



Glean Education's Ed Leaders in Literacy Podcast Episode #3 - Sharon Dunn (Loudon Elementary School)

Speaker 1: The results they've been immediate and we had one of the biggest shifts in the state.

Speaker 2: It's almost magical when it all comes together. And I think to myself, this is what education is about.

Speaker 3: There were inequities everywhere. My students in south Texas ultimately taught me more than I taught them.

Speaker 4: Over 40% of our students were leaving third grade with less than proficient reading skills. And that was just something we had to stop.

Speaker 5: The bottom line is that we can prevent reading failure. We can change the trajectory of these students' lives. And I just want to shout from the rooftops. It can be done.

Jessica Hamman: From Glean Education. This is Ed Leaders in Literacy, a podcast series that features educators and administrators who have made hard decisions about instruction, curriculum, intervention, and school systems to close the achievement gap and build equity by improving literacy.

Jessica Hamman: I'm Jessica Hamman, founder of Glean Education, and on the show today is Sharon Dunn, former principal of Loudon Elementary School, a high poverty, title one school in Panama-Buena Vista Union School District in Bakersfield, California. She began her career teaching preschool, kindergarten, third, fifth, and sixth grades, before moving into administration in a title one program specialist role, then as assistant principal, and then again, as principal of Loudon Elementary School from 2009 to 2019. Sharon led Loudon through a period of school systems change and academic improvement. Her team was selected to present their success story at the California title one conference in Los Angeles and at the Association of California Administrators in 2019. Sharon, thank you for coming and talking to us today.

Sharon Dunn: It's my pleasure.

Jessica Hamman: Take us back to those early positions that you held as an educator and administrator, and talk to us a little bit about how those positions informed the work that you did and the perspective you had when you entered that principalship role.



Sharon Dunn: Well, sure. Interestingly enough, I graduated from UC Santa Barbara with my business economics degree. I originally wanted to become a teacher, but the job market was closed. There was a push for women in business, but then a few years later, it opened up and I was able to obtain my credential. And my first teaching assignment was in a small town north of Bakersfield, very high poverty and 99% EL. And it was my first job, so I was scrambling to figure things out. Those three years were really a great foundation because I learned a lot about how EL students learn. I figured out how to use materials like reading mastery or corrective reading. I was just trying to search for anything that would help the kids transition into English. And then I was transferred to Panama-Buena Vista Union School District, and I taught kindergarten as well there.

Sharon Dunn: And when I went from several years at kindergarten, but then I made the leap to sixth grade. And when I made that leap to sixth grade, I realized, oh, these are kindergartners in sixth grade bodies. There were some real reading struggles. And I was at a middle class school. Didn't have a lot of high needs, intact families. However, I noticed that there were sixth graders that were maybe two years, three years below grade level. They really struggled with reading. There were major gaps and I thought, how do I get through this curriculum? How do I help them achieve? And then it led me to obtaining a master's degree and researching and then ultimately getting my administrative credential. But those questions and that struggle within teaching helped me with my research and my master's project to really delve into reading. And then I became a categorical program specialist assistant principal, and I was able to



put some systems in place, bring a universal screener in at one of my schools, which was DIBELS at the time, now it's called Acadience. And I was able to learn that part that's essential to give teachers data.

Jessica Hamman: Tell me a little bit more about that role as a categorical program specialist. Was that a school systems role, managing and organizing the MTSS and intervention systems for the school?

Sharon Dunn: Well, this is several years ago, so MTSS wasn't even a word or an acronym at that point. However RTI was, and it really depended on your site principal, what the categorical program specialist would do. And I was fortunate enough to work with a principal that gave me a lot of leeway and let me create and do and bring in the universal screener, which was DIBELS, and try to group kids together with like needs and create a system. And that was just the very first blush. I had really no idea what I was doing, except I was trying to follow what the data said, which in hindsight is what you're supposed to do. But that equipped me when I became principal at Loudon, realized, okay, this school does not have any assessment or universal screener in place. I've got to know where these kids are.

Sharon Dunn: So let's fast forward to when I was appointed principal in 2009-10, I didn't change anything the first year, I just left things as they were. The principal before me opened a new school, over a third of the staff at Loudon went with her to the new school. If you remember, in 09-10, there was a huge economic decline in California. There



were teacher layoffs and in our district, there are several affluent schools. And some of those teachers at the affluent schools were placed at Loudon, which was a high poverty school. And they were none too happy to be placed there. And so there was a perfect storm for a new principal. It was just the situation became very tenuous at times because of these factors. So that first year I just really left everything alone, but I realized by the second year we need some data.

Sharon Dunn: I've got to figure out where these kids are. And so I brought in DIBELS that second year, and beginning of the year, mid-year, and end of the year benchmarks. Well, that was huge because at the end of the year, I looked at the data reports and particularly with kindergarten, and I thought, oh my goodness, our kindergarteners come in around 36 to 40% at benchmark from their homes at the beginning of the year. By the end of the year, that first year of data showed that those kindergarten students were leaving kindergarten 29% at benchmark. This meant 71% of my kinder students were entering first grade highly at risk. And that is insurmountable. I just thought, oh, we are in trouble. This ship is sinking and sinking fast because kindergarten lays the foundation. Everything trickles up from there, kindergarten, first grade, second grade, pivotal in early reading skills.

Sharon Dunn: And I thought, okay, I've got to know more. I've got to delve deeper into this assessment piece. So I took a team to Los Angeles and we attended the Acadience Super Institute. And we were in a huge ballroom, there were many districts like Compton, LA unified. It was very well attended, and I came equipped with my sea of red and yellow data. That means the kids that were below benchmark. And



I walked right up to one of the authors, Dr. Roland Good and said, "I'm a new principal. This is my second year. Here's our first look at data." And he looked at my data, and he looked up at me and he held his finger up and he said, well, there is something you can do about this. At that time, he was there to help us all understand the assessment pieces and how to discern the data, how to analyze and synthesize and what does it all mean?

Sharon Dunn: And then I wanted to know what are the indicators for instruction? I literally went from table to table in that ballroom, different high poverty districts, and asked them well. So when you realize kids are under achieving in these critical areas, what do they do next? And I had just copious notes from different school districts. No one had the same answer. It was all different. That being said, I also, at around that time, went to the California title one conference, met Kara Bergen, who was a specialist in helping create systems at school, especially differentiation of the core. Your first best instruction is your core instruction. And I thought this makes total sense. Let's start at the core. I learned as much as we need to have intervention. I had to start with core and Karen, we brought her on campus.

Sharon Dunn: She worked with our leadership team and our teachers, and it was our first walk to learn experience. And it worked well. We had small group instruction according to needs. We used three different measures to group students during a portion of the English language arts block. And we started to see some gains, and I was really happy about that. But as the next couple years unfolded, we were making gains, but not the kind of gains that were truly needed, especially in kindergarten and first grade and second grade. And I



thought we are not hitting the target. We are not helping these kids understand what to do when it comes to early literacy, especially with phonemic awareness and phonics. Then I went to the national title one conference and I'm attending this session and I get out of the session, I walk through where they have all the kiosks and I see that book. I've Dibel'd, Now What? that I used with my kindergarten teachers.

Sharon Dunn: And I started talking to the person in the booth who was Dr. Susan Hall. And I told her about our walk to learn and that we had Acadience assessments, that we weren't seeing the results. And she said, you're perfectly poised for the next step, let me show you this diagnostic assessment. I remember it like yesterday. It was like a jolt of lightning that went through me. I thought, this is it. This is exactly what is needed. This diagnostic that can tell our teachers if it's a vowel team or an r controlled vowel, what is the problem? And not only that, she developed the materials and processes for the teachers to clean up the skilled deficits. I went back, we talked to leadership, we brought her consultant in to work with us immediately. And that started a real journey of school improvement because we were getting to the science of reading. And we needed our walk to learn to, and differentiation of the core that was critical, but we needed to really equip our teachers with the materials and processes that they needed.

Jessica Hamman: So it seems like such an interesting journey, and you were the investigator that saw the problem and kept at it. There's such persistence in this story and so many questions that I have surrounding it. But the first thing that comes to mind is cost of all these things. I and you know that school budgets are tight,



especially in California. And I imagine administrators and educators that are listening to this podcast are saying, well, that sounds amazing, but how did you bring your whole team to Vegas, to the Acadience Super Institute? How did you manage to bring in these consultants, and how were you able to finagle the cost? Maybe this is where your business degree helped, because you were able to tie all these incredible elements together to make it work and that's a critical question here. So what are the cost of these things and how, clearly they're worth the cost, but how were you able to bring all your teachers to get this done and bring the important consultants in?

Sharon Dunn: That's a really good question. First, when looking at a budget, you have to keep the main thing. What is our charge? What is our responsibility as school administrators, principals, or district administrators? Truly, at the core, is developing readers that can read fluently and accurately and with comprehension. If you don't fix the reading problem, you won't meet the needs of the students in a high poverty situation. And so I had to set aside a lot of funding to bring in consultants at X amount a day.

Sharon Dunn: To hire the subs, I was at school till 10 o'clock at night, working on schedules and creating the contracts and just making sure that I had enough funding to make this happen, but just stay the course and have a process. And with the budget, we met with leadership and we would decide what's the most important, and that's how we began. And fortunately, we had a healthy title one budget because of our poverty situation. So I was able to cut back on extraneous things that weren't results oriented and focus all that funding to the professional development of the teachers and giving the teachers



release time during the school day to then hone what they've learned, apply it, and collaborate in the most effective way.

Jessica Hamman: It seems like three particular areas that you came in with knowledge of really supported this investigation that you ended up seeking and kind of finding answers to. And those three areas were core instruction, school systems, so RTI in this case, and assessment. You came in kind of with this vision, and sought PD to support your team's knowledge of this. How did you approach the professional development? Was this something that teachers were open to and did it end at the professional development, or was a critical component the consultancy and the implementation that was followed up?

Sharon Dunn: Well, what I learned is that I love collaboration and you want to be all inclusive, but the site principal's a linchpin. I knew enough about reading to know that we were on the right track. Now, by this time, we had our walk to learn with differentiation of core, and then 95% group. Consultants come in and work with staff, the diagnostic assessments and materials, and that created a second walk to learn. And you're always going to have naysayers, but I had enough of my leadership team that were solid anchors that were right with me. And they would help the rest of the staff that maybe didn't understand or were resistant.

Sharon Dunn: That's how we were able to move in a direction. We just scheduled the professional development and through the professional development with the consultants, people were going, oh, aha. All



of a sudden the smoke began to clear. I was in every session with the teachers during the professional development, when we'd have consultants come in, answering those questions and having the conversations. These are our kids. We're responsible for them. They are bright and it's our job to meet them where their needs are. We have to change our instruction to effectively meet the needs of the kids.

Jessica Hamman: So really it was mindset change that you were after.

Sharon Dunn: It truly was a mindset change. You are right. And as we started seeing small successes, we'd see a student, for example, with Acadience, there's a color coding, and kids that are intensive are red and kids that are strategic, not quite at benchmark are yellow, and the kids that are at benchmark or above are green, and the high achieving kids are blue. And we'd see movement of the red go to yellow and the yellow go to green and the green go to blue.

Sharon Dunn: And we'd see these kids that, oh, I can't believe it. The conversations were phenomenal. And then success creates success and it just starts to grow. But as a leader, you have to be brave enough, if I could say, or strong enough, to really pull the staff through and be right there with them in the trenches, have those conversations and be ready for the ones that are going to completely dig their heels in. You're not going to win everybody, but you work with the ones that are with you and the ones that are on the fence, they start to come your way. And then I had the right people in the right seats on the bus, and that was critical.



Jessica Hamman: So let's talk a little bit about where it took you. It was 10 years that you were at Loudon and I first found you actually via Twitter with a post from a director at Acadience, Dr. Stephanie Stoler, and she was celebrating this wonderful model of academic and literacy improvement at Loudon. And I took a closer look and saw that you were listed and retweeted within this tweet. And you were celebrating your cast data from 2018, I believe. And I would love for you to talk a little bit about what the statewide data looked like from where you started, and when you ended after 10 years of being a principal there.

Sharon Dunn: Right. The last 10 years, our standards changed in California. When we first instituted our walk to learn, we fell back 11 points.

Jessica Hamman: Where were you falling back from? Where had you started? Were you-

Sharon Dunn: Well, 800 was the schools that did really well and wouldn't be in program improvement. Our school was in program improvement at the time, and we didn't make progress. We fell back. It was like an implementation dip because it was a massive change. The next year we grew maybe five points. And then the API went away because common core came in, and we had a few years without assessments. Then we had the cast assessments come in. So 2015 was our first cast. Our results came in and there are 19 elementary schools in Panama-Buena Vista. Loudon was right there at the bottom. We



were like 29% met standard out of the 19 elementary schools. I thought, oh, this is hard to take because I knew we were on the right road, but there's no magic bullet. Nothing happens overnight. And we had to stay the course, but imagine staff in a staff meeting and you're talking about your results, and we're at the bottom.

Sharon Dunn: It was like a kick in the gut. The leadership just took it to heart, and rightly so. But, again, that's where I had to say, we're doing the right things. It's going to take some time. It takes three to five years to make substantial changes. And we just began all of this, maybe in 14, 15, right in there. So let's stay the course because we are seeing results. Our red kids are moving, and we keep refining our practices. It's going to get better. Well in three short years, so that was 2015, by 2018, we came in with cast at 52% met standard. Not only that, out of the 19 schools, we were the only title one school up in the top third of the district. In our last year, the 2018-19 cast scores came in. We are 58% met standard, and we are fourth in the district. It's truly the hardest thing in my life and my career that I've ever tackled. But the most rewarding.

Jessica Hamman: It's really such an important part of the story because it takes such persistence to stay the course. It's almost as if you were fueling a rocket ship and it was simmering with the launchers buzzing and then you eventually took off. But, boy, it took a lot of time to get that fuel burning and to get the rocket boosters to launch you into space. But it's so important for people to hear that this takes a long time and the hard work didn't stop at year two or five or seven or nine. In fact, it needs to keep going, and you may not see progress, in fact, you may see a dip. You may see a big dip when people are shifting their mindset and learning new practices, but that with



proper PD and dedication of the administration and the hard work of the teachers that this type of improvement is absolutely possible.

Sharon Dunn: You're so right. It does take a lot of time, but that's our job. We're here to create hope for the future for our students. And that is the number one priority.

Jessica Hamman: So for those administrators who are looking to make change, they're sitting at your year one and in their view, they're faced with all these obstacles in front of them, what would be your advice on where to get started?

Sharon Dunn: Just to remember that we can prevent reading failure. We have the science of reading. We have research behind us. We know what works, what creates a reader.

Jessica Hamman: And what's interesting is that I've heard in some districts, we have principals and leadership who may have never taught elementary school. So with you, as a kindergarten teacher at one of your earliest and most formative teaching experiences, you came in with an understanding of the importance of strong, foundational reading skills. But perhaps some people that enter into these roles may not be aware of the components of reading that need to be in place in order for fluent and accurate reading to become set. So understanding that phonological awareness and phonics are critical components, understanding how you get to comprehension by reading accurately and automatically is really critical. And it may



not be something that principals necessarily were aware of in their past educational history.

Sharon Dunn: You are so right. It's learning yourself what are the critical foundational pieces. The principal can't be the expert in all things. It's just being with your staff, learning what is needed and give them the materials and processes needed to be successful. The systems really create success at a school site when they're solid, and that's the expectation. We do this five days a week. We know when our assessment dates are, we know when which aids are going where, and there's a whole logistical piece behind the scenes to make it as streamlined for the teachers as possible.

Jessica Hamman: And I'd like to ask you a practical question. So in terms of the curriculum, were all these new science of reading based practices layered upon the current curriculum? Or did you replace the curriculum with a new curriculum? How did that play out? What did that look like?

Sharon Dunn: No, we have adopted a curriculum that we are required to use. And for Panama, it's benchmark advanced, and you take your basic curriculum, which has great components, but when you have students at your school that aren't where they need to be and cannot effectively read yet, you have to layer upon that curriculum. For instance, I could say the phonics piece in benchmark advanced is a weaker component, so that 95% group materials and processes really fill that in. We also trained our staff and right from the beginning and beyond to shore up our writing component, because



reading and writing go hand in hand. And then when we differentiate the core, we look at our intensive and our strategic students and we supplement the core with 95%, or other pieces that those students need within a particular time block of the core, not the whole English language arts block, but a particular 45 minute or an hour block of time. So we supplement the existing curriculum.

Jessica Hamman: I think I saw some interaction on a [inaudible 00:26:23] I was on recently that referred to, I believe it was a 2008 research study, that said that 85% of students in special education have a primary disability in reading and writing, which tells us that if we improve core instruction, it's very likely that the rates of special education eligibility will go down because we're addressing the primary issue that's getting them there in the first place.

Sharon Dunn: I believe that 100%. I've lived and breathed it. I've seen too many kids placed in RSP that shouldn't have been there. It really goes back to our beliefs. Do we believe it is the purpose of our school to ensure that all students learn at high levels? Do we acknowledge that students learn at different rates and with different levels of support? And have we created a schedule that guarantees students will receive additional opportunities for learning in a systematic way, regardless of who their teacher might be? This is equity.

Jessica Hamman: So I know that you retired in 2019, which, I'm very happy for you, but sad for education in general, because you clearly have a lot to give and really important insight. Where do you think your next chapter will lead you?



Sharon Dunn: Well, I have an opportunity to work with 95% group. Being able to share the story of Loudon, the journey of success, to come alongside school principals and district administration, to help them walk through the processes that it takes to make implementation of an intervention like 95% group successful.

Jessica Hamman: Well, that's very exciting. Any other thoughts that you'd like to leave our listeners with?

Sharon Dunn: Just that the bottom line is that we can prevent reading failure. We can change the trajectory of these students lives. And I just want to shout from the rooftops, it can be done.

Jessica Hamman: I so enjoyed our chat and I hope it's just the first of a long discussion that we'll continue to have.

Sharon Dunn: Oh, I hope so too. And keep up your good work. I just admire you for doing what you're doing. It's pretty amazing.

Jessica Hamman: Thank you. Did you like hearing from Sharon Dunn and her work at Loudon Elementary School and beyond find her on Twitter @Sdunn_Sharon. Thank you for listening to our ed leaders in



literacy podcast. To find links to the articles and research mentioned in this podcast, go to Glean Education.com/edleaderspodcast and access them in the show notes. Bye for now.

