



Spencer Schools: A District Striving for the ‘Moonshot Goal’ of Improved Student Achievement

Embracing the ‘Moonshot Goal’

Like most districts, Spencer Schools faced a drop in student achievement coming out of the pandemic. During the 2018-19 school year, the ISASP Literacy Proficiency for third graders was 78%. By the 2020-21 school year, that figure had dropped to 46%. The district had to ask itself some basic questions. “What do we do?” “How do we come together?” Most importantly, “We don’t play the blame game,” says Superintendent Terry Hemann. With the data in hand and a sense of urgency, Spencer Schools decided to shoot for the moon with the ‘Moonshot Goal.’



Spencer Schools Superintendent Terry Hemann discusses the ‘Moonshot Goal’ with summit attendees.

- 85% of students will read at grade level by the end of third grade.
- 90% of the remaining students will read at grade level by the end of seventh grade.
- All students will maintain or increase their reading level through 12th grade.

Preparation Through Board Development

How was the district already prepared to achieve this ambitious goal? Over many years, the board had already engaged in numerous custom workshops, leading to a clear understanding of their governance role when it comes to student learning. The board commits to work sessions throughout the year to learn from staff leadership. The board-superintendent team creates a year-long board development calendar that identifies dates when the board will meet with key staff on improvement efforts. Setting these dates signals to staff and the community the board’s commitment to a high and equitable education for all students. Together, the board studies data and learns about priorities for student learning and works with staff to set student learning goals based on that data. The board was already well-equipped to shoot for its ‘Moonshot Goal.’

Engaging the District

The first step for Spencer Schools was to develop and enact their vision. Hemann’s guidance was straightforward— “Let’s make sure we’re all doing the right work in the right direction.” The first step was curriculum review, which included a literacy team that engaged in research on different instructional models which led to the selection of an aligned curriculum resource for all teachers to implement. The literacy team landed on LETRS, the Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading & Spelling. The curriculum involved intensive professional learning on the part of the staff, including the use of publisher coaching and support and the implementation of teacher leaders.

One of the most surprising outcomes was the impact it had on teachers. “It put us back in the spot of kids. One of the most powerful things—teachers were nervous, overwhelmed, and scared” explained Hemann. LETRS is not a resource so much as a strategy, which involves two different curriculums. The K-2 focus was on learning to read. For grades 3-5, the focus was on reading to learn.

Engaging the Community

The district knew it had to engage the community to achieve their goal. With help from The Donovan Group, an entire marketing campaign was born—#SpencerReads. Spencer Schools set out to put together a balanced coalition of community leaders, which included the Spencer Chamber of Commerce, the Iowa State University Extension Program, the Spencer Public Library, representatives from neighboring parochial schools, the Spencer School Foundations, and local businesses.

#SpencerReads held a kickoff campaign on National Read a Book Day, encouraging everyone in the community to take 15 minutes to read, take photos, and post them on social media, tagging #SpencerReads. It’s been full steam ahead ever since. The district put out a call on Facebook, asking for volunteers to read to students in the district’s 60+ elementary classrooms. Within 24 hours, the district had to take the post down because they had too many volunteers! From the district’s perspective, “It helps when they can see other people enjoy reading later in life for other purposes than just school and just textbooks.”



Businesses around the community now have book bins, where anyone can leave or take a book. As part of a basketball game, the district put tables in the lobby for attendees to leave books, with a swap taking place during halftime. When the opposing team learned about the initiative, their players brought books to donate as well. The community has added a reading component to several of its civic events, including the Grand Meander, Family Fest, and the Ice Cream Social.

The Results & Key Takeaways

The results have already proved powerful. From the fall to winter of 2022, third grade reading scores had jumped from 57% to 64%, fourth grade from 60% to 68%, and fifth grade from 60% to 70%. Spencer Schools challenges all Iowa districts to ask themselves:

- What is your Moonshot opportunity in your district?
- How could you get this process started in your role? What is your first step?
- What are the potential partners in your community?
- What event in your community could you enhance with a focus on literacy?



Hemann is confident the district is on the right course. “The teachers are going to make sure we succeed, and the community is going to make sure we succeed.”

For more information, contact Terry Hemann at themann@spencerschools.org.