

New Special Education Administrator of the Year — Kelly Bartling-Ballinger



Bartling-Ballinger

Kelly Bartling-Ballinger of Pender, Nebraska was awarded the NEW SpEd ADMINISTRATOR OF THE YEAR 2007-2008 designation by the Nebraska Association of Special Education Supervisors (NASES), at their fall conference in Nebraska City on September 18th. Presenting the award was Stuart Clark, ESU 1 Special Education Director. This was the inaugural presentation of the award, which recognizes outstanding new (in their first five years) supervisors in the field.

During the presentation, Clark spoke of Bartling-Ballinger's dedication to her students and their families, stating "she has been a tireless advocate for students with disabilities." He went on to note that she has been an inspiration to other teachers, someone that instills trust and respect. "From her start at Wayne State Col-

lege, where she served as the President of the Nebraska State Student Council for Exceptional Children, to her efforts today, Kelly has been a leader and a friend," said Clark. "To be eligible for the award, a candidate must be nominated by a co-worker, an administrator and a parent of a child with a disability. With Kelly's ability to build relationships and work hard to ensure students get what they need to succeed, that wasn't difficult."

Bartling-Ballinger has taught at Walthill ('94-'98), Sioux City ('98-'00) and West Point ('00-'05). She was Special Education Director for the Wayne Public Schools ('05-'08) and is currently serving the Pender Community School District as Special Education Director/instructor.

She and her husband, Larry, reside in Pender, Nebraska with their two daughters. ■

Gering Public Schools Closes the Achievement Gap with Direct Instruction

BY DON HAGUE, Superintendent, Gering Public Schools



Hague

Gering Public Schools had an achievement problem when I first took over the reins as superintendent of the district. Some students were learning well, but many others were not. Large numbers of students were not acquiring fundamental skills in reading and language, and this was reflected in their writing performance. Only 57 percent of Gering's fourth graders scored proficient on the Statewide Writing Assessment in 2005, which put Gering in last place among the largest 25 districts in Nebraska. Moreover, several subgroups of students were performing even lower. For example, only 39 percent of Hispanic students scored proficient on the Writing Assessment in 2005. As in many other communities in Nebraska, the Hispanic population was expanding year by year, which made these low scores a particular concern for the future.

We decided to see what type of approaches to learning and teaching could improve overall student performance while closing the performance gap between subgroups. We wanted to do both. We wanted to address the needs of our lower performing students as well as those already performing well. We wanted all students to achieve at higher levels. And we wanted something

that could be used comprehensively. We didn't want an approach that would be used for just some of the students or an approach that would be used just for part of the year. We wanted to find a core approach that would address the needs of the full range of learners in Gering.

After much research, the district selected Direct Instruction (DI), a powerful, scripted program for teaching and learning that has been used successfully for years in a wide variety of settings. DI started out as DISTAR at the University of Illinois, and it has more evidence of effectiveness than any other program we investigated. It was designed to help students in high poverty areas succeed, but it has provisions for meeting the needs of higher performers. Students are placed at their performance level, not their grade level, and they can be skipped through the lessons at a faster rate if they can demonstrate that they're ready for it.

We wanted to see the program in action. A team of teachers and administrators visited Park Elementary in Great Bend, Kansas where they had been implementing DI schoolwide for several years. The team was impressed with what they saw: students performing above grade

continued on page 13

Gering Public Schools—Hague (continued from page 7)

level in reading and language, and a system that could be replicated. Park Elementary was getting the results we were looking for: higher performance for all students and a narrowing of the achievement gap. If they could do it, we felt we could do it, too.

The first year was a challenge. So much was new to the staff. The schedule had to be changed to accommodate two reading periods a day for most students. Teachers didn't have the same students all day but shared them through cross-class grouping. This required closer monitoring of the halls to cut down on transition time.

We decided to implement the program in grades K-3 initially as part of our Reading First program. Most teachers were excited. A few were concerned. Would the program be able to serve all our students? Would teachers lose their creativity by having to follow a script?

From the beginning we understood that we wanted the highest quality professional development available—professional development that would allow us to implement the program effectively. We also wanted to build our capacity to maintain the implementation of DI at a high level of fidelity into the future. We knew that we could simply buy the Direct Instruction materials commercially and try to implement them without training and support. But we wanted to provide our teachers and administrators the same level of support that had led to success in Park Elementary and other places.

We chose the National Institute for Direct Instruction (NIFDI) to provide support services. NIFDI was founded by the creators of DI, and they have been involved in hundreds of successful implementations of DI. They have a comprehensive support program involving training teachers, paraprofessionals, administrators and coaches. NIFDI was the service provider for Park Elementary, which gave NIFDI a high recommendation.

Expectations for staff members changed as part of the DI implementation. Teachers had to follow the scripts in the programs, submit student performance data weekly and be receptive to expert advice. Principals needed to support the model fully and participate in weekly problem solving sessions. Reading coordinators needed to accompany NIFDI consultants in classrooms, collect data from teachers and become the lead on-site coach for the

schools. I felt that everyone knew they were part of a district-wide effort, and that everyone had an important part to play.

The first year was a challenge. So much was new to the staff. The schedule had to be changed to accommodate two reading periods a day for most students. Teachers didn't have the same students all day but shared them through cross-class grouping. This required closer monitoring of the halls to cut down on transition time. Most teachers had not received extensive in-class support before, and some took a while to get used to the observations and feedback. They seemed to get used to the scripts pretty quickly, though, as they realized that they didn't have to invent examples or wording and could concentrate much more on student responses—what students already understood and what students needed to practice more.

Even though the implementation was tough at times, we could see the success after the first year. So we expanded the program into fourth through sixth grades at the elementary schools and all grades at the junior high.

Now it is 2008 and we can look back to see how successful the DI implementation has been. Students overall are reading and writing at much higher levels. The percent of all fourth grade students scoring proficient on the Statewide Writing Assessment increased to 95 percent in 2008, moving Gering to third place among the largest 25 districts in Nebraska. Performance of student subgroups has also increased dramatically. The percent of Free and Reduced Lunch students scoring proficient increased by 37 percent from 2005 to 2008, and the percent of Gering Special Education students scoring proficient has increased by 60 percent over the same time period. Ninety-three percent of Hispanic students scored proficient on the Writing Assessment in 2008, virtually closing the achievement gap. The program was so successful at the junior high that it went from a schoolwide implementation to being used by just a couple of teachers remedially.

NIFDI was so impressed by our success that they made a film about our experience and put it on their web site (<http://www.nifdi.org/>). The film, *Closing the Performance Gap: The Gering Story*, describes the changes we went through as a district, from one that met the needs of some students, to one that meets the needs of all students. It is a story that has pointed us in a positive direction, one we hope to build on in future years. ■