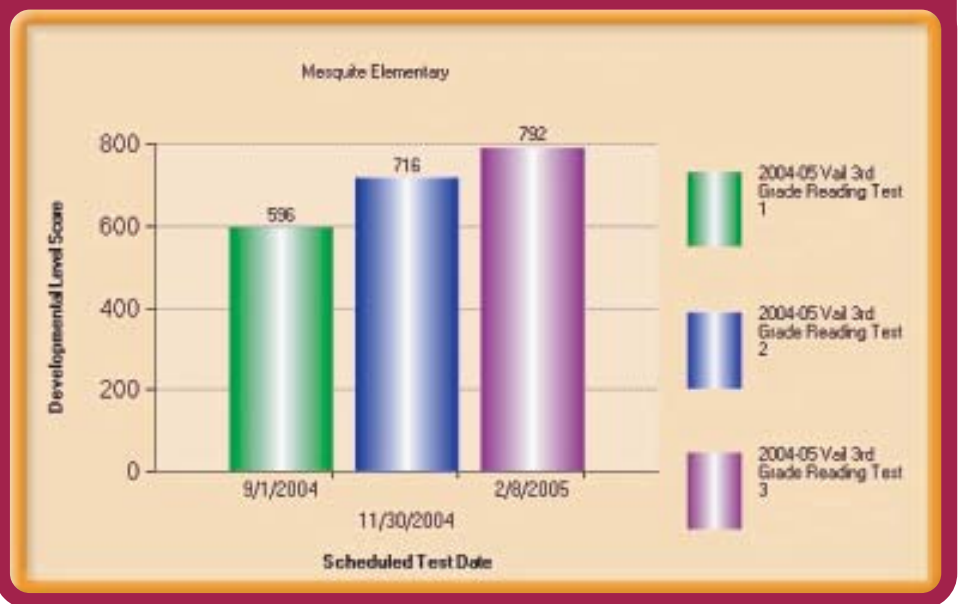
Mesquite Elementary
Vail Unified School District
Vail, Arizona



Mesquite Elementary opened as a new school in the Vail Unified School District in 1999. As part of a rapidly growing school district (student growth of approximately 12%), Mesquite started with a new mix of students, teachers and leadership and has been subject to fluctuating enrollment as new schools in the district open. The school currently operates as a Kindergarten through Eighth grade elementary school serving 575 students.

In just a few years, this young school has made outstanding progress by using a problem-solving approach to educational management. Goal-directed problem solving is achieved through the gathering, analysis, and rapid reporting of real-time data on student learning obtained throughout the school year. The process includes goal setting and planning, administration of benchmark and formative assessments, curriculum implementation and instruction followed by evaluation/monitoring. Embracing the importance of accountability demands, Mesquite educators set out to implement evidence-based programs to raise student achievement. Their approach demonstrates that when student improvement is the ultimate purpose of testing, it can be a positive educational component.

Galileo K-12 Online Multi Test Report



Challenges Lead to a Vision of Excellence

In 2002-03 Mesquite Elementary was labeled by the Arizona Department of Education as a "Performing School." Educational leaders at the school knew that the label was tied to the Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS) results and set out to raise student achievement in the next year. One obstacle to making significant improvements in the following year was that teachers would have to address the recently updated Arizona Academic Standards (2003) as required, as well as the 1996 standards (the 2004 AIMS tested the 1996

standards). In addition, the passing score for AIMS had recently been raised by the Arizona Department of Education.

Yet, Connie Erickson, Mesquite Elementary principal, and her staff did not postpone their goal for academic excellence. Instead, district and school initiatives were combined to make a significant impact. The 2003-04 Arizona School Report Card for Mesquite Elementary indicated that Mesquite had advanced from "Performing" to "Excelling" in just one year (2004). The school's successes in the two years since 2003 have been recognized by numerous awards.

Mesquite Accomplishments

- Mesquite Elementary was one of 3 Schools recognized by the State of Arizona for their Best Practices as part of the Spotlight on School Success for 2004-05.
- Mesquite student achievement on AIMS (Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards) increased substantially in the 2 year period in all three tested areas (Reading, Math and Writing). The percent of eighth grade students meeting or exceeding the standards in Writing rose from 31 to 84. Eighth grade Math results grew from 18 to 54 percent meeting or exceeding the standard.
- Mesquite was designated as an Arizona Educational Foundation A+ School in 2005.
- Mesquite Principal, Connie Erickson, was named a National Distinguished Principal of the Year for the State of Arizona.
- Mesquite was the 1st Place K-8 Winner of the 2004 ASBA Golden Bell Award.

Research-Based Approach

Mesquite made an impact on student achievement in a short time frame due to the concerted effort of students, parents, teachers and administrators. These stakeholders implemented several standards-based programs that contributed to the measurable progress of students in the school.

The process began with a determination to focus on standards. Mesquite benefited from the implementation of The Vail Unified School District Data Driven Instruction Initiative that began in 2003. The initiative involved a partnership between Vail, Assessment Technology, Incorporated (ATI), and WestEd, to enhance the district's capacity to deliver standards-based instruction to promote learning. As a result, Vail teachers recognized that the state standards are the root of instruction.

The standards-based focus was reinforced by giving teachers the tools necessary to use data in the classroom. Teachers received support to analyze data tied to Arizona State Standards by performance objective from formative and benchmark tests. Professional development, team meetings with a Student Data Coordinator, and access to technology for managing learning aided staff in using data to improve teaching and learning. This young school with many new faces established continuity in teaching methods through professional development, weekly grade-level meetings and written lesson plans based on curriculum mapped to the standards. Access

to useful information on student learning on a regular basis provided the evidence-based structure for growth in the school.

Using time wisely became another focus for change. Common sense said that creating change in the educational approach required educator time. Principal Erickson responded by providing staff and team planning times to brainstorm, prioritize and share best teaching practices in classroom pacing and transitions, group alerting, and

maintaining active participation in the classroom. From this, an award-winning program called "Bell-to-Bell Learning" blossomed at Mesquite as a strategic component to

implementing standards-based instruction.

The following pages detail several standards-based programs implemented at Mesquite and show how a school can achieve excellence quickly.

• Essential Standards

In order to address both the importance of standards-based instruction and how the amount of teaching time available is best used to cover the standards, Vail School District uses a district-wide accountability system that began with the identification of "Essential Standards." As participants in WestEd's Local Assessment Professional Development Series (LAPDS), administrators and teachers from Mesquite helped determine which standards need proficiency before a student exits each grade level. Ongoing work with WestEd ensures the district's

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principals, teachers, and students have viable targets for improving student achievement.

The Essential Standards are used at the District level to develop benchmark assessments and at the school level to create formative tests. Benchmark tests are administered on Math and Language Arts/Reading Standards three times during the school year. At Mesquite, formative assessments are administered every few weeks to enable a grade level team to gauge levels of success and adjust their instructional efforts accordingly. Formative assessments are teacher-designed, consistent across grade level, and match the scope and sequence of performance objectives that will appear on upcoming benchmark assessments.

Joe Sassone, Vail Assistant Superintendent remarks that, "With information on how many students succeed in the Essential Standards, Mesquite is able to develop strategies to improve instruction and intervention."

- **Educational Management System**

The implementation of the Galileo K-12 Online Educational Management System (EMS) is an additional district-wide contribution to improving student performance. At Mesquite, educators access Galileo reporting tools to evaluate student accomplishments. They use the information on student learning to modify instruction to increase student achievement. Erickson explains, "When students are not meeting the standards, Galileo reports are helpful in determining how to re-teach. Is it a class issue or a small group of students?"

Use of technology provides numerous benefits to educators. Galileo enables teachers to easily create and administer, either by paper or online, standards-aligned tests. Galileo is organized around learning standards, so benchmark and formative tests, grade book information, assignments, lesson plans and curriculum maps are all linked electronically to specific performance objectives.

Galileo Online technology provides Vail School District instant access to assessment information at student, class, grade, school and district levels. For example, the Multi-Test report makes it possible for Vail School District to predict AIMS performance from successively administered benchmark assessments based on test equating procedures within Galileo.

The percentage of 5th graders "Exceeding the Standard" for Math rose from 45% to 51% to 69%. Other grades experienced similar gains.

Another report, the Class Development Profile Grid, is used to breakdown assessment results in each class. This report shows the performance level of each student on each performance objective tested.

"My team and I also look at Galileo's Item Analysis reports to analyze raw test scores," says Erickson. Teachers can see which performance objectives students may be having difficulty with across the entire grade, and even look deeper by analyzing incorrect answer choices.



- **Achievement Teacher**

Providing teachers with assistance in analyzing the information on learning available from Galileo is a critical component of Mesquite's rapid and ongoing progress. Vail School District funds a Student Data Coordinator at every school. Known as the "achievement teacher", this person is responsible for compiling and preparing student assessment data for use by teaching teams and administrators to inform instructional practices. Data is also assembled in reports or presentations communicating achievement results to educational stakeholders.

Mesquite holds "Data Team Meetings" every 2 weeks for each grade level. At these meetings, the group looks at data showing how many students Meet, Approach, or Fall Below the standard for a specific learning objective. When students are not meeting the standard, the team examines the data to determine whether it is a class issue or student issue. From this information, the teachers create a plan for what they call "re-teaching." Having a dedicated position for analyzing data on student progress helps ensure that every student has an opportunity to learn.

- **Comprehensive System of Student Support**

The synergy of these components — essential standards, benchmark and formative testing, the educational management system, and grade-level analysis with the achievement teacher — is visible in Mesquite’s Comprehensive System of Student Support (CSSS). The CSSS is a Daily Math Re-teach/Enrich Class that Erickson credits with having a significant impact on increasing math test scores. Over a three year period the percentage of 5th grade children at the level of “Exceeds Standard” for Math rose from 45% to 51% to 69%. Other grades experienced similar gains.

The Re-teach/Enrich Class occurs every day from 12:30-1:00pm. During this time, the entire school focuses on a specific Math concept. Data from formative tests are used to determine whether students will receive re-teaching or enrichment on the focus math concept. Every staff member at Mesquite has an assignment to teach during that time, including para-professionals and specialists, so groups get as much attention as possible.

- **Bell-to-Bell Learning**

Winner of the 2005 ASBA Golden Bell Award, “Bell-to-Bell Learning” is based on the commitment to using every minute of teaching time effectively every day. The research-based principles that drive the program suggest that the biggest impact on student achievement is derived from focused classroom instructional practices and active

Galileo K-12 Online Class Development Profile Grid

Class Development Profile Grid Report						
Class Math 3:						
Test 2004-05 Vail 3rd Grade Math Test 3						
MS Meets Standard						
AS Approaches Standard						
FS Falls Below Standard						
	Student A	Student B	Student C	Student D	Student E	Student F
Standards						
M03-S1C2-05. Select the grade level appropriate operation to solve word problems.	AS	AS	MS	FS	MS	MS
M03-S1C3-01. Solve grade level appropriate problems using estimation.	FS	MS	MS	MS	MS	MS
M03-S3C4-02. Make simple predictions based on a variable (e.g., increases in allowance as you get older).	AS	MS	MS	AS	MS	MS
M03-S4C1-02. Name concrete objects and pictures of three-dimensional solids (cones, spheres and cubes).	MS	FS	MS	MS	MS	MS
M03-S4C1-03. Describe relationships between two-dimensional and three-dimensional objects. (squares/cubes, circles/spheres, triangles/cones)	MS	MS	MS	AS	MS	MS

participation by students. “Bell-to-Bell” culture assumes that student learning is a shared responsibility and is supported by parents, community, staff and students.

Mesquite students are taught how to be engaged participants. Posters in the classrooms offer tips like: Watch for signals from the teacher. Arrive at School on-time, ready and rested. Kids know what it means when the teacher directs a student to “stay on-task.” Parental awareness-building helps decrease absences and tardies and increase numbers of students regularly completing homework. Mesquite teachers create and staff homework clubs and “Saturday school” to help struggling students. Smooth transitions are reinforced and classroom interruptions for messages or announcements are restricted. Erickson provides motivational challenges to make “Bell-to-Bell” fun and keep it top-of-mind.

Recognizing achievement is an overall theme. At the end of every school year students who have made progress as determined by standardized test scores are recognized with ribbons, trophies and plaques at a school assembly. Exceptional student attendance, which has been shown to promote learning and achievement, is recognized quarterly.

Erickson says, “In our world of high stakes testing, Mesquite recognizes students who achieve and improve academically.”

Strategies Lead to Continued Success

As a result of implementing these strategies, teachers are able to continuously gauge the level of student mastery, adjust instructional efforts to meet the needs of students, offer re-teach/enrichment activities, and enhance student achievement. Mesquite received the state’s School Success Award for their efforts in the areas of AIMS, yearly progress, and the use of data to improve educational programs. Schools looking for strategies for improvement might consider replicating the ideas that enabled Mesquite Elementary to achieve exceptional gains in student performance in a short period of time.

Resources:

- Arizona Department of Education Spotlight on Success www.ade.az.gov/
- Assessment Technology, Inc. and Galileo www.ati-online.com
- Vail Unified School District and Mesquite Elementary School www.vail.k12.az.us/
- WestEd’s Local Accountability Professional Development Series www.WestEd.org/lapds

Contact us for More Information at 1-877-442-5453

Galileo K-12 Online

