

By JESSICA CRAWFORD • Daily Leader South Middle School and USD No. 480 recently took a fairly negative situation and turned it around to yield positive results.

When South Middle School went on restructuring last year, a plan was in place to make the necessary changes that would bring success to the students in the building. However, the plans for South spread throughout the district.

The result?

The entire district made AYP for the 2009-10 school year – an accomplishment not seen since approximately 2004.

Not only did the planning process bring the district AYP success – a \$2 million grant was recently awarded to South Middle School. The guidelines were very strict, but teachers and administrators alike stuck to the process which ultimately led to the monetary reward.

“The guidelines are from the federal government,” Director of Curriculum and Staff Development Lana Evans said. “Once the state got application approval from the federal government, the state came back and said, ‘Here are the guidelines if you want this money,’ but to be real honest it was more like, ‘Here is the list and here is who qualifies.’ So, it wasn’t that everybody could apply for it, it was only schools in the top 5 percent of the lowest ranking in the state, based on state assessments. They base that off reading and math including all students.”

The fact South Middle School would be on restructuring for the 2009-10 school year, meant a plan was already in place to better educate the students. In order to apply for the grant, all involved tweaked the plan in such a way that ultimately won them the grant.

“We already knew, based on No Child Left Behind, that if you had been on school improvement for two years, you would be on restructuring,” Evans said. “So we already had that planned and knew it was coming. So we pretty much had the plan put together, so we were very fortunate. We were also very proactive. That did help us a lot. We already had a lot of initiatives, we did a lot of research we knew what we needed to do. Being proactive really helped us have a vision.

“We spent a lot of time just planning,” she explained. “It was very time consuming. It was a big effort with where we wanted to take South Middle School and where we wanted to go. And \$2 million is a lot of money, when you think about how you are going to initiate that into a plan. That really saved us.”

When first notified of the possibility of the grant, the district was unaware the grant was competitive. Thankfully, Evans said, a proactive approach gave USD No. 480 a competitive edge.

“Until May or June, we didn’t even know this was a competitive grant,” she said. “We obviously had a very well thought out plan or we would not have received the grant.”

South Middle School Principal Gilberto Rito said many changes were made in his building – changes that would ultimately reach the entire district.

“We made the plans to make the school better and provide a better education,” Rito said. “On the proactive side, we couldn’t sit down and do more of the same. It was a tough year for teachers, but they came through. It was a matter of changing the approaches of how we do things.

“We implemented an I (intervention) -Block. We have a 30-minute block where we reinforced and reviewed the weak indicators,” he continued. “We were looking at our data and then we would use the I-Block to practice where we were weak. That was every day of the week. Every single teacher, with the exception of two, had a on I-Block. We had 27 I-Blocks, we would practice our weaknesses. And when you do that from August to May, it is practice over and over. It really gave us a lot of practice. The other side of it is the students took ownership because the knew what they had to do to pass.”

USD 480 was bound and determined to receive the grant. Many guidelines and reworking the plan in order to continue the application process weeded out many schools. But USD 480 stuck with the process to the end.

“There were 33 schools on improvement that qualified for the grant,” Director of Human Resources and Public Relations Paul Larkin said. “Of those, I believe, 23 submitted applications. Then everybody got them sent back to improve. Then there were only 11 schools that chose to resubmit and make all the necessary changes. Of those, 11 that resubmitted, six grants were awarded.”

Evans said the school year was tough for everyone involved. Teachers set in their ways learned to work as a team in an effort to offer continuity to students throughout the education process.

“They worked together as a family,” Evans said. “They share things with each other. That has been really good. They collaborate. It has helped so much to have that support.

“Before we were all just doing our own thing,” she added. “In all honesty, at first it was tough. But, it was one of those things we put together with a lot of research. We had some resistance from teachers that wanted more input. However, I take my hat off to the teachers because they have put that aside. It came down to when they saw the growth of the students, they just couldn’t deny that.”

As difficult as it was, the plan worked. Not only did USD 480 receive the \$2 million dollar School Improvement Grant for South Middle School, the entire district met AYP – as a team.