

How a Diverse Elementary School Built a Culture of Success and Raised Achievement

Wagoner Elementary School serves young learners from the diverse community of Sauk Village, Illinois, just outside of Chicago in southern Cook County. The student population of Wagoner is 76.1% Black, 27.2% Hispanic, and 2.5% white, with a 20% mobility rate (nearly triple the Illinois state average). Of all of Wagoner’s students, roughly 59% come from low-income families and 74% receive free or reduced lunch assistance.

For the 2018–2019 school year, Wagoner was ranked in a group of the lowest-performing schools in all of Illinois and designated as needing “Comprehensive Support” by the Illinois State Board of Education report card. During this same school year, the Illinois state survey of student outcomes (University of Chicago’s 5Essentials Survey) indicated that Wagoner was only “Partially Organized for Improvement.”

Since then, Wagoner Elementary School has been able to initiate a dramatic turnaround and navigate the challenges of the pandemic. In just a few short years, Wagoner has reshaped its approach to professional learning and instructional leadership to improve student learning across the school. For example, between the 2021–2022 and 2022–2023 school years, student achievement levels for both reading and math climbed significantly at every grade level. (See the “Looking at the Data” section for more details from the NWEA Measures of Academic Progress.)

For the 2022–2023 school year, Wagoner was designated as “Commendable” by the Illinois State Board of Education report card—the second-highest

ranking for Illinois schools. Similarly, the most recent 5Essentials Survey gave Wagoner the highest designation of “Well Organized for Improvement.” Along the way, Wagoner was also recognized as an Illinois Kind School for 2021–2022 and was honored with a National Championship award for advancement in social emotional learning and positive school climate in 2019–2020. Perhaps most impressive, between 2019 and 2023, Wagoner saw dramatic improvement on every measure of the 5Essentials Survey—including critical areas like Quality of Student Discussion (+74), Instructional Leadership (+46), and Collaborative Practices (+73). (See the “Looking at the Data” section for more details from the University of Chicago’s 5Essentials Survey.)

So, given these starting conditions—and the pandemic—how was such a dramatic turnaround possible at Wagoner in just a few short school years?

Wagoner’s transformation began with the recruitment of Dr. Sharon Paver-Nepote as principal in 2018 and the promotion of local administrator Monica Laux as assistant principal. Together, they sought the support of a professional learning partner who could support their ambitious school improvement goals.

That’s why in spring 2019, Wagoner chose the Thoughtful Classroom to be their primary professional development partner. In the first year of the partnership, the focus was on building the Four Cornerstones of Effective Classrooms (Silver Strong & Associates, 2012). Using the Four Cornerstones as a common framework, the Wagoner team assessed the current learning culture, aligned their instructional



“The partnership between the Thoughtful Classroom and Wagoner has been transformational. Teachers are empowered to impact teaching and learning on a much deeper level than they had ever done before, and students are developing skills to foster independence, deep thinking, and self-reflection.”

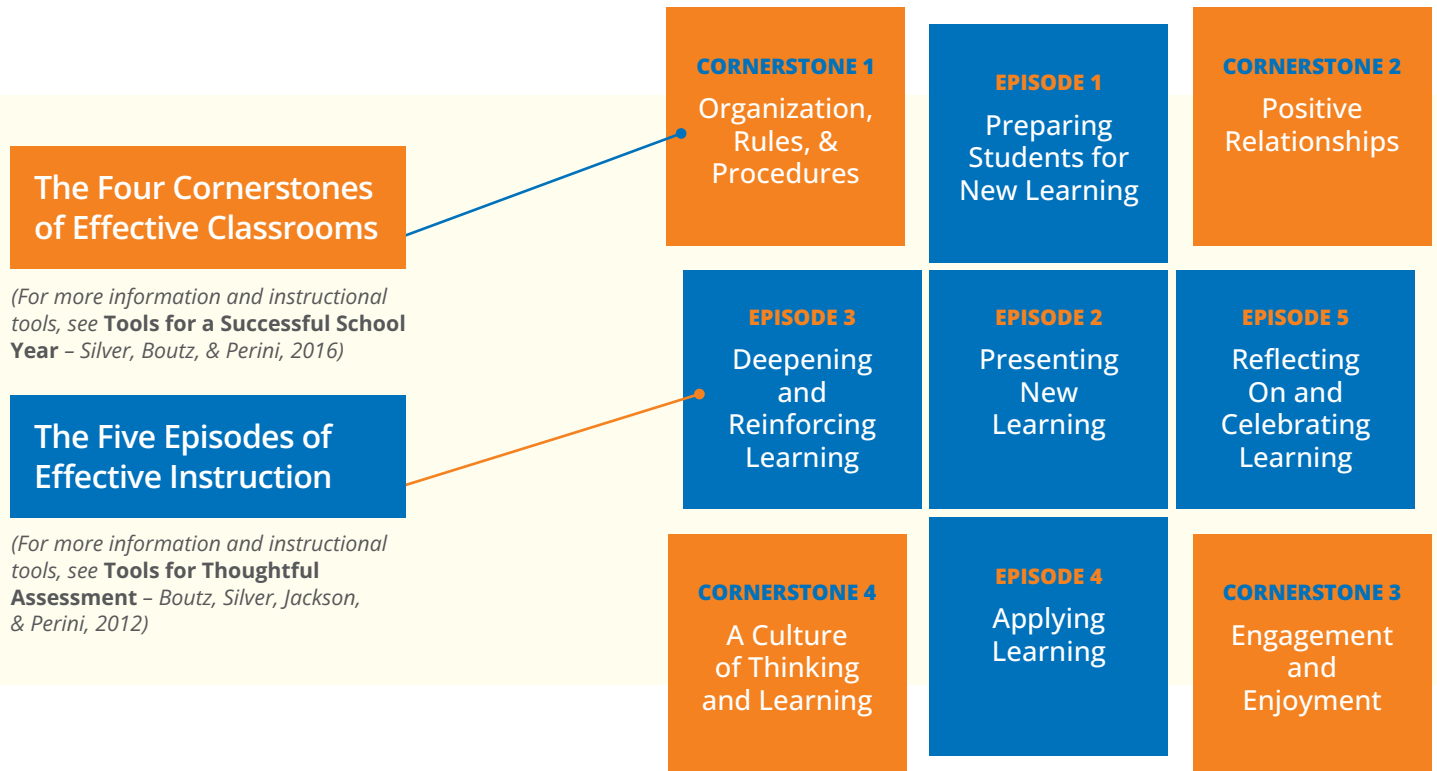
Dr. Sharon Nepote, Principal, Wagoner Elementary School

practices to each cornerstone, and identified key areas for improvement. Dr. Nepote explains the positive impact the Four Cornerstones had on classroom and school culture: “The simplicity of the Four Cornerstones really spoke to our staff. When we adopted it as a framework, we soon saw greater collaboration and better instructional practice. Higher expectations were met because of the support teachers received from their instructional leaders and each other.”

With the Four Cornerstones established, the focus of year two of the partnership shifted to instructional design. The Five Episodes of Effective Instruction (Silver Strong & Associates, 2012) became the instructional framework that guided Wagoner’s work in improving

planning, implementation, and assessment practices. The Five Episodes gave Wagoner teachers a simple five-phase process for designing learning sequences that promote active and in-depth learning in every classroom. The staff also committed to learning a common set of tools to make learning sequences more engaging, more effective, and more likely to lead to deep learning.

Another key element of Wagoner’s partnership with the Thoughtful Classroom was leadership training, coaching, and support. To ensure the entire staff received the guidance they needed and these early results became long-term changes, the administration implemented The CRAFT of Leadership model (Silver Strong & Associates, 2015).



The Leadership Capacities of CRAFT

Collaboration
Reflection
Adaptation
Focus
Trust

The integration of CRAFT helped promote a team philosophy of “we’re all in this together” and created a culture where staff felt respected, valued, and appreciated. As assistant principal Monica Laux explains, “The integration of Thoughtful Classroom’s CRAFT model for leadership has supported the development of a team that is collectively vested in the success of the school. Members identify problems

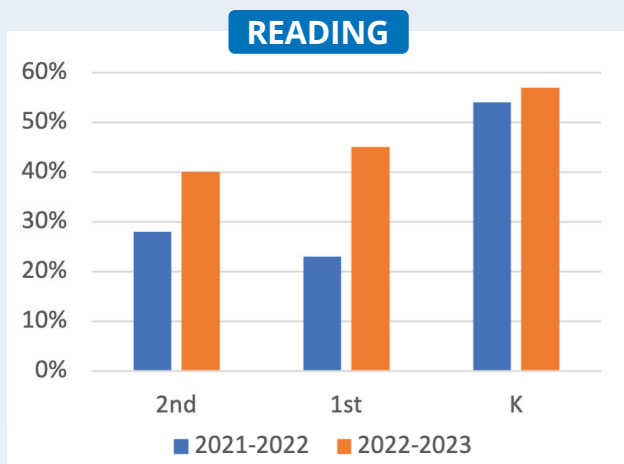
of practice and they collaborate to seek out viable solutions. CRAFT has become so ingrained with our team that staff will independently schedule times to meet and reflect.”

Wagoner’s success shows how strong leadership, coupled with Thoughtful Classroom support, can unify the entire staff around a common vision, promote dramatic improvements in teaching and learning, and change the culture of the school. As Dr. Nepote recounts, “When I started at Wagoner, no one wanted to be a member of the School Leadership Team. Past experiences had instilled in teachers that the work was not valued. Since partnering with the Thoughtful Classroom and focusing on CRAFT, our leadership team has become vital and critical to our school improvement process. Staff members now request to be a part of the team, and teachers are enthusiastic about the work that is being accomplished.”

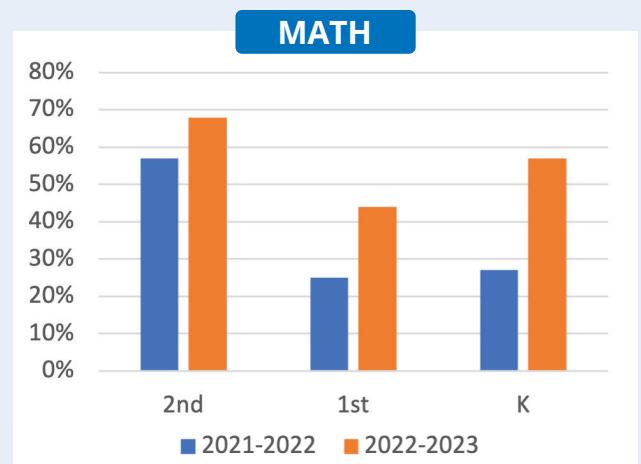
Looking at the Data

Wagoner Elementary School – NWEA MAP

Percentage of Students Scoring >41st Percentile in 2021–2022 School Year vs. 2022–2023 School Year



READING	2021-2022	2022-2023	Increase
2nd Grade	28%	40%	+12%
1st Grade	23%	45%	+22%
Kindergarten	54%	57%	+3%



MATH	2021-2022	2022-2023	Increase
2nd Grade	57%	68%	+11%
1st Grade	25%	44%	+19%
Kindergarten	27%	52%	+25%



Looking at the Data

Wagoner Elementary School – 5Essentials Survey

2018–2019 School Year vs. 2022–2023 School Year (with Illinois State Average for 2022–2023)

5Essentials Category	Wagoner SY 2019	Wagoner SY 2023	INCREASE SY 2019 vs. SY 2023	Illinois State Average SY 2023
AMBITIOUS INSTRUCTION	30	94	+64	55
Quality of Student Discussion	20	94	+74	40
EFFECTIVE LEADERS	48	80	+32	47
Instructional Leadership	45	91	+46	46
Program Coherence	57	90	+33	51
Teacher Influence	41	70	+29	42
Teacher Principal Trust	47	70	+23	46
COLLABORATIVE TEACHERS	32	80	+48	41
Collaborative Practices	26	99	+73	37
Collective Responsibility	35	74	+39	35
Quality of Professional Development	50	99	+49	47
School Commitment	19	54	+35	37
Teacher to Teacher Trust	29	72	+43	48
INVOLVED FAMILIES	35	86	+51	52
Parent Influence on Decision Making in Schools	64	99	+35	55
Parent Involvement	22	77	+55	55
Teacher Parent Trust	18	83	+65	46
SUPPLEMENTAL MEASURES	33	70	+37	46
Socialization of New Teachers	69	99	+30	84
Reflective Dialogue	62	93	+31	39
Innovation	36	86	+50	36
Student Responsibility	6	49	+43	39
Teacher Safety	1	37	+36	29
Classroom Disruption	23	56	+33	48

Boutz, A. L., Silver, H. F., Jackson, J. W., & Perini, M. J. (2012). *Tools for thoughtful assessment: Classroom-ready techniques for improving teaching and learning*. Franklin Lakes NJ: Thoughtful Education Press.

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