

# The Janesville Success Story

How one district faced with challenging demographics rose from mediocrity

**SESSION:** *Creating a Culture of Achievement – Improving Student Learning Results in a Large District* | **Presenters:** Kim Ehrhardt, director of instructional services, Janesville School District; Karen Schulte, district administrator; Robert Smiley, chief information officer, Janesville School District



For many years, the Janesville School District sat comfortably in the middle of the pack when it came to student achievement. Then, prompted by some external changes as well as new leadership, the district decided to try for the top.

“We became very focused on what our culture would look like. Instead of being in the middle of the pack, we wanted to be number one,” recalled Kim Ehrhardt, Janesville’s director of instructional services. “Culture is the vehicle that really brings substantial change.”

The results have been stunning. Within the past three years, two of Janesville’s elementary schools have been nationally recognized as Blue Ribbon Schools. The district’s student test scores are now at the top when compared to other districts around them. And on the last state-issued district report card, Janesville’s score was second highest among the 10 largest districts in Wisconsin.

The achievements are even more remarkable when you consider Janesville’s demographics. The ninth largest school district in Wisconsin, it has 10,400 students, 1,400 employees and 21 schools. The closing of local businesses led to hard times for Janesville and its students. The district has a high number of homeless students

and more than half the district’s students come from families with incomes below the poverty level. Yet the district has been recognized at the state level for its success at educating students from low-income families.

“We have the same standards for those students as we do for every other student,” Janesville’s Superintendent Karen Schulte said, adding that the difference was a higher level of support for those lower income students.

The first step on the journey to excellence was setting clear, measurable goals for the district and its leadership team, who are rated each year on how well they have achieved those goals. Goals for each school are then set to align with the district goals so all students, teachers and administrators are working toward the same objectives each year.

Janesville changed the way it communicated with parents and students and among the staff. There are frequent surveys of parents and staff on a variety of topics and changes are made in response to the survey results. Principals are also asked to rate the performance of central office staff.

“We are service oriented,” Schulte said. “We serve the principals who serve the teachers who serve the students.”

Janesville changed its curriculum to a guaranteed and viable curriculum that includes the same mastery goals for each student. The district developed a set of curriculum-based common assessments that are given each quarter or trimester. The results are then reviewed and analyzed at monthly data retreats held at each school.

A final component is technology that is carefully chosen to complement the curriculum and tied to a specific way of improving student achievement. Janesville has two of the first immersive telepresences in Wisconsin, enabling students to talk live with experts all over the world. Elementary schools are able to use technology to virtually combine classrooms. District staff can receive needed training on site using a remote link with an external trainer.

The district is still looking for new ways to achieve. Janesville has established an international education program that sends staff overseas to learn how schools in other countries are producing students who are even higher achieving.

“We’re continuing to learn and find out how we can be more competitive,” Schulte said. ■