
Case Study: Heatherbrae Elementary School

Phoenix, AZ | 730 students | 85% Hispanic | 8% African-American | 92% Low-income | 10% Special Ed

Profile: Eva Stevens, 2014 Ryan Award Winner

When Eva Stevens took over as principal of Heatherbrae Elementary in 2000, dirt-bare grounds surrounded worn school buildings. Students played unsupervised on playground equipment in the morning and were all over the campus. But as teacher Deborah Howard describes it, there was a more ominous problem: *"The inside needed a lot of work...The people...they were very relaxed,"* she says. The student achievement rate was stuck in the thirties. In some classes, just 16 percent of kids were meeting expectations on state assessments. Teachers were used to doing things the way they wanted—*"without any data, without any results, without any consequences, without any accountability,"* Stevens recalls.

Today, Heatherbrae Elementary continues on its decade-long climb toward becoming a 90-90-90 school. In 2014, students hit an 85 percent proficiency rate in reading, with 91 percent of third-graders meeting or exceeding standards on the reading portion of the state test. The school's impressive performance has earned it an 'A' rating from the state of Arizona.

Piece by piece, 2014 Ryan Award winner Eva Stevens has built a strong, mission-driven culture, putting in place the necessary systems and structures. It took a number of years to get the school where it is today, and Stevens carefully guards the delicate school culture, spending four to five hours a day in the classroom. As a leader, Stevens' quiet but firm presence is felt throughout the building—her mark seen in the lesson plans,

the way students move quietly through the breezeways, and the consistent routines that bring stability to the classroom.

The daughter of a teacher, Stevens says school always has been a happy place for her, and she knew from a young age she also would become a teacher. After earning a degree from Southern Illinois University, she started her teaching career in East St. Louis and later moved with her family to

Phoenix. While she loved being in the classroom, she did the math and realized she could impact more children's lives by moving into administration. Soon after, she became an assistant principal, and later, principal of Heatherbrae.

Located in Northwest Phoenix, Heatherbrae is a fixed institution in a neighborhood of squat sand-colored apartment buildings. More than 90 percent of Heatherbrae

students are minority and come from low-income households. But with a principal who refuses to allow the nation's persistent achievement gap to affect the experience of her students, this district-run school shows the promise of what is possible with a strong leader in place.

Starting with Someone Else's Team

As is often the case in a traditional public school, Stevens inherited the staff that was there when she started in her new role as principal at Heatherbrae. She made hires as vacancies arose, but a number of holdovers clung to the old ways of doings



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Anna Lopez, parent

things and did not buy into her vision. *"A lot of people thought that what they were doing was OK. It didn't register with them that they should be different,"* she recalls. In Stevens' vision, the school would be one where every single student in every single classroom would be making progress. The environment would be one of constant learning for everyone involved—not only for the students, but for the teachers and parents as well. The relaxed atmosphere would be replaced with one ruled by high expectations. Howard, who was one of the teachers who welcomed Stevens' changes back in 2000 and remains a fourth-grade teacher today, remembers the difficulty in getting some members of the staff on board with that vision. *"If I started a school and I had to endure some of the things she did, I don't know if I could have done it, to be honest with you,"* she says. *"I used to think, 'how can she deal with this on a daily basis?' There was quite a bit of resistance when she first arrived here."*

At the end of the first year, a number of teachers left because they disagreed with the direction. Others stayed, though they were not entirely bought in to the plan. *"Some people may say they're on board and pretend they're on board, but when they go in their classrooms and close their doors, you don't know if they're on board. That was a challenge,"* Stevens says. But at the same time, the school started to make progress because there were expectations in place. And though some didn't believe wholeheartedly in the changes, they started behaving as if they did to avoid trouble. *"You can't change their heart necessarily, but you can change behaviors. So we were aiming at changing behaviors right away,"* she says. That first year there was a small increase in academic achievement. *"Even though our scores were going up, I think it took three or four years before we moved our campus to the way our campus is today, simply because there were barriers that were just phenomenal in terms of attitudes of individual belief systems that were in conflict,"* Stevens says.

Because there were people remaining on staff who

were trying to topple what she was trying to build, Stevens established structures that would allow staff members to confront the problems around them, particularly some bullying personalities on the staff. Howard says after about three years, the people who remained on staff were mostly those who understood what Stevens was trying to accomplish. She says Stevens' decision to involve the staff in setting the vision helped gather teacher buy-in. *"We joined forces. It wasn't just Ms. Stevens had a vision; it was the whole school. Because if it wasn't, we wouldn't be as strong, as committed as we are,"* Howard says.

Stevens says all schools can create a strong culture of high expectations. She acknowledged that it was more time-consuming to build her team at a district school. *"I don't think it's a district or a charter initiative,"* she says. *"In any school, I can look at my data, I can look at my instruction, I can assess and reflect on the quality of instruction—where it is and where it needs to be—and what it takes to move it to where it needs to be. I don't think there's a limit to that in any school."*

The campaign to get parents to buy-in to the mission and vision was also lengthy. Stevens' first year, the goal of a new parent involvement committee was just to open the doors of the school. The staff started providing activities like movie nights and parent cafes, before expanding into a parent library and other classes.

Anna Lopez has had five children attend Heatherbrae. An older daughter struggled during her time there, and *"if not for the psychologist and the principal, I don't know what I would have done,"* Lopez says, tearing up. *"I can't even tell you how amazing Ms. Stevens is...When I bring up an issue, she never says I don't have time for it. She's always right on it."*

Parents are welcomed in for lunch, and as the neighborhood has gone through rough cycles, Lopez says the school has provided a safe, bright spot for the children. *"You always feel like the school is a place you want to be,"* Lopez says.



Principal Eva Stevens, a 2014 Ryan Award Winner, meets with students outside Heatherbrae Elementary School before class (Phoenix, AZ).

First Best Instruction

With a strong foundation laid, Stevens could turn her attention to accelerating academic achievement. She soon realized the focus of the school day was all wrong. More students were staying after school for tutoring than were grasping the material the first time it was presented during the school day. *"Our pyramid of intervention was upside down,"* Stevens says. *"We realized that until we changed those 6½ hours that the child spends with the teacher each day, that 1½ hours we have after school really isn't going to matter. We can do 1½ hours after school and give them really great instruction, but if tomorrow they come back and they have 6½ hours of ineffective instruction, what difference does it make?"*

Stevens focused on making Tier 1 instruction truly the staff's "first and best" instruction. Tier 2 and 3 instruction would be available for those students who needed additional support, but the leadership intended to hit most students with high quality instruction the first time around. As Stevens and her team concentrated on tightening the schedule and maximizing instructional minutes, they created consistent structures, lesson plans, routines, and expectations across the school. Now, at the end of each class period, teachers divide the class into small groups, working closely with the lowest-tier students or those who did not fully grasp the day's lesson to bring them up to the level where they

need to be. In first and second grade, Stevens has created "Walk to Intervention," in which students are grouped by their needs. At 2 p.m. each day, the students go to a classroom where the teacher has planned a lesson geared toward their individual needs.

Systems and Structures

From reinforcing the broader values that should guide the team to spelling out in detail expectations in daily interactions, Stevens is very clear in her communications. Meeting agendas include reminders of the agreed-upon norms for behavior in meetings. (Produce clear expectations/action steps, Focus on the main objective, for example.) The objective of the meeting is clearly stated, along with positive reminders to "Know Thy Impact!" and a motto of "Every Child! Every Chance! Every Classroom! Every Day!" Questions posed at staff meetings include: What do we want our students to know and be able to do? How will we know if they know it? How will we respond if they don't know?

At breakfast time, throughout the school, the children finish their food and worksheets at their desks as quiet music plays in the background. The continuity from classroom to classroom is the result of Steven's careful vigilance and the common elements that have been applied to each class. Morning routines help students know what they should be doing when. Stevens never lets things slip that could detract from a constructive learning environment. *"If I'm walking down the hall and I hear a louder-than-usual voice, I'll step in and say, 'is there something wrong?' That's really important. I believe we have a great climate and culture, but it is so delicate,"* Stevens says. *"It's so difficult to build and so easy to lose."*

The procedures help the kids feel safe and secure, because they know what to expect, says teacher Katherine Treasure. *"I could leave without even a teacher being in there and they would still know what to do. It's like a well-oiled machine,"* she says. *"If they get off track, the beauty of it is their peers say 'Hey!'"*

Mission Control

Stevens is rarely without a plan, says assistant principal Julie Case. To enroll others in her vision, she builds leaders from within the staff, who help hold others accountable. A regular leadership team meeting helps Stevens rally staff around the vision and to keep the team focused on its goals. During these meetings, the team pores over student data, finding points of celebration and areas for improvement. At the end of one recent meeting, Stevens asks the members of the group to share an inspiring quote, one to motivate them in their leadership role for the week ahead.

Teacher Rebecca DeSantis reflects on a quote Stevens shared in an email. *"Leaders don't think I, they think we... Yesterday I was so frustrated by my math lesson that didn't go as I wanted it. The first thing I did was go to (fellow teacher Adriana) Torres and say, 'what do I do?' And we thought of things we would do today,"* DeSantis says.

Stevens nods and as the meeting draws to a close, points to the "Know Thy Impact" sign. "High expectations—what does it look like, sound like?" she says to her team. *"Keep that in mind as we go, what does that look like as I go about my daily life?"*

This collaborative environment is key to keeping Heatherbrae running smoothly, Stevens says. Teachers say that Stevens' even-handed approach toward the staff helps nurture a professional environment where teachers feel safe sharing. *"She's very fair. Whether she has a personal relationship with you or not, she's going to treat everyone the same,"* says teacher Pam Metcalf. *"She doesn't have a clique."* But she's going to deliver the truth. *"If you're not doing what you're*

supposed to, she's going to let you know that," Metcalf adds. *"You don't see anyone cutting corners or being lazy, because they will stand out... That's what you don't want to do on this campus is stand out for that."*

Classrooms are bursting with students—36 and 37 students in most classes, though the staff is able to keep kindergarten down to 27 and 28 students. There are no classroom aides. The campus struggles with teacher turnover, as many young teachers come to Arizona from across the country to gain experience, then move back closer to home. But the school's high-frequency coaching model helps the staff to get the teachers up to speed quickly.



Aguilar Lawlor, an assistant superintendent for the Cartwright School District, says she saw what set the school apart: high expectations and Eva Stevens.

Instructional coach Bobbie Blair's day is spent moving from classroom to classroom, whisper-coaching, modeling, or observing. Feedback is not provided at a post-observation meeting, or even after the class period, but right in the moment. *"If they're doing a lesson and it's not meeting what the kids need, I'm not going to wait the 45 minutes,"* Blair says. *"If there's an*

immediate need and the lesson's not going well, I will say, 'here are my concerns—can I step in?'" Instead of giving teachers three to five years to build their instructional skills, while classrooms of students flail, the leadership sets immediate high expectations for teachers and supports them through intensive coaching. *"When we bring in new teachers, we say, 'this is what we expect, but I'll help you get there,'"* Blair says.

Every Thursday, students are dismissed early so the Heatherbrae staff can gather for schoolwide professional development from 1:45 p.m. to 3:25 p.m. *"Mrs. Stevens doesn't just have a professional development because you're supposed to have*



them on Thursdays. There's a purpose behind everything she does," says Case. The professional development is often targeting something Stevens noticed on her regular walkthroughs.

LeeAnn Aguilar Lawlor, an assistant superintendent for the Cartwright School District, says from her first visit to Heatherbrae, she saw what set the school apart: high expectations and Eva Stevens. She recalls going into a first-grade class where most of the students had started the year speaking only Spanish. It was the second semester and the children were speaking in complete sentences with very high academic language, she says. *"I said, 'this*

is amazing that you would see children who started the year not speaking English and not having the background that students who are native English speakers have, but being able to read and write by the spring of the same year using high-level academic vocabulary.' It was, to me, just amazing," Lawlor says.

Stevens remains modest about her accomplishments. *"It really is her leadership and her ability to create systems in the school that everybody knows and understands from year to year,"* Lawlor says.