

National Blue Ribbon Schools Program  
Checotah Intermediate Elementary School  
Audio Profile Transcript

I'm Ryan Ambrose. I'm the principal of Checotah Intermediate School. We are located in Northeast Oklahoma. Our town has a population of just over 3,000 people. We have 305 students. I'm also the transportation director. Because of our size, we do have to wear a few hats.

Something we do every semester at Checotah is to help our students set individual goals. We started with five. There were three reading goals and two math goals and, it was kind of an in-house trial on error program, so no one came in and did a sales pitch and said, "This is what we need to do." It was something that really happened organically, so it's kind of our system.

Because of that, I believe our staff has bought in a little faster than they would have if it was a canned program. It has expanded to double that size to 10 goals and it includes attendance goals and some classroom goals.

Then some incentives that we have, that follow that, we have celebrations for, for the kids whenever they meet those goals at the end of the semester where we have a big pizza party.

So, in 2011, we got computer access for all of our, our students. So we started looking into software that we could use that would kind of track our students' growth.

So we initially started just testing as the software recommended, which was about three times a year. And what we found is that that is pretty hard to use that data because, basically, you're getting all the way to Christmas to figure out if you've grown any. So what we did is we started assessing more often. Which was, kind of, neat, but now what are you going to use that data?

Well, first we had to educate ourselves. And in fact, I have some old pictures that I've included in, in some presentations that I've done of our staff sitting in some of our classrooms taking these assessments whenever they were brand new because I wanted us to feel what the kids were going through. So, that kind of gave us some first-hand knowledge to be able to then tell the kids, "Here's what these numbers mean. Here's what we think we need from you."

So it was kind of a natural progression to be able to take that, that information, mail merge those to, basically, stickers that we put on the kids' binders. So everywhere the kids went, they had their five goals.

We slowly, over the course of about two years, figured out what, what we really believed in. Once a semester, whatever kids would come in in August, we would assess them that first week. From those assessments, we would take one half years' worth of growth and just add it to their assessment. And so that was their first semester goal. So, basically, all we're trying to do, we don't care where you are, we just want every kid to grow a half year in that semester.

In the second semester, we kind of figured out where the kids need to be as we near April and, and the state assessments. If the kid is really, really high, we may only ask, write out a semester worth of growth for them. But if the kid is a little lower, now we try to close that gap.

I believe the individualization of the, the goals have greatly improved our instruction. I believe that whenever a teacher will get down to a student level, regardless of where that kid is and be able to meet them where they are and fill those foundational blocks that they may be missing, the growth is unbelievable.

That's also one of the harder things. That's also a challenge for any teacher. You know, you're kind of taught whenever you become a teacher that you do your presentation, you do your lesson, there's a reinforcement activity, and that's education. That's not us anymore. We work very hard to try to grow every kid, a year in a year, and that is, it's both successful and very challenging.

One more challenging thing that we've run into recently is our new staff coming in. Because we do things a little differently. But there again, once they figure it out, then they don't ever want to go back. What we do, we really go, like, we know from month to month to month if we're making a difference in a student.

So many schools, they, they'll go ahead and jump through the hoops of going through assessments, but then don't know how to really use the data. So, I would say that would probably be first and foremost is get a core group of teachers and administration comfortable with, with what you're doing.

Well, without a doubt, one of the major reasons that we have been successful is we have an amazing group of teachers and staff that work together. It's a full team effort to be able to make our system work for our kids.

As a parent, there has to be buy in from them also. we probably have the most pushback from parents of the higher performing kids because they've never struggled until now. Because they've always been at least at grade level. So, asking those kids to continue to grow has been probably a little bit of a challenge, but once the parents see it and they buy in, you can't ask for a, a more supportive group than.

We are incredibly excited about being a national blue ribbon school. None of our students would have the growth that they do, unless they have all of their needs met. So, our staff goes above and beyond, loving our kids, making them feel welcome, making our school be a place that the kids want to be. I'm thoroughly proud of our staff and our kids and my school.