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Banners highlighting Liberal High School's ranking in the state and nation by "U.S. News and World Report" are showcased in the parking lot around the public high school. Only four years ago, Liberal was in the bottom 15 percent of schools in Kansas according to their standardized test results, but an effort to turn the school around by principal Keith Adams which he calls the "Three Pillars" reversed the sliding scores and has the school setting higher academic goals.
L&T photo/Earl Watt

From one of worst high schools in Kansas to trendsetter, Liberal High School experiences historic turnaround

By EARL WATT

• Leader & Times

Six years ago, Liberal High School was not far from losing local control of the management and educational process.

Test scores were well below the acceptable level to meet the No Child Left Behind mandates,

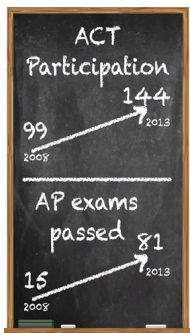
and the school was required to have an evaluation to see what steps were being taken to avoid a takeover.

What they discovered was the difficulties had little to do with the academic process.

Principal Keith Adams was in his first year in 2006 after serving as an assistant for Jim Little, and the task was not an easy one. Liberal High School had to turn around, quickly.

Former USD No. 480 School Board President Dan Diepenbrock remembered facing the challenges. He was elected in 2003 and was part of a task force that was formed in the summer of 2006 to address the severe academic shortcomings at LHS.

“The purpose was to focus on middle schools and the high school,” Diepenbrock said. “We wanted to know why we were so poor and what we could do about it.”



The task force identified some goals, including getting more participation in advanced placement classes and increasing ACT scores.

“We wanted to get our best kids doing the best they can, and we wanted to focus on the middle,” Diepenbrock said. “We wanted to increase college readiness for the kids in the middle.”

While planning strategies on how to turn the academics around, Diepenbrock said the group wanted input from teachers, and several attended a lunch to discuss the issue.

Several department heads attended, and the task force asked the teachers what was the problem.

“The first thing they said was, ‘We can’t connect with these kids. There is so much apathy. They just sit in class, and you can’t reach them.’ To me, that was critical. We needed to focus on that. If you can’t connect, no matter how good the teacher or curriculum, it won’t matter.”

Adams started to develop an action plan during that year with a focus on trying to help the teachers relate to the students.

Two programs made their way to the plan that would focus on relating with the kids and helping those in the middle strive for something better.

Capturing Kids Hearts

Capturing Kids Hearts was a program that was implemented in the summer of 2007.

“We trained 100 of our teachers district-wide that first summer we brought Capturing Kids Hearts in,” Adams said. “We saw positive signs right off the bat.”

The training, according to Adams, was “life-changing.”

“I had a teacher who was in the profession a long time, and was starting to have burn-out,” he

said. “Her attitude was negative. After she went to the training, her complete outlook changed. She said she had never been through anything like that.

“This training doesn’t just help you be a better teacher, it makes you a better person,” Adams said. “Relationships are important. Having that with your students is as much a part of learning as anything else. There is less stress, a positive atmosphere, self managed classrooms, the students are a part of the team, the discipline plan, they build a social contract together, how they will treat each other, how they respond to conflict. There is more buy-in knowing they are working together for their own benefit.”

With a staff supporting the program, the culture began to change, even if the test scores were not yet showing a correlation.

“Relationships are huge,” Adams said. “If you can build positive relationships with students they will perform academically. Our experience here has proven that. I’ve seen gang clothing — students representing gangs — go down drastically. It’s almost non-existent. We hardly see that. I attribute that to programs building positive relationships giving them direction and support to focus on school rather than the negative.”

AVID

While Capturing Kids Hearts was helping build relationships, AVID was focusing on the kids in the middle.

AVID, or Advancement Via Individual Determination, was a program Diepenbrock saw first in an educational column from the “Washington Post,” and then he read a book on the program.

AVID focuses on adding rigor to the students in the middle and pushing them to perform at a higher level. Students have to apply to be a part of the AVID program.

Diepenbrock passed the information to then-superintendent Vernon Welch who immediately planned a trip to California to see the plan in action.

A group of principals, counselors, teachers and administrators, along with Diepenbrock, made the trip to Riverside Calif., and saw an AVID school first-hand.

“I was sold on the program because I read the book,” Diepenbrock said. “When we went to Ramona High School the rest of the group was sold the minute they had contact with those kids. We spent the day there, sat in on some classes — it was a done deal.”

On the way back, several of the teachers had read most of the book on the program, and Adams implemented the plan at the same time Capturing Kids Hearts was implemented.

AVID started small and then expanded. It now includes two sections in every grade from seven to 12.

LITERACY FIRST

The school also implemented Literacy First, a teaching method district-wide that focused on vocabulary development as well as student participation in the learning process. Teachers were required to build these exercises into their lesson plans on a daily basis.

Still, the grades weren't catching up to the relationships being built and the extra push, and in 2009, LHS was considered a School on improvement. In 2010, LHS was in the bottom 15 percent in Kansas.

That resulted in an on-site visit from a consulting group to examine what was happening at LHS by the State of Kansas.

“They did a needs assessment,” Adams said. “They talked to focus groups in the community and the school, and presented their findings. What they found was the things we were already implementing were working. They said continue to do those things. All three were synergistic, they complemented each other. We were seeing progress. We were a needs improvement school. Even though they were telling us that, we knew we were making progress.”

In 2010, LHS made the Adequate Yearly Progress benchmarks required by No Child Left Behind.

The school continued to push forward, and more students enrolled in Advanced Placement classes. More students also started to take the ACT test, and recently, for the first time, the number of Hispanic students, which make up a large majority of the student population, outnumbered other students in taking the college-entrance exam. Since 2008, the number of students taking the ACT has increased from 99 to 144.

The average ACT score is also getting closer to the national average.

AP exams which allow a student to get college credit without the higher cost have also increased. In 2008, 70 students took AP tests, and 15 passed with an acceptable score. In 2013, 396 tests were taken, and 81 passed with an acceptable score.

In 2012, the school was recognized for meeting the state’s Standards of Excellence, and in 2013, LHS was listed as the seventh best high school in Kansas and top 10 percent in the nation by U.S. News and World Report magazine.

“We realized what we were doing was effective, it was working,” Adams said. “At that time, people were skeptical, it was just another initiative, it shall pass, which is the typical mind set in new initiatives. But whenever people saw the data, and it showed what we were doing was successful, then they bought in even more, and it became a systemic process that this is how we operate.”

Adams said they have worked to create an environment where new teachers have a grasp of

what is expected at LHS so that the expectations and processes are not just entrenched in the current staff but can be carried over to new personnel.

According to Diepenbrock, who did not run in 2011 after serving two terms, the building principal is the key to having success at any school.

“From the janitor to superintendent, everyone is important,” Diepenbrock said. “If you were forced to say who has the most important role in a school district, it is the building principal. He or she will make the difference every time. You can have great teachers, but without an instructional leader to motivate and encourage them, it won’t happen. The building manager days are over. I went to school in the ’60s and ’70s. The principal was there to make sure the lights were on and nobody got killed. Teachers taught, and whatever happened, happened. You have to have an instructional leader who motivates. The principal takes the blame when things go wrong, and the principal gets the credit when they go right, and Keith (Adams) deserves the credit.”

And the goals continue to escalate.

“The seventh place ranking was just a road sign we are passing on the way to success,” Adams said. “We don’t want to be content. The faculty members are pushing each other to be better.”

Adams has set a goal for the school to be an AVID National Demonstration School by 2015 and for the ACT scores to exceed the state average by 2014. He also wants to meet 90 percent of the goals set in AP classes as well as have a 90 percent graduation rate by 2014.

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