

A graphic of a spotlight shining from the top left corner of the page, illuminating the title area.

# Alaska School SPOTLIGHT

## Dillingham City School District

December 2022

The minute I was hired as the new superintendent of Dillingham City School District, there was no confusion or question about my directive from the school board. Improve academics.

After looking at the scores and analyzing different types of data, I knew that to improve academics, we needed to elevate our reading skills. We would never grow, never change if our students could not read. It just so happens that this is where I have lived for many years, which has been surprising to many with whom I work.

It is clear that we have some skilled teachers that can lead our students toward raising reading scores and engagement. What was holding us back? Balanced literacy and the legacy that just reading teaches kids to read. I knew it would take a laser focus on how we teach reading and how we make it work in our classrooms. Again, something I have done both in and outside of the classroom for many years.

I assembled team members who knew and shared the vision I had communicated. We set out using all our available resources to ensure that every teacher, regardless of grade or the subject, were to become reading teachers. In my first presentation to our staff, I challenged them to become the reading teacher our students needed to move ahead. Not only to grow but to close the achievement gap that was staring us in the face. I closed that presentation with "Oprah" style motivation pointing to each group of teachers, claiming, "You're a reading teacher." "You're a reading teacher." "You're a reading teacher." "We are all reading teachers!"

We are on the ground floor, working with our teachers to help them understand the science of reading. We had to get the message, data, and facts out that research has shown that explicit, systematic instruction in how letters represent sounds is the most effective way to teach students to read. Giving students books they cannot read or repeated reading of books "at their level" widens the achievement gap. We were not doing what was best for students.

We are also building a consistent process for identifying students and their weaknesses from the bottom up. With this process comes targeted, meaningful interventions that will improve skill, growth, and proficiency at every students' level. This work will help us look at the whole child and not just a number or score on a test.

We also needed an excellent comprehensive teacher support system and a curriculum that aligns with the goal of immersing our students and ourselves in the belief that reading is a combination of decoding and linguistic comprehension. We needed decodable books, not leveled books; we needed consistent phonics instruction, not a 3-cueing system to guess at words. But most importantly, we



**Our Mission: An excellent education for every student every day.**

needed to express to teachers the urgency of doing what is best for students by teaching what the structure of the science of reading requires us to do.

Like Scarborough's Rope, we needed to get many different resources to spin together and communicate this new expectation. We are utilizing our LINKED grant funds to provide support at both the elementary and the MS/HS levels. We hired a reading coach to demonstrate lessons, provide materials and consult with teachers. We worked with an outside resource to meet with teachers regularly to give pointers, answer questions and lead a change model. Every Friday afternoon, our staff engages in professional development that centers around reading instruction. We are being honest about our data. We are showing teachers in black and white that what we have done in the past is not working. Another important thread in our rope is ensuring our administrators are proficient in what we are trying to implement and inviting them to share in our enthusiasm that the outlook provides. Administrators are tasked with updating and then keeping our district structures in place, including MTSS, PBIS, a clear scope and sequence, and of course, we all will need to share the knowledge of curriculum standards.

We are forming committees to dissect and review new curricula and choose one that matches our goals and standards. We are giving each student in the community two new books per month that they can choose with their family. We work diligently to include parents in engagement activities that motivate families and make it easy for them to help their students at home. These engagement activities provide families with resources and structures to support students' literacy efforts outside the regular school day. Throughout the LINKED grant, every child in our community will have at least 100 books in their home library.

The road has not been paved with rainbows and bubbles. Doing what you have always done is the path of least resistance and the way that makes staff most comfortable, but it does not change our achievement trajectory. We are willing to take things slowly at first, making sure there is a strong foundation of understanding, professional development, and motivation to make the change that is proven best for students. As we make our way, the evolution and challenge will take hold and build momentum. When teachers see the improvement in scores and engagement, we know they will grab on and dive in. We started with those already motivated to learn and implement structured literacy strategies in their classrooms. Others have since joined. We are well on our way. I look forward to reporting back on the successes of our grassroots efforts.

I hear myself daily repeating the words by which I make every decision. "We have to do what is best for kids." I know all my staff hears me say this in their heads as they walk through the day. I know one day, they will be saying it in their voice. I can see myself having discussions with many of them, constantly plugging the science of reading. Questioning every move we make to be sure we stay the course in bringing about this change. Sometime soon, teachers will be collaborating and asking each other these questions. And pretty soon, with all the energy and push and try and do, our kids will read. I know because this is the job that I was hired to do, and do it we will.