



Rocking the Boat in Mountain Time

Superintendent Grotting, tell me a little about Nyssa.

Grotting: Nyssa is located in Eastern Oregon, as far east as you can possibly go. We are in a different time zone than most of Oregon. The Snake River actually runs through the town as it separates Oregon from Idaho. The town has approximately 3,000 people. The main industry is agriculture, primarily the growing of sugar beets, onions, wheat, potatoes, and corn. The largest employer used to be White Satin Amalgamated Sugar. However, this year they closed their doors due to the impact of international trade agreements, so now the school district is the largest employer in Nyssa.

Your staff and students have made great gains in reducing the achievement gap and have won the Celebrating Success award from the Department of Education in Oregon. Our readers want to know what the school district did to improve things for the kids.

Grotting: Well, our elementary school was selected as one of the top six schools in the state of Oregon. In the selection process, the Department of Education discovered that the schools selected were all elementary schools.

Nyssa School District

An interview with Don Grotting, Superintendent, Nyssa School District
Janine Weeks, Assistant Superintendent and Curriculum Director
Geno Bates, Elementary School Principal
Jana Iverson, Middle School Principal
Interviewed by Jay Hutchins, Executive Editor

So they wanted to start looking a little bit deeper and look specifically at districts, and use data on test scores for those districts that were closing the achievement gap, not only in their elementary but also in their middle and high schools. And so, our entire school district was selected.

Tell me about the demographics of the school.

Grotting: We are approximately 60 percent Hispanic. We also have a small Asian population. Of our Hispanic population, approximately 50 to 60 percent are ELL (English Language Learners). District-wide, only 25 to 30 percent of the migrant kids speak English.

We have a large population of Kindergartners who have no English speaking skills. However, throughout the year we will

also have students, primarily from Mexico, entering various grade levels with no English speaking skills, and in some instances these students have not attended school regularly or not at all in Mexico.

That's a real challenge to bring those kids up to benchmarks within one or two years.

Grotting: To say the least! This is my 5th year here. When I arrived, the elementary school, after having been evaluated as a poor-performing school, was just beginning to make some gains under the leadership of Principal Janine Weeks. Our middle school was a low-performing school, and our high school was just on the cusp of being low-performing. At the time, the school board had some specific goals for the superintendent. The number one priority was to increase student achievement.

The first thing I did was make changes in instructional leadership roles, specifically the principals in the middle school and the high school. Janine Weeks, who is now assistant superintendent and curriculum director, was the elementary school principal and was already doing a good job and working closely with Portland State University.

So Janine, what were the major changes you made when you were the elementary school principal?

Weeks: The elementary school was identified as being in need of school improvement in 1996-97, and before that time we had begun to implement a reading program, or phonics program, called *Johnny Can Spell*.

Where did Johnny Can Spell come from?

Weeks: *Johnny Can Spell* is a program that was developed by Alice Nine from the Portland area. She took Spaulding Phonics, which is a program that's been around for quite a long time, and made some revisions to it that strengthened the program.

We broke the phonics program down to what we needed to teach at each level. And the strategies are group strategies such as choral learning, which is very appropriate for young children as well as English Language Learners. The teacher gives the kids a prompt, and the students answer as a group.

An explicit, directly instructed phonics program?

Weeks: Exactly, it's pretty well outlined—the sequence, the skills, and the process that needs to be followed. Reading, writing, and spelling are parts of one process. So as the kids learn the sounds, they are writing the sounds, and saying the sounds. It is all in one package, so that by the time the kids are through the process, reading is a pretty natural transition.

I understand that you really focus on vocabulary because you have English Language Learners.

Weeks: That is correct. No matter what the elementary school teachers are teaching for content, they purposefully teach the vocabulary. The Kindergarten and 1st grade teachers structure vocabulary into everything, and they teach vocabulary as an explicit skill.

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— Janine Weeks,
Assistant Superintendent

You received some help from PSU. What did PSU do that was helpful?

Weeks: We wanted to develop a process that we could use to make decisions so that we weren't responding to the whims of the moment—the pendulums of current practices. The Accelerated Schools program, developed by Dr. Henry Levin of Stanford University, allowed us to set up a structure within the school to examine each phase of our curriculum, including math and science, and determine the best practices for each of these. We needed to evaluate the things that we were doing well, what we needed to change, and the best ways to do it. We wanted information so that we were not just responding as salesmen walked in the door.

Describe the approach the school was using before making these changes.

Weeks: It was not as organized or coordinated. Instruction was based on the administrator who happened to be there at the time, or what individual teachers had heard were good ideas.

Was there any other specific program that really made a difference?

Weeks: We had heard of a program that was implemented in some schools in Idaho that formalized the review and practice of the skills after they were introduced. For instance, after we introduced long division we made sure our students did long division every day for the rest of the year—as a group.

Another thing that made a huge difference for us was that we implemented all-day Kindergarten for all students. At about the same time, we started the phonics program. So that gave us the time to do a lot more with the kids. And I think that was about 1993 or 1994.

Where did the leadership come from for making these changes?

Grotting: It came from the Principal, Janine Weeks.

► **Weeks:** We also had a number of good teachers standing up and saying that we needed to find ways to change things. Implementation of the all-day Kindergarten came about as a result of district and school staff seeing the impact of that type of program on migrant Kindergarten students. The other changes came about as a result of a staff who truly felt that they could make a difference for the at-risk students in our classrooms. We searched for programs that had proven successful for similar students and were based on proven, effective teaching practices, and implemented them.

Janine, when you implemented these changes was there any resistance?

Weeks: Yes. We implemented the full-day Kindergarten program because we had some kids who didn't have organized daycare during the day, and we felt that if we kept them in school we could give them a good head start on what they needed for learning. But some of our kids had stay-at-home moms who wanted their kids to be at home with them. So, for a while, if parents preferred half-day Kindergarten and were doing similar things at home, it was a great option for their children. As the program progressed, the half-day kids were having so much fun they wouldn't want to go home. In the end, everybody went for full-day Kindergarten.

Grotting: I'd like to go back to the idea of leadership. It has continued to go on and continued to improve. Geno Bates, who is the current principal of the elementary school, is here and I think it's important to say that we have built a foundation with that staff, and that it is important to have people like Geno who can build on the foundation Janine has created.

Therefore, your success in the elementary school was due to implementing specific programs school-wide, and having every teacher on the same page about those programs?

Grotting: Correct.

Weeks: And the Accelerated Schools program gave us organizational structure. The whole point was to set checks and balances at every level so that changes were not a response to a single person's ideas. I think it is also important to mention the DIBELS program, which was brought to us by the state.

DIBELS is a way of evaluating the progress in phonics?

Weeks: Yes it is. It allows us to make some fairly reliable predictions at the Kindergarten level about which students are going to be successful readers without intervention before the third grade.

So DIBELS allows you to target students who need either a different curriculum, a different supplemental program, or tutoring to get them up to their reading level by third grade?

Weeks: Yes, Roland Good and Ed Kameenui from the University of Oregon developed and provided training for the program. Studies have shown that if students are not successful readers by third grade, it is very difficult to help them become good readers. As a result, we need to be very strategic in how we use those first three years. We've kept track of students as they have moved through middle and high school. It has been really encouraging to us to see that we have created a good foundation for those kids all the way up through high school. We've been pretty impressed.

I've noticed that many of the schools that have succeeded with a large population of at-risk kids level across classes for language arts and some for math. Hosford

Middle School in SE Portland levels the whole school for language arts, so a high-performing 6th grader may be with 8th graders for language arts. My impression of Nyssa is that you teach to skill levels within the grades and that you hold kids back a grade level when they are not progressing, correct?

Grotting: Yes. At the elementary school, there are pretty comprehensive standards of promotion. If we're going to make a retention, we try to do it within the first-grade year to give students just one more year of that academic language, one more year of the foundation they need. But the big question is: Will the retention benefit them?

In March, usually at our parent-teacher conferences, we start talking to parents about where their child needs to be, if the possibility of retention is there. Again, we take into account the age of each child and whether or not they have they been retained before.

Weeks: When I came into the district in the 1980s, it was pretty routine for us to retain a classroom of kids at the end of first grade. As a result, we generally had 20 to 30 more students in first grade than in any other grade in the school. About 6 years ago, retention dropped to the levels that we have now. I think this year we're looking at maybe 8 to 10 students being retained out of 100. In grades 2, 3, 4, and 5 we may have 1 or 2 students out of each of those grades being retained.

Was the problem because you had so many English Language Learners?

Weeks: Yes, this was before we had the phonics program. We were using whole language programs at the time and not a structured approach. We have also learned a lot more since that time about effective instructional strategies for second language learners.

I'm very also curious about the Read 180 program, where it came from and why you think it works.

Grotting: I learned about it from the Salem School District, and I know they've done extensive research. And so we looked into the program, invited *Read 180* to come talk to us about the program, and sent a group of teachers and administrators over to visit

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Middle School Principal

their program. It's an expensive program, especially the computer stations. Jana Iverson, the middle school principal, can talk about this better than I.

Iverson: There are quite a few aspects to the program. Oregon now counts it as one of the most successful reading programs eligible for grants. The program is computer based and uses audio books, paperbacks, videos, and vocabulary to help students develop background skills.

It also works on spelling and reading fluency. There's a program that has the kids read into a microphone and the computer reads back to them.

Weeks: When we looked at our testing results, we saw that a lot of our students are challenged in the area of their vocabulary skills. We believe that this is largely because of a lack of background experiences, which are necessary to create context for what they read. Through stories, video presentations, and appropriate reading material, *Read 180* builds a better understanding of situations as well as vocabulary that students encounter in their reading. In addition, some of our students may be at a specific grade level because of age, but instructionally may operate at a lower level. The *Read 180* program allows kids to read at their instructional level, but the material they work with is appropriate for their age and experience level.

So, Jana, you're saying that the audio books, the vocabulary work, and the videos really help kids build background?

Iverson: Yes, much of the material is non-fiction; it provides information in science and social studies that the kids will need in their other classrooms. So even though they may be reading at a 3rd grade level, they may be learning about 8th grade social studies.

Don, do you use Read 180 in the middle and high school?

Grotting: Yes, to implement the *Read 180*, we added a specific reading teacher for the middle school and the high school. We made that a staffing priority. I also want to mention that we created what we call a CIM class. Those students who do not achieve their Certificate of Initial Mastery can go back and focus on specific skills in reading and writing. We've instituted an elementary school, district-wide program called *Step up to Writing*.

What else should people know about the Nyssa School District?

Grotting: That everything that happens before high school affects high school. The way our campus is structured, we're really close together. Sometimes we have a high school student go back and take an 8th grade science class or a language arts class. It addresses the same issues as the leveling that you mentioned.

On the other end, we've worked really well with our community college, and so we are offering a host of college level classes at our high school. Even though many of our students are the first generation to graduate from high school, we're trying to get them involved in post-high school education before they leave our school, taking college level credit classes. And we've been fortunate that through some grants and using some of our federal money, we actually pay for those college credits at Treasure Valley Community College in Ontario, Oregon.

We offer courses from Math 111 through college-level calculus. Students can take college writing through Writing 123, American and English Literature classes, college chemistry, college physics, some biology, and computer classes—and that's been positive.

Is there anything interesting that we haven't mentioned?

► **Iverson:** I think the administrators in here would agree that we needed somebody at the superintendent's level to say, "Guess what, it's really important that our kids achieve. No more excuses. Athletics aren't as important as achievement. We're all going to focus and make this happen." Our teachers all remember when Don first came and said, "Look, if you don't want to work hard, head down the road. We're going to make this happen and you're going to have to work hard to get it done." It made a difference to our teachers.

Did very many teachers leave at that time?

Iverson: No. We had some administrators that left, but teachers stayed.

Do you feel like talking about accountability a little bit?

{Lots of good-natured laughter from the group.}

Iverson: Definitely. We are accountable for how well the students do. We can't blame it on somebody else. When Don made it clear who was accountable, the atmosphere improved, the teachers became happier, and the morale went up—without a doubt.

► **Teachers here have a belief system. They believe the kids can learn and kids know we believe in them.**

—Geno Bates,
Elementary School Principal

That seems to have been the case everywhere there's been a turnaround, and I heard you all laugh when I mentioned accountability.

► **Bates:** This is Geno Bates, the current elementary school principal chiming in. Teachers here have a belief system. They believe the kids can learn and kids know we believe in them. I've seen that at the middle school and at the high school. The kids are taking it and going with it, and so are the teachers.

Weeks: I think before, there was a set of assumptions that these kids are from low-income backgrounds, they don't have experiences to bring to school, the home situations may not be great, and they're second language learners. How can we be expected to get these kids up to the appropriate levels? And that was where our No Excuses philosophy came in. These kids have every right to be as competitive as any other kid coming out of any other school in the state.

Superintendent Grotting came in and said that's how it was going to be?

Weeks: Exactly.

Grotting: I would add that, if a school does not have instructional leaders in the building, to make sure it's done, it is hard to make it happen. As Jana said, most teachers want leadership, but maybe don't feel supported or are not disposed to rock the boat. When I came here I said, "I'm going to push you out onto the diving board. You're either going to jump or we're going to push you off."

All the successful schools I have been visiting have leadership stories. It didn't always come from a new superintendent. Sometimes it comes from a group of teachers at a school who had some vision and a lot of initiative. One of the more interesting things is the way people have to go out and patch together programs and really focus on finding ways to determine what really is going to work and what isn't going to work.

Iverson: I'm not all that convinced that the program is what makes the difference. The dedication, follow through, and the focus are what changes things.

Bates: I think you could have the best programs in the world, but if you don't have people using them right, working with them right, and working with the kids with the right attitude, those programs aren't going to be successful.

Weeks: I agree wholeheartedly. I think, based on some of our conversations with people about our students' success, there are many people out there looking for a silver bullet. They want the perfect program, and I don't know that it's there. I also think that it needs

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to fit the community and school, and the group of teachers who are there. So I would be afraid of someone out there saying, if you're going to be a successful school you have to adopt this program, you have to follow this process. I'm not sure that's the answer.

► **Grotting:** I believe superintendents often get too consumed by the finances and politics of education and forget to do our most important job—to understand how we are delivering instruction and how that affects what our students are learning.

It took a lot of trust to admit that we were not doing the job correctly. We had to ask what we needed to do to help these kids. If we had not been willing to do that, things would not have changed.

That's a perfect place to end today. I really appreciate you all taking the time to do this. I'm starting to have a proprietary feeling about how the kids in Oregon are educated because I've been speaking to so many people who feel invested.



Don Grotting has served as a superintendent for eight years, having just completed his fifth year in the Nyssa School District. Previously a dislocated timber worker he entered the field of education 12 years ago when the Georgia Pacific Plant in Coquille ceased operations due to the spotted owl and importation of wood products from Canada. He has a Bachelors degree in Elementary Education from Southwestern Oregon Community College and Linfield College. He gained his Masters in Educational Administration from Portland State University, and his superintendent license from Lewis and Clark University.



Janine Weeks is Assistant Superintendent and Curriculum Director of the Nyssa School district. Previously she was the Nyssa Elementary School Principal. Janine worked as an elementary school teacher for 12 years and a special education teacher for 3.5 years.



Jana Iverson grew up in Arizona and has lived in Nyssa for the past 17 years. Before becoming Principal of Nyssa Middle School she was the Curriculum Director and Assistant Superintendent for the Nyssa School District. She has been an adjunct Professor at Lewis and Clark in the Ropes Program and has taught at Eastern Oregon University, Ontario Campus. Jana just completed preliminary exams to move into doctoral candidacy at the University of Idaho and will finalize her dissertation during the summer of 2006.



Geno Bates was born and raised in Ontario, Oregon. Geno graduated from Ontario High School in 1982. He graduated with a Masters Degree in Educational Leadership from Northwest Nazarene University in 2001. He was Asst. Principal at Park Ridge Elementary School in Nampa, Idaho from 2000-2001 and Assistant Principal of Nyssa High School in Nyssa, Oregon from 2001-2002 before becoming Principal of Nyssa Elementary.