

Accelerate Institute Case Study  
Framework Objective #2 – High-Performing Team

**HEATHERBRAE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL**

**2014 RYAN AWARD WINNER:**

**EVA STEVENS**

**SCHOOL STATS**  
Phoenix, AZ

**730 Students**  
**Grades K-6**

**85% Hispanic**  
**8% African-American**  
**92% Low-Income**  
**10% Special Education**

Piece by piece, 2014 Ryan Award winner **Eva Stevens** has built a strong, mission-driven culture, putting in place the necessary systems and structures.



**Accelerate Institute®**



## HEATHERBRAE ELEMENTARY

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 3rd graders meeting or exceeding standards on the state’s test reading portion. The school’s impressive performance has earned it an ‘A’ rating from the state of Arizona.

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Teachers at Heatherbrae collaborate together frequently to explore new approaches for helping their students achieve more.



**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.

As is often the case in a traditional public school, Stevens inherited the existing staff 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 doing 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 4th-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 brought into 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 of the new expectations in place. And though some didn't believe wholeheartedly in the changes, they started behaving as if they did, to avoid trouble.

## #2 HIGH-PERFORMING TEAM

### ACCELERATE FRAMEWORK OBJECTIVE 2

The team is committed to the vision, strategies, and tactics to accomplish the goals.

1. **Staff expectations** and non-negotiables are clear.
2. **Staff is bought into the vision** of the school and is free of blockers or resisters.
3. **A hiring process is conducted with clear alignment to staff expectations** and non-negotiables and the school is staffed to meet the needs of the students.
4. **Onboarding and development of staff is systematic**, fosters buy-in and trust, and results in high levels of teacher retention.
5. **Teachers are celebrated for their accomplishments** and progress toward school goals.
6. **Performance levels are communicated directly and promptly to all staff.**
7. **Staff is consistently held accountable** to job expectations.

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**“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, the school registered 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, and of individual belief systems that were in conflict,” Stevens says.

*“So little by little, I broke down that resistance. It was a systems change that had to occur.”*

Case in point: She recalls one professional development session where a teacher adamantly insisted, in front of the staff: “I’m not going to do it.” Stevens says she planted her feet, smiled and asked him to think about it, keep it to himself and that they would talk about it later. “I tried to address things calmly and respectfully but yet address them.” She committed to not let little things slide, sending the message that common behaviors and respect was an important part of the school environment. But there were moments in staff meetings when certain staff members would intentionally disregard an agreed-upon norm. “I would take a post-it and I might write ‘Norm No. 1’ and walk through very discreetly and put it in front of him or her because everyone at their table knew they had challenged the norm, so everyone at the table knew they were getting called on it,” she says.

**Individually, she would follow up through conversations about professional responsibilities and acceptable behavior.** She’d encourage teachers to bring up anything they felt strongly about in that private conversation. “So little by little, I broke down that resistance,” she says. Some teachers held onto the idea that their prep time should be their own, and they challenged the idea that they should have to attend team meetings or collaborate with other teachers. “It was a systems change that had to occur,” Stevens adds.

She worked to get the grade-level teams and supportive staff members to a point where they would hold the resisters accountable in meetings, even when Stevens wasn’t there. “I didn’t want to be the only person doing this, but it takes time for other people to be comfortable and really take on sometimes bullying personalities among the staff,” she says. She brought in a consultant to help create structures that would allow staff members to confront the problems around them, particularly the bullying personalities.

The first breakthrough she had was when some staff members would come to tell her about others breaking the norms, which she could then address with the person. “Without giving colleagues names, I could say ‘A concern has come to my attention. What do you think could be the root of this? Why would teachers on your team believe this? What behaviors did they see that caused them to think this?’ When I began to address them, they began to dissipate,” she says. As time went on, the staff took care of more of those issues directly themselves. After a few years, as resisters retired and new people were brought in, the teachers who had bought into the vision were modeling the behavior Stevens hoped they all would exhibit, helping to onboard the new staff members.

**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 who 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.

**One of the critical steps in helping to change the school was the drafting of the strategic plan.**

Stevens pulled together a group of staff members who created an initial plan that was brought back before the whole staff for several rounds of input. Stevens says the committee helped to bring in voices from throughout the school. The resulting committee still exists today.

Stevens says all schools can create a strong school 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."



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

Today, Stevens is described as a friendly leader with a no-nonsense style. "She doesn't snap her fingers or anything like that, but you know this is what is expected of you," Howard says.

**The lesson Stevens learned? "Have a great sense of vision and a great sense of purpose, and really understand that everything not in alignment with that vision and purpose has to be dealt with."**

Assistant principal Julie Case says Stevens is very attentive to the culture and the commitments the teachers have made toward the mission and vision. She always has a plan. To enroll others in her vision, she builds leaders from within the staff, who help hold others accountable. When announcing a decision or change, she uses a layered approach, first notifying the leaders and getting them on board, then going out to the larger group, Case says.

"If one person is negative or does something negative, there is usually somebody else sitting at that table who will call them out on it. It doesn't spread," Case says. She's learned from Stevens how to tend to the culture. "You have to really listen to what people say, because their comment may not be negative, but their comment may undermine the mission. So when you hear a comment, you need to address it right away and redirect it into a positive way so that it doesn't spread," Case says.

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**Every year before school starts, Stevens has the staff revisit the vision and the collective commitments during orientation.** First with small groups, then as a team and as a whole group, building the commitment at every level.

Teacher Katherine Poureetezadi-Treasure says Stevens looks at faculty members as individuals, recognizing each teacher's strengths before they do and understanding the demands of their lives outside of school. "She helps you reach her expectations," adds teacher Rebecca DeSantis. "She doesn't just say this is what you need to do, now do it. She'll give you the support you need."

