

On the Right Track 4: Program Improvement Schools and Districts Making a Difference in Student Achievement

Interview with Gina Kismet, Principal of Monroe Elementary School, Hanford Elementary School District

Introduction:

Schools Moving Up, June 28, 2006 2:41 p.m. EST

JULIE DUFFIELD

Hello, this is Julie Duffield from WestEd. Thank you for accessing this SchoolsMovingUp audio interview with Gina Kismet, principal at Monroe Elementary in Hanford Elementary School District. Monroe is located in the Central Valley, between Bakersfield and Modesto, and is a K-6 school that serves about 500 students. Monroe exited Program Improvement in Year 2.

This interview was conducted by Angeline Spain from the American Institute of Research. The institute is a partner with WestEd on the California Comprehensive Center. The conversation is based on an original presentation that Gina made for the On the Right Track Symposium in April, 2006

ANGELINE SPAIN: Good morning, Gina.

GINA KISMET: Good morning.

ANGELINE SPAIN: Well, I'd like to start off with asking you how you would describe your school, Monroe Elementary, to another elementary school administrator.

GINA KISMET: And I'm going to assume we're talking demographically or just as school climate as well?

ANGELINE SPAIN: Sure, demographically and school climate.

GINA KISMET: OK, well, we are, our enrollment is about as, it is about 520 students. Our makeup demographically is about 50 percent Caucasian and about 50 percent Hispanic. We have a very small African-American population of about four percent in there.

We have a small group of English language learners, our percent of the L students is about eight percent, and our free and reduced lunch rate for students is about 43 percent. We're situated right there in the middle of Hanford. There is a lot of poverty.

This year, our school has experienced a lot of transiency, a lot of difficulties with attendance, and the demographics have been changing this year, in particular, those, that, those numbers are based off of last year, but are demographics are changing because we're an overflow school. So we have students enrolling every week, a couple of students a week and we have students leaving every week.

So, that's starting to change a little bit and we're starting to experience more of what the other schools in our district have, which is a higher transient rate, higher poverty rate, and a higher English language learner rate, and higher Hispanic rate is what's happening right now.

Our school climate is such that it's very much like the other schools in the district in that we're, we have a very collaborative staff. Classified and certificated staff work very closely together, my teachers are extremely collaborative at every single grade level. They do voluntary collaborations, they attend voluntary professional development.

We do not have the same amount of funding as some of the other schools, which makes it difficult to do all those extra things, but my staff does a lot of it voluntarily because of the sense of urgency that they feel and the commitment that they feel. So, we have a great staff of committed individuals who are working really closely together, very collaborative, very reflective.

ANGELINE SPAIN: Great, well, congratulations on all the progress that you've been able to make.

GINA KISMET: Thank you.

ANGELINE SPAIN: So, I'd like to talk a little bit more specifically now about the academic growth that you've achieved at Monroe. You did exit program improvement and you've made a bit of growth on your API and your interval annual measurable objectives, AMOs.

GINA KISMET: Right.

ANGELINE SPAIN: And the figures for last year were 38 percent of your students for proficient or above for English, language, arts, and 39 percent of your students were at proficient or above for mathematics. So, could you tell us a little bit about more about the changes you've seen in student achievement over the past two years?

GINA KISMET: We have been very, we have worked very hard and we're starting to reap the rewards of that hard work. We have had made good growth. We increased six percent basically. Six percent more of our students were proficient or advance in math and five percent more of our students were proficient or advance with English arts.

The nice thing is when you look at our API growth, you'll see a nice, consistent, steady, solid number and that is something that I look for because I don't want to see a huge jump then followed by a decrease. And so, over the last two years, for example, in 03-04, we grew 23 points in our API and then in the 04-05 school year, we grew 26 points.

So, we're seeing some consistency as far as the amount of growth that we're making. It's not huge, it's good growth, it's a good amount of growth but it's not so high that I'm concerned about as later the next year maybe not making as much growth. So, I feel really confident about the growth that we're making because I feel like it's real consistent.

I have been the principal there now for two years. Next year will be the start of my third year and we are fortunate enough that we have made our AMOs and all of our sub-groups, our Hispanics, our economically disadvantaged and then our Caucasians.

In looking at an area of focus for us, it's going to be to keep a really, really close eye on our Hispanic population because they did not do as well as our Caucasians and so that's a concern to me. And then also keeping an eye on our English language learners as that population grows and as we want to make sure we're meeting the needs of all the students at our school. So, I think, did I answer that question as far as how we're doing?

ANGELINE SPAIN: Definitely. So, it sounds like you definitely have your eye on the ball but kind of as your population is changing, especially last year and it sounds like you're expecting it to continue for next year, you're thinking about strategies to keep that focus.

GINA KISMET: Right and we are, you know, we were very proud this year. One of the things I'm always doing with my staff is sharing out data and they're always sharing out data, so it goes both ways.

At every faculty meeting, they share data out with me because we collect them on pre-data and rather than just collecting it and it being something that goes into a file or onto a shelf, they share it out a faculty meeting, and it's been very interesting this year because it's one of the first times we've done that.

It's been received very well. One of the things I shared with my staff then is that we went in our statewide ranking, we grew from a four to a five, and then in our similar school's ranking, we remain the same.

But, if you recall, initially, one of the nice things, a great moment for me, was when I initially shared that out there was some changes later on. They actually removed that information as far as similar school rankings. It actually had originally showed that we went down.

And what was nice about that is the sense of urgency. My teachers saw that and they were extremely upset and dissatisfied and they were looking for the next, they said what are we going to do? We need to find out why we're not continuing to grow the similar, you know, as a similar school. This is the same school as us in a different area.

After the CDE republished that data, though, and showed that we actually maintained where we were at, well that was much better than what they had originally said. We were very pleased with it.

But the idea or the fact that my staff actually cared enough to say take responsibility for it, which is what happened, and to have conversations about this can't happen. You know, we can't be moving down in our similar school's ranking, that was a great thing.

So, all of the data I'm constantly sharing with my teachers and explaining it to them in as easy as terms as possible so that they can understand it and they can, you know, think it over, reflect on it, and decide as a team with their grade level what it is that we need to do, what suggestions they can make, what ends that they can give to our next steps, basically.

So, I think the data, all of the data, and sharing that with my staff has been very, very helpful.

Celebrating the gains that we're making, but then I turn around and I balance out with the next sense of urgency, which is what I did with it.

So, while we're real happy about the gains that we're making, I continue to kind of remind the staff that this is the next step/ The objectives, our goals they keep getting raised like anything else so we have to continue to do what we're doing and do it even better.

ANGELINE SPAIN: Great. Could I just quickly ask you to share with us what data you are looking at monthly?

GINA KISMET: Teachers report out reading levels monthly. And it's just an assessment that we use within our district. They do instruction, that's kind of a dipstick; it's kind of a monthly dipstick. They're instructional running records, which is a reading running record on our students.

And since I've been with the district, which will be five years, we have always collected it at both of my school sites. But what has happened is it seems like it's something that's

collected and well, sometimes we'll discuss it or sometimes we'll meet with teachers. There's nothing ever really being done with it.

And also, when teachers are reporting data, I think it's really critical to know whether or not that data is valid and reliable. So, one way that I have, made sure that it's meaningful. If I'm going to collect it we need to talk about it. Otherwise there's no reason for me to collect it. We're not going to collect data for the purpose of collecting data.

So, they report off instructional running records and then with that, we've also been able to identify maybe what they're reporting is not completely accurate, not because they're purposely doing it. So maybe we need to look at the reliability and validity of how they're getting the assessment. So, it's been a really, really great tool.

And what they do is, as a grade level they come together and they report out their instructional running records in the form of percent of students who are below the benchmark, at the benchmark, or above the benchmark. We've broken it up into three categories.

And so it's real interesting to see them come together as a grade level team and pool together their percentages and then they go up there and they write them up. So, it's been really nice. We've learned a lot there.

ANGELINE SPAIN: I can tell. Well, that kind of actually leads me into what I would, was wanting to ask you next which was about your instructional program and it sounds like you're using data a lot to kind of think through your instructional program. So, how have you embedded instructional assistance and support into the school day, and of what kind of support do you provide for students?

GINA KISMET: Well, we are using data a lot. The instructional running record is just one thing that we do monthly. We also have benchmarks. We have district wide benchmarks that we're using now and we are fortunate enough to be using EduSoft.

So teachers can scan in that data themselves. They can immediately get that information back on how students performed on the assessment, how they performed on the essential standards that they were being tested on and then they can go back and they can revise their instructions.

As far as the, to be more specific about the instructional assistance that we're kind of embedding in the school day; Hanford I think is really unique in that there's a lot of support for teachers, new teachers, teachers who have been teaching for many years. There's lots of support. We have a full time literacy coach at my school site and at every school site, and some of our schools even have two literacy coaches. Monroe has one.

My literacy coach spends every hour of her day in the classrooms alongside teachers, demonstrating lessons, watching them demonstrate a lesson and coaching them, demonstrating differentiated instructions point of small group and showing them this is how you do the reading instruction, demonstrating assessments, so that we make sure we all have reliability and validity in the way we're giving the assessment, that we're doing it in a very uniform manner.

She joins in on all collaborations. She joins in on all professional development and reads it. My learning director is the next key person. My learning director spends about 40 percent of his day in the classrooms to coaching teachers, demonstrating lessons, providing feedback and support, demonstrating assessments so that we have validity in our assessments, training teachers right there rather than training outside of school at the end of the day without students.

We do it with the students. Let me show you how to give these assessments. So, he too spends a lot of his time in the classroom, not as much as the literacy coach but he does as well. And then the next role is myself as the principal as much as possible, when I have free time or we work on freeing up my time, I'm in the classrooms.

I love to demonstrate assessments. That's one of the areas I feel very strong in. We focus a lot on reading. So I'm often demonstrating reading assessments looking for validity, coaching teachers and I too will actually demonstrate lessons for teachers. So I'll go in. I'll demonstrate a lesson. And then we'll kind of do some debriefing later where we'll debrief with the teacher and talk about how the lesson went and some possible next steps.

The difference between the learning director and the literacy coach and myself is that the learning director and literacy coach, they work more in like a cycle. What I've requested for them to do at my school site is to work in a cycle of possibly two weeks. One week they demonstrate every single day in one particular academic area. The next week they watch and they coach and provide feedback.

And that's not evaluative. Neither one of those two positions are evaluative. The principal is the only one that does evaluations, so they get to wear this coaching hat and teachers feel more comfortable with them.

But, with that being said, the teachers are still comfortable with me giving them coaching because they know as long as they accept the coaching, as long as they go in and they're willing to reflect and revise their instructions that it doesn't end up in an evaluation.

And hopefully we prevent it from ever going into an evaluation if there's an area of focus for improvements. So, it's been really, really nice. Teachers have been real receptive to it and new and old teachers, they can't get enough help actually. They all want support.

So, it's been really, really good. I don't have any teachers who say, oh, I know that and I don't need that. So it's been good.

ANGELINE SPAIN: I can see. Well, I know at the conference, at the On the Right Track conference, you had talked about how you had modified the administrative structure at your school.

GINA KISMET: Yes.

ANGELINE SPAIN: So, you've talked about your role and the role of your learning director, are there any other changes that you have made to support instruction in terms of the structure?

GINA KISMET: The structural changes, credit has to go to our superintendent Rebecca Presley. I have been with the district for five years and a few years before I even came to the district, she recognized that in order for us to continue to focus on academics and student achievement, which that must be the priority for us that we would have to do some restructuring. And so, I hope I'm not jumping ahead on this, but she basically set it up to where all of our schools were restructured.

So, in order to free up the principal and the learning director, which used to be a vice principal's role. We no longer have a vice principal. It's now been re-termed a learning director so that their focus is on instruction. She is the one who led that change as far as restructuring all of our school sites so that the focus again, is on student achievement and on improving instruction. And so we're really, really fortunate, district wide, that we have that set up. Does that kind of...?

ANGELINE SPAIN: Yes.

GINA KISMET: That...

ANGELINE SPAIN: So, it's something that, it's not only your school but also other schools in the district that you've made this change to.

KISMET : Right, and let me expand a little bit by saying in order, how did we do that? And one of the questions came up, you know how do you do that? Where is the discipline? Who is handling the discipline? Who handles, you know, all the things that come up during the day. Because believe it or not a lot of times if you call me, I'm not in my office, I'm actually in a classroom.

So, with that restructuring, they re-termed our secretary as the school operations officer and our school operations officer maintains the operations of the school, all the day to

day operations of the school, she handles. All the logistical things that need to take place on a day to day basis, she's there to respond to.

She can even be she is considered our school operations officer. That position is even considered management. Therefore, if there's a parent concern that comes in and I'm not immediately available because I'm in a classroom, and that's something that we'll say to parents, you know the principal's in the classroom focusing on instruction right now. But I will take a message and get back to her, but is there something that I can help you with?

So, she can even work with parents, listen to parents if there's an urgency, problem solve things that go outside of a normal secretary. She does all of the day to day things and she actually even supervises classified staff. So, she does do a lot of the classified staff evaluations, depending on if it's an instructional classified staff member or if it's just a classified staff member such as other office secretaries that are office personnel or yard supervisors.

So, she does that, as well, which frees me up. The other role that we have is a student advocate. And the role of the student advocate has changed and it's changed at my site. I've kind of redefined what it looks like. My student advocate is an, she does a lot of counseling and a lot of peer groups and that's the focus of her job.

However, she assists with some of the day to day discipline. So, she provides me support if I need help or if I'm in a classroom. I'm doing, I'm working with a teacher, she will protect my time as well by going ahead and handling the situation as much as possible.

She's very good at what she does. She knows discipline very well so I have all the confidence that she can handle those bigger cases that teachers can't handle as far as discipline goes. She's there to help step in and we kind of balance it between myself and her, as far as handling all the discipline. So, we're lucky enough to have that position as well.

ANGELINE SPAIN: Well, it sounds like you've been able to put a lot of things in place to protect the administrative time in the classroom, as well as students in the classroom.

GINA KISMET: We have, we have, we're very fortunate.

ANGELINE SPAIN: Yes, well, I know that one of the things that you talked about at the conference was that you have a motto which is "Don't tell staff what to do but demonstrate it."

GINA KISMET: Yes.

ANGELINE SPAIN: So, what are some of the examples of how you have done that?

GINA KISMET: We, when I came on last year, we teach reading and a writing workshop which is we work very closely with Columbia University in New York. All staff development that happens in Hanford Elementary, at Monroe Elementary, all of our staff development is done internally. That's the first thing I should say.

So, we're not sending teachers out to conferences or to training. We do it internally and that is why our district has invested so much in developing the instructional knowledge and expertise that the principal, the learning director, and the literacy coach. We are affiliates of, or with Columbia University and so Columbia University from New York, they come down a couple of times a year.

But with that being said, let me get back to the district for them, when I came on last year, there were several teachers who were not doing what we were doing, the reading workshop structure that we have been doing for over five years, the writing workshop structure. They weren't doing it when I came on. Some of them were trying to a small degree.

So, one of the things I immediately recognized is I wanted to eliminate any barriers or any reasons why they're not doing it. And so if they didn't ask for the support, I still gave them support when I first came on last year.

I didn't have anybody who was resistant to that. I did a voluntary professional development study after school for my first and second grade teachers, every single first and second grade teacher committed to it.

So, I, they wanted it but I don't think, I just opened up more opportunities for it. And so, with that being said, we, I gave everybody equal and the same amount of support releasing teachers during the day to go and observe other teachers in reading workshop and writing workshop, releasing a group of teachers, all the first grade, to go to a different school site and see this taking place in action, or releasing all of that grade level to watch the literacy coach in one classroom working with students and demonstrating a lesson.

We had some professional development at a few of our other school sites and I, myself, the learning director, we released every single teacher because there wouldn't be enough subs because this was a district wide thing. We released every single teacher and covered huge groups of students to release those teachers so that they could go during their instructional day to see instruction happening, good instruction, what does it look like and to hear it being debriefed by other experts.

So, there are a lot of times where I'll even sub a class so that I can release my staff to go and see something because, regardless of the money, there's not enough subs. Other things as far as the just, we're focusing on the, oh, showing and not doing. Other things that we've done is at our faculty meetings for example, this year one of my focuses is I wanted to continue to move away from operational items and to work toward more professional development because, again, we don't have the same funding as other schools.

Our funding is more limited, how are we going to show teachers and get teachers as much development as they need? So, one of the things that we did is we did demonstrations in our faculty meetings and they were great fun because everybody was there to see it, the whole staff, at one time.

And everyone was there at the same time to debrief it. So what we did was we pulled our students from the after school program and we demonstrated lessons and we shared the hat, myself, the learning director, and the literacy coach. Then we would maybe break off into some small groups and do some more specific demonstrations based on grade level.

So, we've done it in faculty meetings. Some of the other things we've done is at faculty meetings we do focus on professional development. We did study trips of our campus and so we walked, we went into every single classroom, we, all the doors were open. We basically called it our de-privatizing instruction and we walked through.

First grade teachers got to see a fourth grade classroom, just the classroom environment. How was it set up? What did they have set up in there to make sure the instruction is happening in a smooth manner? So, we did that. We also do collaboration and when we do collaboration it has been less of the telling and more of the showing.

So, when I release my second grade teachers today, they have a half day collaboration. We do some research. We do some background knowledge in whatever instructional area we're going to focus on. And then we go in and we do, I call them off the cuff demonstration.

So, I've got second grade, what are you teaching right now? What unit is studied? What lesson would you be teaching today? We, I have even written the lesson right there, five to ten minutes, make sure it aligns to standards, make sure it aligns to pacing in their unit of study, and then we all go into that classroom, and then I demonstrate the lesson.

And then we go back and we debrief that lesson. How did it go? What things went well? What did you notice about this? What was the structure of the lesson? How was this instruction? What could you gain from seeing this instruction? So, we do a lot more of the showing versus just telling like this is just good methodology but let me show you what it looks like in actual action.

ANGELINE SPAIN: Well, it sounds like you definitely doing a lot of hands-on development. So I'm sure that the teachers are appreciating that. I would like to just go back a little bit and ask you to talk about your "Just Right for Them" instructional program, which is how you're differentiating for, to meet the student's different needs. So, could you talk a little bit about the process for developing this program and what it is exactly?

GINA KISMET: We're district wide, again. And what that means is basically we, at Monroe we have several students, our fourth grade students, we have fourth grade students who may not be reading at a fourth grade level or anywhere near that. We are just like every other school in that we have groups of students who are not at grade level.

And so, we have to be very strategic in determining how is it that we're going to provide them with such precise instruction that we can move them to the next level and possibly get them to grade level. And so we use that monthly data that we collect on students to identify where they're at instructionally.

And then to kind of do some more prescriptive instruction and to differentiate instruction so we find groups of students within classrooms. The teachers do this. They identify groups of students within their classrooms so they can provide small group differentiated instruction.

And so, particularly in reading, what you'll see is we don't just have an anthology that teachers are teaching from and reading. We have that anthology that it can't be used with all students because if a student's reading at a second grade level in a fourth grade classroom, they can't access it. They get frustrated. They shut down.

And so what you'll see in our classrooms is, every classroom has a leveled library and what that means is they have a wealth of books that are at different levels to meet the instructional needs of the children in that classroom. And so the teacher works the students and guides those students in knowing, OK, this is the instructional level I'm at right now.

And when I say instructional, that means this is a little challenging for the student but it's not so challenging that the student is going to feel overwhelmed. It's focusing kind of like back on that zone of proximal development, this is exactly the next step for this student.

And so teachers are really becoming diagnostic in this is where he is at and this is the next step. And so they're having those conversations with their students, training their students on these are the things you know how to do and that you're doing well.

For example as a reader, this is the level that you're reading at and this is what you're going to work on. These are your strategies. These are your goals that we need to work on next, and so we want to move you into this next level. And so you'll see a lot of movement. We're trying to move kids through levels but we're being very prescriptive in this is what you need to do to get to the next level.

So, every single classroom has a leveled library. We have a full classroom that we call our literacy library or book room that's devoted to level text for teachers to check out, and they get to come in and check it out as much as they want, as much as they need.

Last year we spent the majority, my staff gave me input and their input was that we need more nonfiction books. And so we spent a huge amount of money purchasing more nonfiction books at all student's levels to build up the classroom library, to branch out and do more background knowledge basically for our students.

And so, teachers have a wealth of resources to go to, to provide students with that "Just Right" instruction and we call them "Just Right" books. And so, I can go into a classroom and students have their book bag. They have ten books/ They can tell me, that's one of the things I do as a principal, I'll talk to them about that, they can tell me why it's just right.

You'll see maybe a small range of levels in there something that's just right for them, and maybe something that's just a little bit harder for them. So, it's been, it's a really good thing because it's more specific and more precise and teachers are differentiating their instruction based on that information that they have.

ANGELINE SPAIN: Great. Well, we've definitely covered a lot of ground today starting with talking about how you're using data and looking at it to make sure you're making the progress you're expecting to see, talking about how your administrative structure has been changed so that you can focus on the instruction that's taking place in the classroom, and that you're actually spending a lot of time there, and your staff development with the kind of focus on observation and modeling and debriefing and down to the students actually being aware of what they're striving for.

So, I guess wrapping up and thinking about your progress so far, what do you see as your main goals for next year, 2006-07?

GINA KISMET: There's so much, I think that we balance all of our successes with the next sense of urgency or the next goal for us school. And so we need to continue to create a, I need to continue to create a clear sense of urgency for my teachers. We need to continue to raise the level of instruction and build capacity of teachers and that is my leadership team, myself, my learning director, and literacy coach.

That is our responsibility is continuing to raise the level of instruction and building the capacity of our teachers, developing leaders within our staff. I want, I'm going to focus basically; one of the things I've been gearing up for next year is we need to continue to look at what it is that we're doing within the instructional day and eliminating the nonessential items.

There are still some nonessential items that are taking place that we need to take out because that's how important every minute of the instruction is. And I think one of the other things is next year is looking a little bit more closely at our subgroup data and making sure, because again even though the, our English language learners are not a significant subgroup, our goal at our, in our district, our goal at my school is that every single student will continue to make progress toward being proficient or advanced.

And so while they're not a subgroup, they do need our attention because they, had they been a subgroup, our English language learners they would not have met their annual measurable objective.

And one of the things I'm always telling my staff is that they're our students. They're Hanford Elementary students and we're a program improvement district and our English language learners are not making it as a district.

And so we need to share that responsibility and we need to, as a school site, look at those students and make sure that they're making enough progress. So just continuing what we're doing, tightening it up even more, raising the level of our instruction, raising the level of my capacity as well as the capacity of my teachers.

ANGELINE SPAIN: Great, well, I just wanted to say congratulations on what you've been able to do and wish you luck for next year.

GINA KISMET: Thank you so much.

ANGELINE SPAIN: Thank you, bye-bye.

JULIE DUFFIELD:

Thanks for listening to this SchoolsMovingUp audio interview. We again thank Gina Kismet, Principal of Monroe Elementary and Angline Spain with the American Institute of Research—a partner with WestEd on the California Comprehensive Center.

Be sure to read the full school profile for Monroe Elementary which is posted on the Schoolsmovingup Web site at www.schoolsmovingup.net. This is Julie Duffield for Schoolsmovingup at WestEd...thank you for listening.

GINA KISMET: Bye.

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