

Surviving the New Age of Accountability

By Jacquelyn A. Jacobson

The first day of school for the Wickenburg Unified School District was August 8th – August 8th at 8:00 a.m., to be specific. At precisely 8:10 a.m., during a record heat wave in Arizona, the air conditioning units in Wickenburg High School went down. On the same day, we enrolled 100 more students than anticipated, and class sizes were nearing 40. The heat caused the girls to break the dress code, the milk to spoil in the cafeteria coolers, and the copy machines to overheat. This also was the day that Wickenburg High School began the implementation of a new core curriculum designed to increase the rigor in all courses. We had planned for a year; received over \$500,000 in grant funding; and purchased iPads, textbooks and supplemental instructional supplies. We had trained teachers, written pacing calendars, unwrapped standards and created lesson plans of which we were extraordinarily proud. And, on this – the first day of school - the only focus we had was the 116 degree temperature that was creating 90 degree classrooms. Such is the life of a principal.

Wickenburg High School is a small rural school in Wickenburg, Arizona. Our school is located approximately 50 miles northwest of Phoenix and has a student population of 750. The attendance area for the school is 1000 square miles and draws from five feeder elementary school systems. Fifty percent of the freshman class is “home-grown” from the Wickenburg Unified School District’s elementary schools. The remaining 50 percent arrive at our door from the surrounding, even more remote, attendance areas. As a rural school, Wickenburg High School has a difficult time attracting and retaining teachers and often must resort to using long term substitutes when highly qualified and appropriately certified teachers cannot be found. Despite these challenges, the Wickenburg Unified School District is ranked 15th in the state in academic achievement, as determined by state assessment results, and is often cited as a model for the implementation of national initiatives.

We find ourselves on the cutting edge of these national initiatives by maintaining a laser-like focus on the destination of moving every student to the next academic level. We take accountability very seriously. Accountability, by definition, is accepting responsibility for someone or something. Educational accountability, while an ever-changing moving target, requires school leaders to accept their responsibility to society, to parents and to our students. It is my job, as a school leader, to anticipate the changes and ensure that the academic culture of my school thrives in this new environment. There never has been a time in education where the stakes are higher and the accountability so demanding. As the public eye continues to focus on principals and their ability to deliver results, I find myself responding to those challenges in the following ways.



Construct a Solid Road

The road to student achievement is paved by effective school system leadership, by strong governance and leadership. The Wickenburg Unified School District is fortunate to have a superintendent with a clear focus and a Governing Board that understands the role it plays. Dr. Howard Carlson has created a path for us to follow that leaves no room for misinterpretation, and the Governing Board, led by Board President Joe Maglio, supports us every step of the way. The focus statement of the Wickenburg Unified School District is: “We are creating A+ schools with a laser-like focus on the Essential Elements of Instruction and moving each student to the next academic level.” We have a specific framework for the improvement of student learning. We are expected to maintain constant alignment with this focus and vision. The road is paved, and the lanes are clearly marked. Deviation from this road is unacceptable, and the system and building-level leadership maintains check points of calibration along the way. Without the absolute and unyielding commitment to this purpose and direction, it is not possible to prepare a system or a school for the demands of accountability. Once the road is built, it then becomes the responsibility of each principal to get behind the wheel and reach the destination.



Anticipate the Curves and Embrace Innovation

As the Common Core Standards were adopted in the state of Arizona, and around the nation, it became clear that multiple changes in accountability were just around the corner. The rigor was unmistakably increasing and intensifying. Teachers now would be held accountable for effective instruction through new evaluation systems intended to measure not only the effectiveness of instructional delivery, but the academic progress of each student in a teacher’s classroom. Students now would be assessed on that increased rigor. Wickenburg High School anticipated this momentous change in accountability and made a conscious decision to stay ahead of the curve.

In 2011, Wickenburg High School joined the national movement “Excellence for All,” led by Marc Tucker and the National Center on Education and the Economy. Titled “Move on When Ready” in the state of Arizona, and under the guidance of the Center for the Future of Arizona, this initiative provides a new pathway for students through the administration of Board Exams in all core content areas and allows students the option of moving to Community College after the sophomore year if all exams are successfully completed. It is a system designed to break the boundaries of seat time and simple accumulation of credits. It is an innovative approach to creating high rigor curriculum and schools that are competitive in the international arena. It is a system that will ensure our students are college and career ready.

With the goal of increased rigor, Wickenburg adopted the ACT Quality Core curriculum, fully aligned with the Common Core Standards, and we spent a year preparing to implement the new curriculum in 2012-2013. We were fortunate to receive more than \$500,000 in private foundation funding to assist in the implementation, which includes paying for Community College tuition for those moving on; funding the ACT Explore, Plan and ACT tests; and upgrading classroom technology. As the new state assessments are created and items released, it has become apparent that we made a wise decision. The language of test items released by the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) mirrors the depth of knowledge found in assessment questions of the ACT Quality Core exams. Our teachers are beginning to deliver instruction differently and at a higher level. As a principal, I have found myself providing more specific and effective feedback for the teachers as I spend time in the classrooms. By anticipating this change in accountability, Wickenburg High School finds itself ahead of the curve and well on the way to reaching the final destination.



Stay in the Lane

The final destination has been determined by a visionary school system leadership. The road has been established. The landmarks on the educational journey have been anticipated on the map of accountability. Fortunately, the GPS coordinates for students, teachers and administrators of the Wickenburg Unified School District have been calculated with precision. All that remains is for school leaders to stay in the lane and remain focused on increased student achievement. It is only with such purpose and intent that we meet the challenges of accountability. *

Jacquelyn A. Jacobson has served as principal of Wickenburg High School since 2007. During her tenure, she has developed a national partnership with the National Center for Education and the Economy and participated in the Excellence for All initiative and a state-wide partnership with the Center for the Future of Arizona and participated in Move on When Ready initiative. Additionally, she has received more than \$1 million in funding for educational initiative, including \$500,000 in local foundation grant money to implement Move on When Ready Board Examination initiative. Jacobson earned a Bachelor of Arts from Furman University and Masters of both Education and Social Work from Arizona State University.