



NW RISE SPOTLIGHT

GLENN'S FERRY SCHOOL DISTRICT (IDAHO)

Glenn's Ferry School District serves a close-knit Idaho community committed to preparing students for new horizons. Many come from nontraditional and low-income homes and struggle to find their way. The district has high expectations for all its students and is proud to give them a high-quality education and multiple opportunities to succeed.

Joining NW RISE in 2014 was a turning point for Glenn's Ferry. Cuts in staffing, salaries, and programs had reduced teacher morale to its lowest point in many years. NW RISE gave the five-member team a sense of belonging to a community of peers working in similar schools.

“Our team returned from that first convening super energized,” recalls K–8 principal Rob Spriggs. “It was a conference unlike any we’d ever been to before.” Surrounded by colleagues sharing rural strengths and challenges, they discussed new ideas that could be immediately applied in their strong community setting.

Based on a NW RISE student engagement survey, many Glenn's Ferry students weren't engaged in school. The district took these results to heart and decided to make student engagement a top priority. “The survey gave our students a voice,” says Spriggs, “and we responded that if our students aren't engaged, we need to adjust our practice until they are.”

The district focused its three-year staff professional development plan on improving student engagement and social-emotional learning. Activities included revising curriculum and instruction, engaging staff in schoolwide book studies (Teach Like a Pirate and The Innovator's Mindset, for example), and bringing nationally recognized experts such as Kevin Honeycutt to share student engagement strategies with the staff.

“We didn't expect teachers to use every tool offered to them, but we wanted them to use at least one they felt would work with their students,” says Spriggs.

To support teachers in this work, Glenn's Ferry administrators used the NW RISE classroom walk-through protocol during the 2015-16 and 2016-17 school years to provide specific, individual feedback to staff members. “I observed each of my 18 teachers between 10 and 12 times using that protocol,” said Spriggs, “which is exhausting work, but extremely helpful for improving engagement.”

Glenns Ferry also used the concept of cross-district networking, which had been modeled at the NW RISE convening, to strengthen, extend, and build cohesion in its student engagement effort. Once the district identified promising professional development opportunities, it organized and scheduled the professional learning in collaboration with other Idaho NW RISE schools. Glenns Ferry teachers learned alongside staff members from the Idaho City and Garden Valley school districts, then held follow-up meetings to develop implementation plans and report on progress. During these professional learning convenings, participants used a format that had been modeled at the NW RISE convening, including breakout discussions, demonstrations, and the use of Open Space technology.

These efforts have produced more engaging, rigorous classroom instruction. Teachers in grades 4 and 5, for example, have focused on strengthening students' academic vocabulary, particularly with words used in higher-order thinking tasks (e.g., synthesize, evaluate). This led to the school's highest test scores for their grade level.

Spriggs recently observed some of these students as they engaged in a joint math project with NW RISE job-alike teachers in Alaska. "Our kids were livestreaming with Alaska students, and they were arguing about math problems," he says. "One little girl was adamant about a math problem involving beads. She stood up and said, 'I don't agree with your claim. What's your evidence?' It was very exciting!"

Glenns Ferry can also point to much stronger bell-to-bell instruction at the middle and high school. "We're tighter with agendas, daily objectives, and students leaving class," says Spriggs. "We're wasting so much less time." These engagement efforts aren't confined to classrooms. Elementary teachers covered all the student bathrooms with positive slogans and posters focused on noncognitive traits.

Due to these efforts, student engagement results on the NW RISE survey are improving. "I'm especially proud of improvements for the 25 percent of our students who have struggled socially and emotionally and lacked a sense of belonging at our schools," says Spriggs.

As a result of its hard work, Glenns Ferry was recognized this year by the Idaho State Department of Education as a top performer in student engagement and social-emotional learning skills, based on a statewide student survey for grades 3–8.