

Oklahoma A+ Schools:
What the Research Tells Us
2002 - 2007

A Five Volume Research Report



Volume One

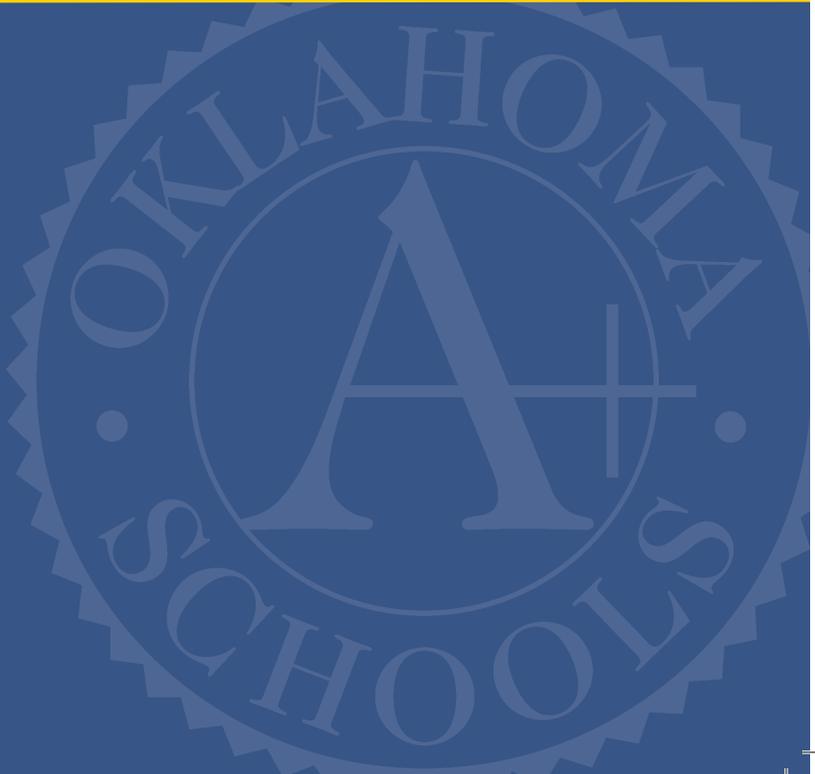
Composite Narratives

Bryan L. Duke, Ph.D.

Volume 1 of 5



Published by:
Oklahoma A+ Schools® / University of Central Oklahoma
January 2010
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Oklahoma A+ Schools®

Research Report: 2002 – 2007

Volume One: Composite Narratives

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Preface

It's not often that a volume of educational research can be recommended as a "good read." This one can. It's a great story – a trio of stories, actually – about three schools grappling with the challenges of trying to change their behavior so they become more vibrant, imaginative, and collegial places for students to learn, teachers to teach, and their internal and external communities invested as partners and supporters of what goes on in the schoolhouse.

The three schools are fictional, but, in a sense, their stories are not. The schools are metaphors – imaginative likenesses derived from extensive research into a set of actual schools in the network of Oklahoma's A+ Schools. Each story illuminates the complex dynamics of trying to achieve a model of success that eighty percent of teachers and administrators voted in principle to pursue. The devil, as always, is in the details of the changes in attitudes and practices that are required.

Oklahoma A+ Schools® was created in 2002 as a research-based initiative and continues to generate evaluations and research studies and reports to guide its implementation and expansion, provide formative feedback to its participating schools (60 currently), and present its findings at state and national forums to advance understanding of the nature of teaching and learning that leads to school transformation. A+ has regularly commissioned teams of researchers from within and outside of Oklahoma to conduct these studies and make recommendations on the application of their research to these purposes.



Most recently, Oklahoma A+ Schools® commissioned a team of state and national researchers to review the body of findings from its first five years of activity, to conduct a new set of studies informed by the past work, and to probe more deeply into the qualities and characteristics of A+ principles and practices that have the greatest power to transform schools.

This first volume: Composite Narratives, as the researcher Bryan L. Duke points out at the beginning of his narratives, encapsulates into his fictional accounts the findings from the other four volumes in the set of studies.* Quantitative and qualitative data – including intense observations over five years in the schools by Dr. Duke and his colleagues – are the basis for his stories. You can read his narratives first in this volume and then consult the other volumes for the underlying data. Or you can read the other volumes first and come back to see flesh put on their bones in his stories. All of the volumes are compelling.

This new body of research confirms and deepens the understanding of how and why students in A+ schools outperform those in comparable schools throughout Oklahoma on state-mandated assessments and other achievement measures – as they have consistently done over the first five years of the initiative. Importantly, the new research also identifies five qualities that indicate how the transformation sought by A+ is generated and manifested by its programmatic approaches. The researchers identify the qualities of ownership, empowerment, flexibility, resilience, and sustainability, and detail the specific characteristics of A+ that promote their development.



The schools manifest these qualities in varying degrees. The researchers cluster the schools into three types depending on the degree to which the qualities are currently present in the schools. The classifications and their characteristics are enabling A+ to develop analytical rubrics to share with schools currently in the network to decide cooperatively what steps can be taken to deepen the penetration of A+ Essentials into the school fabric.** The rubrics also will be presented to new schools expressing interest in the network to make transparent the commitment needed to achieve full transformation. These very practical applications are one of the impressive features of the body of research.

The composite narratives in this first volume allow a reader to follow the stories of three schools over the course of a year. Each reaches a varying degree of success as a result of the realities of varying levels of commitment, competence and understanding on the part of principals and faculty in the schools and that of district level administrators outside the schools. The reader learns a great deal, not just about schools in the A+ network, but about what it takes to bring schools to the highest level of performance – lessons greatly needed at a time when school reform policies and programs often ignore the specific contexts and daily life of schools. This new body of research indicates that Oklahoma A+ Schools® is an example of how to do it right.

-Richard J. Deasy, Consultant, and Founding Director of the Arts Education Partnership



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Charlene Dell, Ph.D. teaches undergraduate courses in string methods and pedagogy, as well as graduate courses in Music Psychology. Dr. Dell has sixteen years of teaching experience in the public schools of upstate New York and South Carolina. She has presented clinics in string pedagogy and Music Learning Theory at regional, national, and international conferences. She has articles published in the Teaching Music through Orchestra book series, as well as national and international journals. Her research areas are string intonation, arts integration, music learning theory, and orchestral recruitment and retention.

Bryan L. Duke, Ph. D. is Associate Professor of Professional Teacher Education at the University of Central Oklahoma. He received his PhD in Instructional Psychology and Technology from the University of Oklahoma. Prior to his faculty assignment at UCO in 2002, Duke served as a junior high and high school English and acting teacher, as well as an assistant principal in Moore Public Schools (OK) for eleven years. He was District Teacher of the Year in Moore in 2002 and was awarded the College of Education and

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Introduction to the Composite Narratives

The purpose of this volume is to tell the story of Oklahoma A+ implementation, as contextualized in three vivid composite narratives, using the words and observed actions of teachers, principals, students, and parents. This volume utilizes grounded theory and ethnography to demonstrate “amalgamations” of the data depicting “impressionist tales” (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992) of everyday scenarios common to the school experience. Timmermans and Tavory (2007) note that “grounded theory and ethnography meet around the concern of interaction, with grounded theory providing not just a methodology to analyze interaction but also suggesting orienting theoretical principles to draw out interactional processes” (p. 499). In telling the story of the “evolution of a program” (Creswell, 1998), this study used a set of “orienting” principles—namely the A+ Essentials™ (provided hereafter)—to investigate interactions in the highly complex processes of school reform.

The data from which the composite narratives derived were collected over five years by a team of researchers associated with local universities and contracted by Oklahoma A+ Schools®. All current members of the research team were common education teachers at one time, yet none was previously connected to any of the schools in the Oklahoma A+ network. In order to encourage candid responses during the interviews, the researchers made concerted efforts to develop a positive rapport with the principals, teachers, students, and students’ parents. This was accomplished by scheduling the same researcher to visit the same schools each year, developing empathic relationships, emphasizing that the researchers serve as reporters not as evaluators, attending professional development sessions, and asking open-ended questions.

Additionally, all interviewees were informed that their identities would be protected when using their statements and sentiments in our studies.

The five-year data set including all Oklahoma A+ schools garnered through on-site observations, interviews, and surveys were coded using a common list of codes by all members of the Oklahoma A+ Schools[®] research team. The list of codes had been developed over the course of the four previous years in the process of generating annual reports. The coding of the cumulative data was cross-verified by research team members prior to analyzing for findings.

Given that the development of composite narratives would allow for some creative license on the part of the author, during the data analysis and writing of the composites, the author followed a careful protocol to ensure these narratives provided a fair portrayal and realistic look—heavily laced with direct quotes (as suggested by Chiovitti & Piran, 2003) and close paraphrases—at the Oklahoma A+ schools. To minimize the chance of biased interpretations of the data, the author read code reports containing notes across all schools rather than reading the data sets of each individual school. This precaution was taken as an effort to focus the researcher’s attention on how each piece of data might be analyzed free from the influence of prior experiences, expectations, and opinions that might have been developed during on-site school visits.

In the analysis, the author focused on the following general question: Are there indicators of A+ serving as reform in the sense that new approaches and systems have been created in regard to teaching, working together, curricular design, teaching and learning experiences, and utilizing resources? From this question, the author recognized the need to look more specifically at the indicators revealing levels of engagement in, and



sometimes opposition to, the A+ Essentials™: integrated and aligned curriculum, daily arts instruction, experiential and differentiated learning, the Multiple Intelligences, enriched assessment, collaboration, climate and infrastructure.

Initial readings of the qualitative data revealed disparity in how each school engaged in the A+ process. To capture these differences the research team determined that three divisions demonstrating high engagement, moderate engagement, and low engagement regarding each of the A+ Essentials™ captured the essence of what the data revealed. To ensure data were placed consistently into one of the three divisions reflecting engagement, the author developed a rubric to identify the properties and dimensions of each category based on evidence of A+ implementation as reported in the first four Oklahoma A+ Schools® Annual Reports (Barry, N., Raiber, M., Dell, C., Jackson, D., & Duke, B., 2007; Barry, N., Dell, C., & Raiber, M., 2006; Gunzenhauser, M., Montgomery, D., Barry, N., Dell, C., & Raiber, M., 2005; Barry, N., Gunzenhauser, M., Montgomery, D., & Raiber, M., 2004). During initial discussions regarding data analysis and later through verification with the full research team, the author developed gradations of engagement regarding each essential and defined and operationalized these gradations as provided in Volume 5 of this report. For example, when categorizing data reflecting curricular integration, the author developed and verified with the research team the following gradations:

- Use of mostly two-way integration in a consistent, deliberate fashion characterized high engagement.
- Use of some two-way and one-way integration on a frequent but not daily basis characterized moderate engagement.

- Use of occasional or shallow, if any, engagement, usually one-way characterized low engagement.

Then, using a constant comparison approach, incidents in the data were compared for similarities and differences before being grouped into one of these conceptual divisions, an approach that “allows the researcher to differentiate one category/theme from another and to identify properties and dimensions specific to that category/theme” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 73). Miles and Huberman (1994) contend that “conceptually ordered displays [such as our divisions of data into three conceptualizations of engagement in the A+ process] help in clarifying key variables and how they are patterned in cases” (p. 206). Using the model described above to categorize the data, the author sought clear examples of dispositions, actions, and skills that fall into each category. Again at this step, research team members verified the author’s placement of these examples.

Upon this verification, the author developed bulleted story outlines and later vignettes for each category using quotes and observations to reflect scenarios evocative of situations, conversations, practice, and in general, “life” in an Oklahoma elementary school. The author used elementary school settings since the Oklahoma network of A+ schools consisted only of elementary schools during the large majority of the time frame studied and most of the data collected represents that level. Eventually, the author created the narratives from the outlines. According to Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995), “In writing an ethnographic text, the writer organizes some of these themes into a coherent ‘story’ about life and events in the setting studied. Such a narrative requires selecting



only some small portion of the total set of field notes and then linking them into a coherent text representing some aspect or slice of the world studied” (p. 170).

Throughout the analysis of data and the development of the stories in this volume, the author and his colleagues adhered to widely accepted qualitative approaches aimed at developing a believable and trustworthy account. Creswell (1998) provided a number of verification procedures that were implemented in the processes of data collection and analysis and the development of the narratives. First, the researchers participated in continual observations at the school sites for a prolonged period of time (five years), working diligently to develop trusting relationships with the participants and a “sense” of each school. Second, the researchers participated in peer reviews, cross-checking and coming to unanimity that the use of data and the narrative portrayals provided “fair accounts.” Third, the researchers used discussion for negative case analyses to further inform the working hypotheses and the development of concepts and themes. Fourth, the researchers documented rich, thick descriptions in their field notes, and the author attempted to provide a detailed account of the observations in the narratives. Fifth, an external auditor not on the current research team but who has familiarity with A+ Schools examined the findings, interpretations, and conclusions to determine if they are supported by data. Sixth, the researchers triangulated findings from a variety of sources (e.g., interviews, observations, surveys, standardized test scores) and from the perspectives reported by each researcher (see Volumes 2-5) after independent and then collaborative analyses to corroborate findings. These approaches lend trustworthiness to the accounts presented in the narratives.

The rigorous processes described have resulted in a volume that presents composite narratives under the guise of three fictitious schools reflecting the three identified categories of engagement in the Oklahoma A+ process. Scissortail Elementary depicts a school in which the principal and a vast majority of teachers are heavily engaged as demonstrated by deliberate and mindful utilization of all of the A+ Essentials™. Rose Rock Elementary is the setting for the school moderately engaged in A+ implementation. The principal and numerous faculty members have “bought in” philosophically, yet their actions and sometimes attitudes demonstrate challenges in utilizing the Essentials in ways that reflect a deep understanding of what the process could or should look like at their school. Mountain Boomer Elementary depicts a school and a majority of its faculty, including the principal, who shallowly engage in A+ or who demonstrate opposition to the “re-form” Oklahoma A+ encourages. Although some teachers have meaningfully engaged, overall the school seldom evidences the A+ Essentials™ in practice. A few Essentials may be addressed, but they are done so selectively and inconsistently.

In reading the data sets, the researchers recognized that schools which might be characterize as being highly engaged in A+ have some faculty members, even if only a few, who are not highly engaged. Evidence suggests that even in schools with high engagement in A+, there will be some teachers who have not “bought into” the A+ essentials or for some other reason have not engaged with A+ to the extent that their colleagues have. Likewise, schools seeming to reflect low engagement employ some highly-engaged A+ teachers. The reader will see these phenomena reflected in the narratives.



As mentioned previously, the author aimed to provide a substantial amount of “thick” and elaborate descriptions in all three composites to lend authenticity to the accounts provided. The author intentionally included numerous direct quotes and close paraphrases from the data. The following should assist the reader in understanding the nature of how data were embedded in the narratives:

- The use of **bolded text with quote marks** indicates that the material being used in the narrative is a direct quote.
- The use of **bolded text without quotes** indicates the use of data that was closely paraphrased.
- In numerous instances the text has been italicized indicating a character’s stream-of-consciousness. In these instances underlining is used to indicate direct quotes or close paraphrases (rather than bold lettering) for readability purposes.

All attributions of quotes and close paraphrases have been kept true to the roles of the speakers who provided the data (teachers, principals, students, or parents); for example, teacher statements and actions portrayed in the narratives were actually made by teachers.

A few other specifics might help clarify for the reader approaches used in presenting this material. The composite narratives contextualize the Oklahoma A+ process, offering a portrait of these fictitious schools as they progressed through the 2007-08 school year. Although all five years of longitudinal data were included in the coding, the author compressed time in these narratives to represent one academic year. One area not emphasized, and for the most part not included in the narratives, is demographic information about the three schools. These details are purposely omitted to

avoid suggesting that a school's ethnic composition, socioeconomics, geographic location, or classification as a public or private school were determining factors for a school's engagement in the A+ process. The data revealed no such findings.

The researchers chose to utilize the composite narrative approach in the first volume to “set the stage” for the subsequent literature review, quantitative report, and qualitative volumes. A glossary has been included at the end of Volume 1 to clarify specific references and A+ language, and readers will find that these terms are further defined and clarified in the volumes that follow. As the reader of this research might deduce, five years of data collected from over forty schools—each one in its own dynamic process—yields a wealth of information. Beyond what the quantitative and qualitative reports provide, the composite narratives reveal insights of the “re-form” process that more traditional analyses rarely yield by contextualizing findings into a realistic situational account of the often covert and intricate school processes and interpersonal relations among faculty and, in cases, the students.

The Oklahoma A+ Schools[®] research team predicts that actual schools in the Oklahoma A+ network will see a reflection of themselves in numerous ways throughout and possibly across the narratives. The researchers believe these pieces of the A+ story will be of benefit to varying consumers of school research—including teachers, administrators, parents, community officials, board members, as well as fellow researchers—as the composite narratives bring “life” to data and findings and hopefully develop greater understanding of the daily challenges and successes educators involved in a comprehensive, whole-school educational reform initiative faced.



The Oklahoma A+ Schools[®] Research Team would like to acknowledge and thank the following schools for submitting students' artwork to illustrate the research publications:

- Central (Yukon) Elementary School, Yukon, Oklahoma
- Del City Elementary, Del City, Oklahoma
- Western Village Academy, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma
- Woodrow Wilson Elementary School, Bartlesville, Oklahoma

All information identifying particular students, teachers, and schools has been removed prior to using artwork. It is the purpose of the researchers to guard against readers making a false assumption that a particular image, situated during a particular point in the research, is indicative of a teacher or school's performance or engagement in the A+ process. Illustrations have been placed based solely on design.

Scissortail Elementary School

Glancing away from his computer and toward the clock mounted above the marker board extending along the front of his classroom, Mr. Arzola felt a pang of excitement combined with anxiety.

“Am I prepared?” he quietly asked himself.

He looked at the clock again. . .8:10 a.m. In ten minutes, students at Scissortail Elementary School would be entering the halls, finding their way to their assigned classrooms. Mr. Arzola looked back at the computer screen reviewing the blog he just finished writing. Although this would be his fourth year of teaching, Mr. Arzola was new to Scissortail Elementary. **Leaving his first teaching assignment at a nearby private school when the faculty decided not to become an Oklahoma A+ School, he chose Scissortail on one criterion—it was part of the Oklahoma A+ network.**

In completing master’s coursework to advance his teaching skills, he heard peers talk about their schools where arts were a focus, creativity was encouraged, instruction was differentiated and coordinated across subjects, collaboration was evidenced by faculty and students alike, and standardized test scores continually improved and were competitive if not superior to same-district, non-A+ schools.

Mr. Arzola reread a set of belief statements he had compiled since being an undergraduate elementary education student, a set of statements he had recently added to during summer faculty training sessions conducted by Oklahoma A+ Schools® Fellows.

One—Have confidence in your teaching and be willing to try new approaches with your students. He reflected for a moment. **He enjoyed the workshops during the summer training sessions and heard a session presented by the A+ researchers only**



a few weeks ago at the Statewide Conference. Already, he had decided to change his approach to determining the rules of the classroom with his fifth graders. Minutes from now, he would invite his students to create—using an assortment of materials including markers, paper, clay, popsicle sticks, and yarn—an artistic piece reflecting their idea of the most important behaviors necessary for a group to be successful. Mr. Arzola smiled, thinking ***“This approach is a bit of a stretch for me.”*** *I’ve always just told my students the rules.*

Two—Encourage meaningful student engagement by integrating the arts and subjects across the curriculum. Mr. Arzola thought, ***“I’ve tried to incorporate lots of arts. I’ve tried before, but not as intensively. I feel much better about this integration after the training. At least at this school I have heard about many of the teachers utilizing more creative approaches than just color sheets!”***

Three—Meet students where they are, whether they need enrichment or they are lagging. Again Mr. Arzola thought, ***“It’s going to be hard to find enrichment for all kids, but it shouldn’t just be for the gifted. Man. . .this is going to take a lot of work!”***

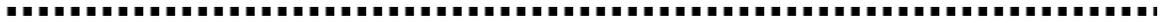
Mr. Arzola glanced back toward the clock. . .8:16 a.m.

“It’s time,” Mr. Arzola said to himself.

He looked around the classroom briefly. Prominently displayed amongst the posters lining the walls was a set of posters he created defining and visually depicting each of the multiple intelligences. **Resting in the “chalk tray” and propped against a portion of one of the marker boards, a magnetic map of the Oklahoma Priority Academic Student Skills (PASS) displayed the division of skills into integrated units, by nine week periods, that he and other faculty developed during summer training**

and several in-service team meetings in early August. Next to a bulletin board Mr. Arzola reserved for his students to personalize with their own pictures and artifacts, a **“Magic Triad”** conveyed the expectation for students to use kind words, a kind touch, and a kind smile while interacting with others. These effects would serve as a reminder to him and as a visible display to students, parents, and colleagues that a safe and positive climate would be created; that the **learning would provide a rich, integrated experience; and that students would be allowed to utilize multiple pathways to learning reflective of their individual strengths.**

Mr. Arzola then crossed the room and positioned himself outside his classroom door. Smiling, he looked down the hall anticipating the young individuals he would soon meet. With great hope, he was ready to invite his students to mutually discover the next nine months together.



As Christina, a third grader at Scissortail Elementary, entered the front doors of the building, things were not exactly as she had remembered them. Filling what last year was an empty corner next to the office was a five-foot replica of a knight. Several students stood looking at and talking about the knight, but Christina’s attention was instantly drawn to another object.

Christina began to walk toward the third and fourth grade hallway, passing a large blue banner with gold lettering identifying Scissortail as an Oklahoma A+ school. Below this banner and throughout the foyer was a set of posters, one stating, **“We network with other schools in the state to provide 8 essentials” and eight others listing each essential: Cross-curricular curriculum. . .the arts. . .experiential learning. . .multiple**



intelligences. . .enriched assessment. . .collaboration. . .climate. . .and shared vision (used for the A+ Essential of infrastructure). Christina’s interest peaked as she moved past these posters, closer and closer to what appeared to **be a drawbridge and moat situated at the entrance of two classrooms at the end of the hall.**

Constructed of wood and painted silver, the drawbridge was about four feet in length. Mounted to one of the posts of the drawbridge, a sign read, “Welcome, Ye, Who Enter These Classrooms!” Christina smiled, as she also noticed **replicas of shields posted on the hallway walls.** Immediately thereafter, a teacher who would later introduce herself as Ms. McLaughlin appeared from one of the classrooms.

“Good morning! Are you in the third grade?” Ms. McLaughlin asked. Christina nodded up and down, and Ms. McLaughlin, finding Christina’s name on her roll sheet, directed her toward her own classroom and welcomed her back to school.

The trickle of students toward the drawbridge began to increase, and Ms. McLaughlin and a fellow third-grade teacher Ms. Pennington continued welcoming and directing the students to their assigned classes.

.....

Inside the main office, Scissortail principal Dr. Holden assisted the school’s counselor in enrolling a new student named Justin Patton.

“So, I noticed a banner saying this is an A+ school. What does that mean?” asked Justin’s mother, Ms. Patton.

Dr. Holden responded, “Well, Scissortail is part of a network of schools who work together to create the best learning experience we can for our students. **Our teachers collaborate as a faculty to integrate different subject areas, especially**

emphasizing the arts and encouraging students to develop creativity. We have worked really hard to create lessons in which students can engage in and experience activities to help them learn. **We believe students are smart in many different ways, and we want to make sure we provide opportunities for every single one of them to learn and to show their learning.”**

Ms. Patton questioned, “But are the students learning what they need to know?”

“Certainly,” replied Dr. Holden, adding that **they were still teaching what the State requires and what students will be tested on during the standardized tests; however, her faculty had been working to change *how* they teach.** “We’re making sure students get the knowledge to prepare them academically. Additionally, we want our students to become good problem solvers and creative thinkers so they can be prepared for a changing global society. **Our test scores have consistently improved since we have been an A+ School,** and we outperform almost all of our sister schools in the district.”

“So how does it work?” asked Ms. Patton.

“**Our teachers collaborate, for one,**” replied Dr. Holden. “**We have a full-time art teacher who works alongside with the music teacher. Together, they work with the media specialist and the teams of teachers.**” “When you have all of these professionals working together to develop ways to connect their lessons, the students can make connections from classroom to classroom, from content area to content area. They begin to see how concepts may be related, and what they learn in one class is reinforced or built upon in others.” Dr. Holden continued sharing, stating that **she sees considerably more creativity on the teachers’ part and on the students’.** She further shared that



her teachers do not do many cut-and-paste kinds of activities or printed color sheets, and that they like students to create their own art or to create their own ways of showing that they understand the material they are studying. After a brief pause, Dr. Holden continued, “**You know, many students at this school face challenges in learning.** Here we are trying to teach through experiences; we’re trying to teach the whole child.”

Ms. Patton replied, “That all sounds great. Things sure are different than when I went to school. I would have loved a school like this. I sure don’t see how you all have the patience for it, though!” [She smiled.]

*Dr. Holden reflected on the amount of work it actually took her and her faculty to create the infrastructure that they currently had in place. **The professional development provided through A+ training had certainly advanced the skill sets of her teachers. She knew that some of her faculty attended A+ workshops every two or three months. The teachers that attended these workshops would always come back to the faculty meetings and share what was learned to the other teachers.***

*In addition, Dr. Holden also reflected on the efforts she had made to ensure that A+ was a central focus at the school. **She considered how she and the faculty met twice monthly to discuss A+, and four times a year, most all of her faculty would meet on a Saturday for several hours to collaborate. New teachers were partnered with a “mentor” teacher who would share strategies for integrating A+ approaches. Beyond these practices, Dr. Holden thought about how one teacher recently commented to her that she and other faculty members really appreciated that she had “worked on creating more planning time built into the teachers’ day to facilitate more opportunity***

for collaboration.” Dr. Holden recalled a monthly practice new the past year where parent volunteers would come into the school and monitor an “event” that the students attended while the teachers were provided common planning time. The teacher with whom she had recently conversed cited this extra planning time as being an extremely valuable resource. Dr. Holden concluded these thoughts realizing that she and her faculty were investing great effort to provide the best education they could for their students.

At this point, Dr. Holden stated, “Alright, Justin, you are going to be in Mr. Arzola’s class.”

Ms. Patton gathered her purse and told her son to “be good” as Dr. Holden led him to his classroom.

On her way out of the building, Ms. Patton passed a bulletin board that caught her attention. Stretched across the top of the bulletin board was the statement, “Scissortail Elementary School is” and an **“A+”** was centered prominently in the middle of this display. Below the **“A+,”** six pages downloaded from an online report labeled **“Oklahoma A+ Research Highlights”** were posted, underneath which was another statement, **“The Research shows...A+ Works!”** Although this report did not specifically provide statistics for Scissortail, it did provide an amalgamation of findings from the more than 40 schools, including Scissortail, that were in the A+ network. **Several other school initiatives were listed by name on the display as well.** She also noticed the obvious medieval theme as illustrations of knights, princesses, and castles adorned the board. Looking at her watch, Ms. Patton headed toward the school’s exit and made a mental note to look at the report on the bulletin board or online when she had more time.

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An hour into the first day of school, Ms. McLaughlin had just finished a get-to-know-you activity and an activity in which she and her third-grade students developed a list of four expectations or rules to which each member of the class agreed to follow. **All of her students engaged not only in creating these rules but also role-playing scenarios illustrative of when these rules would be needed** and how these rules would ensure all students were treated fairly. Intending to encourage students from the first day to be comfortable being interactive with peers, Ms. McLaughlin wanted all of her students to get out of their seats and to physically experience this lesson. As part of the rule-making process, Ms. McLaughlin **incorporated the school's theme** for the academic year, *Medieval Times: Behaving Honorably & Learning to Potential*.

“Did any of you see unordinary things in the halls of the school this morning?” Ms. McLaughlin asked her class.

One boy named Jason stated that **there was a big knight by the office** and claimed, “He was really tall and cool!”

Christina added that **there was a bridge outside of class. . .kind of like a bridge you would see on a castle.**

Another student shared that she **saw some shields on a wall outside** the fourth-grade classrooms.

Ms. McLaughlin continued, “That’s good. This year the whole school will be doing activities around one idea or theme. We’ll be talking about castles, knights, dragons, kings, queens, princes, and princesses. As part of that learning, we expect all of you to behave honorably and to try the very best that you can on every lesson.”

Questions ensued from the students regarding what the word “honorably” meant, and after a brief definition of the word during the rule-making process, Ms. McLaughlin cued the students to respond whether particular example behaviors were honorable or not. This discussion served as a platform from which the students brainstormed ideas for the rules of the class.

Ms. McLaughlin shared with the class that **every few months, those students who lived up to the standards that reflected honorable behavior would be knighted in a candle ceremony at a school assembly. Students would receive a medal and a certificate. She cautioned, however, that students must be careful how they behaved in order to gain this honor and that even once it was gained, students may lose their medals and “knighthood” if they failed to continue behaving honorably.** As examples, she mentioned a scenario in which students became a clique and began to exclude other students. That behavior would be cause for losing their medals. **She also mentioned a story she had heard the principal share where one student was caught telling a lie; her father made her return the medal.** Ms. McLaughlin finished this discussion by telling her students that more important than getting a medal and being knighted was that they all were doing the right thing—treating their fellow students how they would want to be treated.

After a mid-morning restroom break, Ms. McLaughlin introduced her first daily procedure—a morning writing activity. For today’s activity, Ms. McLaughlin paired her students and instructed them to write a sentence about each other at the top of their paper, something they learned about this person during the morning’s activities. **The students were allowed to ask their partner questions and seek assistance in the wording of**



their sentences or the spelling of words. The students were then asked to illustrate what the sentence means to them in the area provided below the sentence line.

Some students were better able to construct their sentences and to spell the words more correctly than others. Likewise, some students were better able than others in creating illustrations. Occasionally, she noticed students who seemed hesitant to ask for help, and she overheard one student, in particular, who was comparing how quickly he was able to complete this activity in comparison to others. Ms. McLaughlin circulated the room liberally praising the efforts of each child and capitalized on the teachable moment this activity presented.

“As I’ve been walking around I have noticed how careful each of you has been to write a sentence and to draw a picture about your partner. I have also noticed how so many of you demonstrated kind words and kind actions as you helped each other. Did you know that you have shown me that you **all are smart in many different ways?**” asked Ms. McLaughlin. She continued by saying that **when writing a sentence, students showed their word smarts. In drawing pictures, she saw their picture smarts, and when they worked so well with each other, they showed their people smarts.**

Her third graders beamed as each continued completing this activity. Ms. McLaughlin allowed them five more minutes before she would lead an activity in which her students shared their work with classmates. Ms. McLaughlin circulated the room and continued to learn about her students as she assessed students’ handwriting, their ability to craft a clear and complete sentence, their ability to interpret the sentence into a visual representation, their creative expression, and their interactions with peers.

What might look like a simple activity was really a powerful approach to engaging her students in learning, as well as a powerful tool for assessment, Ms.

McLaughlin thought to herself.

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In a separate wing of Scissortail Elementary, Ms. Cha clapped her hands slowly five times and **began singing “The Clean Up” song. Her kindergartners looked at her and began putting away puzzles, kits, and interactive learning manipulatives.**

Although numerous students had to be reminded of the procedure for putting supplies away quietly, for reporting to their respective “home” spots on the “listening” rug, for sitting with legs crossed, and for waiting silently for the teacher to give further instructions, within several minutes all 17 students were exactly where they should be.

Ms. Cha took advantage of this opportunity to compliment her students for particular behaviors she saw that exemplified the correct way to follow the clean-up procedure.

“Before we go to the cafeteria for lunch,” Ms. Cha said, “I would like for us all to practice what we talked about earlier this morning, the letter *a*.”

She instructed her students to stand where they were and to get an arm’s length distance from one another. She reminded the students to focus their attention on her, **and she asked the class to sing each line of a song after she sang it first.** The song began, “A is for apple...” and the students responded in chorus. After rehearsing the words several times, Ms. Cha instructed the students to form pairs, and she selected a student to be her partner. **She told the students that she wanted them to use their bodies to understand what being an *a* felt like, and she modeled how two people with one arm**



extending out to the side and one arm diagonally stretched up and across the body could join hands to make the capital letter A.

Ms. Cha stated, “You can be smart with your body!” She then demonstrated how the students could match the song they had just rehearsed with movements while making their letter *a*’s with partners. After several rehearsals, all of the students were participating and correctly following the movements, although a few students required individualized assistance. **Recognizing the opportunity to teach not only letter recognition but also movement terms, Ms. Cha planned to use this activity once again at the end of the day to incorporate a couple of vocabulary words—*slowly* and *quickly*.**



“All eyes right up here,” Mr. Arzola instructed his fifth-grade students, as they directed their attention to the center of the room amid the students’ work tables where he was standing.

Mr. Arzola continued, “Time is just about up for completing our graphing activity.”

Earlier this period, Mr. Arzola had assigned his fifth-grade mathematics students to think about ways they could use graphing as a visual depiction of common experiences in their lives. This activity served multiple purposes as it required students **to share information about themselves to help their peers get to know them, it encouraged students to collaborate to discuss ways to visually represent mathematical expressions**, it encouraged students to be creative in combining mathematics and art, and affectively, it helped the students realize mathematics can be fun.

Mr. Arzola's students were **“making graphs. . .about how they get to school. Do they walk? Do they ride the bus? Do they ride with mom? Do they ride a daycare van?”** Mr. Arzola told his students, **“We graph it [the number of students in each category] so it's a math project. We color it. . .design it and. . .post it for everyone to see so that it's a 'community' affair. Then. . .[we will] write about it. . . .”**

Mr. Arzola continued to monitor the classroom as his fifth graders finished putting away supplies and returning to their originally assigned seats. He spent the next few minutes discussing the procedure for going to lunch, for recess, and for returning to his classroom after their break period. After practicing the procedure for lining up, he walked his students to the cafeteria. On their way there, Mr. Arzola asked specific students, one at a time, to tell the class something that was learned that morning.

While his students were at lunch and recess, Mr. Arzola ate a sandwich in the teacher's workroom with several of his colleagues including the art teacher Mr. Penn and fellow fifth-grade teacher Ms. Shaw. He had developed his afternoon lesson collaboratively with these two just a week ago when **he discovered an idea to incorporate a construction project—the addition of a new wing at the school—into his lessons.** Mr. Arzola thought that the activities and processes of the construction site would serve as an interesting topic that could serve as a conceptual frame for combining numerous subject areas skills. Regarding language arts, he envisioned lessons practicing research skills (involving observation, documentation, and classification of notes into themes) as **the students would observe the site at intervals throughout the year.** He thought that students could further their ability to produce descriptive statements and potentially incorporate new vocabulary in their observations. He also began



brainstorming ways he could teach analogies of the construction process while teaching sentence structures or “building” sentences. He had also spent time thinking of ways to incorporate the construction site and process to other content areas: in mathematics through measurements, student-created story problems (such as for the cost of materials) and modeling; in science through habitats and the properties of materials; and in social studies through discussing where funding for this project originated and purposes of schooling. Mr. Arzola thought to himself, *so many of the multiple intelligences are being tapped!*

When he shared the original ideas with Ms. Shaw, she complimented his creativity and committed to co-developing these ideas into lessons to be used in both classes. Ms. Shaw had also suggested that Mr. Penn would be a great partner in this endeavor. In talking to him, he committed to designing instruction aimed at students using visual art techniques such as line, movement, and perspective to assist the students in making their observations and in recording and sharing them, complete with the use of art terminology. Mr. Arzola and his collaborators made preliminary plans for using a student-created journal depicting the construction that could be passed back and forth between the fifth-grade teachers and Mr. Penn. Additionally, they discussed the multiple ways the journal could be used for enriched assessment—evaluating the visual depictions and art techniques, the level of description in the writing, the research process, and numerous other subject area skills related to Mr. Arzola’s original ideas. This collaborative team enthusiastically shared ideas regarding how the students’ work would also be a great source for reflection, presentation, and group discussion projects.

Finishing his lunch, Mr. Arzola noticed that recess would be over for the students in about ten minutes. He asked Ms. Shaw if she were ready to walk back to the fifth-grade hall, and she nodded in the affirmative. Mr. Penn stated he was eager to see the journals the students were about to create. Mr. Arzola responded that it was his hope the overarching concept of construction and the journal as a learning tool would take what could be a distraction on campus and **use it as an experiential form of instruction.**

Ten minutes later the students were lined up, almost in single file, at the door leading from the playground and into Mr. Arzola's classroom. Mr. Arzola reminded the students of the procedure for entering the room after lunch prior to allowing his students to enter. As the students entered, they noticed that the small table at the front of the room was littered with stacks of writing paper, different colors of construction paper, stickers of construction vehicles and symbols, yarn, glue, and other art supplies. Mr. Arzola informed the students that **one way they were going to practice and to watch the growth of their writing skills was in a journal that would be added to weekly throughout the school year.** He also stated that these journals would be used for lessons in all of their subject areas, including art. Mr. Arzola explained, **"Because the length of the construction. . .[will] last throughout the school year, the journaling project is also an on-going project for the entire school year."** He communicated to his students that they would take about twenty-five minutes to create their journals from the supplies he provided. Then, he led a procedure guiding the students in how to assemble these journals.

After providing a quick break for the students, Mr. Arzola led them to a corner of the school's playground, behind a chain link fence, where the students could see that the



land had been cleared and leveled and the foundation for the new area was being poured. Mr. Arzola asked them to “take in the scene” and to pay particular attention to activities or to features of the construction at this point that they would like to write about and to draw.

At 2:30 p.m. Mr. Arzola’s class was back in room. **“The students were working on their Construction Journals. . . .The students had just returned from an outdoor observation of the [construction] progress, and the students were illustrating covers for the journals.”**

“Two different students. . .[showed Mr. Arzola] their journals. Each journal had pencil drawn pictures colored with crayons and pencil written captions explaining the action of each picture.”

Mr. Arzola was excited that he was able to see baseline data for each student’s use of writing mechanics and grammar, as well as having an indication of each student’s drawing skills. He remembered that **the Oklahoma A+ Fellows during the summer workshops he attended strongly encouraged and supported alternative methods of presenting [to] and assessing students.** Additionally, they emphasized instructional approaches that would **promote creativity in. . . lessons.** He was proud of himself for his idea of using the construction as a topic. He was certain the students would pay close attention to the phases of construction and that as a class they would have great discussions about this process and how it could relate to writing. He also began to think of ways he could connect this construction process to medieval construction—maybe within his mathematics activities—as part of the collaborative, overarching theme the

faculty had adopted for the year. He realized that there were many fun approaches he could explore to engage these students actively in learning.

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After school, Mr. Arzola sat at his computer reflecting on his first day at Scissortail. Tired from the bustle of the day's activities, he was determined to be disciplined in recording his reflections on his blog; however, he would keep his entry brief.

*Today was a great day, overall! My **“students had enthusiasm for learning,”** **and they seemed to have loved coming back to school.** Some of the concepts at first were “hard to define, but there were several light bulb moments on the children’s faces as they collaborated. . . .” I can **“attribute to A+ that I have more confidence, so I will try more things with my kids.”***

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The first weeks at Scissortail seemed to fly by as the faculty and students transitioned back into the school year, and fall break was approaching. During an October professional development day, a day in which students did not attend school, Dr. Holden led a morning faculty meeting to reflect on the successes and challenges the teachers had experienced since school began. She dedicated a portion of this meeting's agenda to the status of A+ at Scissortail and wanted to allow the faculty, as a whole, some time to collaborate on the next steps of their implementation.

Third-grade teacher Ms. Pennington shared that from her perspective, the A+ process at Scissortail **“was somewhat of a shock for [Scissortail’s] new teachers.”** She suggested, **“We have to step back and help them acculturate and make the transition**



[into the school’s practices regarding A+].” She continued by saying the principal was really good about helping the faculty transition into the A+ philosophy and that it was beneficial that Dr. Holden allowed time for new teachers to go and observe more experienced teachers. **“They then see that you can cover the material in different ways,”** claimed Ms. Pennington. Second-grade teacher Ms. White nodded her head in agreement with this statement.

Dr. Holden responded in a manner that seemed to remind all faculty of the function of A+ at Scissortail, although the comment appeared more targeted for those teachers new to the school. She stated, **“The way we use A+ in our school is that we use it as a framework to integrate everything we do in our everyday lives. It’s so hard in schools to try to get everything in [referring to the numerous curricular demands on the teachers], and A+ does a really good job of how to do curriculum alignment, differentiation, and enriched assessments to the point where it allows us to get it all in. It’s really funny because a lot of times with evaluations that I do, when you walk in, you don’t know if. . .[the students are] doing art, or science, or language arts because. . .[you] do such a beautiful job of integrating.”**Dr. Holden added, **“A+. . .is so engrained.”**

Ms. Cha added further that **although the teachers may have been doing a number of these things [including the arts, experiential learning, and so forth] for years, A+ is making them more conscious of what they are doing.**

“A+ blends in [with the approaches I already knew to use]; it’s who we are and what we do. It doesn’t feel like a separate program,” shared Ms. McLaughlin. In

saying this, however, Ms. McLaughlin flashed back to the first couple of years when Scissortail was an A+ school.

Although collaboration with other professionals and teaching across the curriculum was common sense and practice now, it was not common at all just a few years prior. There certainly was a learning curve as she and her colleagues had to learn how to collaborate. Developing methods of integration was challenging for the teachers. Egos were on the line as they shared ideas with others, who might challenge their approaches, and some teachers were hesitant to share lesson plans or instructional tools they considered their “pet” projects. These teachers considered certain lessons to be “their territory” and the instructional approaches and materials they had spent hours developing to be “their tools.” It was not easy for some to drop these demarcated lines and to be generous in sharing their hard work—as well as to be receptive of incorporating others’ instructional approaches—in order to pursue vertical alignment and two-way integration. Ms. McLaughlin felt fortunate to have a true colleague in Ms. Pennington, the other third-grade teacher, as well as strong specials teachers in music, art, and physical education who had shared their content knowledge (including terminology, concepts, instructional approaches, and so forth) so that she was able to encourage students to develop richer, more meaningful conceptual connections across content and disciplines than she could develop and teach if isolated in her classroom. Yes, it was true that A+ was now who the Scissortail faculty members were, and collaboration and integrated teaching were practices they used. Ms. McLaughlin’s attention was drawn back to the discussion at hand.



Dr. Holden discussed her agreement with Ms. McLaughlin's statement that A+ did not seem like a separate program adding on to the other programs already in place at the school. **"The school does not become a canned program; it is a process of effectively teaching and doing school business,"** said Dr. Holden. **"We are A+ because of how we use the process; we are not A+ simply because we belong to the network or because we fulfill network expectations. We are a successful school—not just an A+ school, a GE school, etc. All of the [different school] programs can fit under the umbrella of A+. Part of being A+ is HOW you teach; you can teach PASS [Oklahoma Priority Academic Student Skills] in a way where kids have fun and retain."**

Ms. McLaughlin asserted that in terms of students' learning, **"I think that they [the students] get a more expanded knowledge of a certain situation [or concepts] if they can carry it from one class to another. I have had affirmation in how I was taught [through her undergraduate teacher education program and professional development] to teach. The ADD part of me loves this."** My students get to be active in their learning; they are engaged so that they are thinking and doing, often out of their seats. However, sometimes it is a challenge **"explaining to parents the grades that were given for enriched assessment."**

Several teachers murmured that they have had to make concerted efforts to be explicit in explaining to parents how they were assessing by means other than traditional approaches such as paper and pencil assignments and tests. Mr. Arzola thought back to the activity he did the first day **when his students graphed how they got to school. A number of A+ elements were involved; enriched assessment, experiential learning and arts integration were all lumped together.**

However, Ms. McLaughlin continued saying that **there was great parental support for A+**. Ms. McLaughlin reminded the faculty about a couple of their approaches stating, **“We made a pamphlet for the parents this year—What A+ looks like at Scissortail. We gave these out at the beginning of the year and each time a new student enrolls. We do our Math Nights and Curriculum Nights which brings them [parents] in. We offer food which always helps,”** she laughed. Ms. McLaughlin continued, **“I think it’s real good; I mean we always need more [outreach]. I’ve had compliments from parents how they love to see how their students are being creative. They are always giving us positive feedback on the displays.”**

Borrowing from the *child in the chair* metaphor often used in the training with A+ Fellows, Dr. Holden reminded the faculty that parent support is a likely consequence when she and the teachers make efforts to demonstrate they share a common aim with parents—desiring the best for the children they love.

Mr. Bell, one of the fourth grade teachers asserted, **“The A+ network . . . has empowered creative teaching and increased . . . goals of creative teaching. [I have seen]. . .teachers trying to collaborate much more than before, using collaboration as a tool and a strength to benefit the students. [Teachers]. . .are more comfortable and less resistant [regarding collaboration]. Attitudes such as ‘I like that’ and ‘We can add that’ are becoming more prevalent. . . .We stay pretty busy and get pretty tired, but we do know that what we’re doing with them [the students] works.”**

Impressed with the obvious dedication to the process his colleagues were demonstrating, Mr. Arzola chose to remain silent during the faculty meeting, but he was



excited by the solidarity and passion for teaching demonstrated through these comments. The appreciation he had for his colleagues had grown since his arrival at Scissortail.

Drawing attention again to the purpose of this meeting, Dr. Holden interjected that the faculty now needed to think about **the continual development of the A+ Essentials™**. She complimented her faculty by enumerating on a number of successes she witnessed or heard about during the first quarter of the school year. Additionally, she stated that she had a “dream faculty.” She reminded the teachers that they were not yet “there,” referring to a point of perfection. She further cautioned her teachers to remember that although Scissortail was an excellent school, **“it’s just a continuum,”** that there was always room to improve.

Dr. Holden stated, **“I think that the problem with schools is where you think everybody knows you can stop. It [progress] has to be ongoing. It is very important to stay involved in the networking of fellow A+ schools for purposes of ideas and support.”**Dr. Holden reminded the faculty that this year they had identified the refinement of guided reading across the curriculum as a focus for growth. She shared that the school’s professional development with A+ Fellows later that afternoon would center on **“looking to make sure the teachers are implementing guided reading throughout the curriculum in all the activities that they’re dealing with . . .[including] experiential learning.”**

Dr. Holden requested the teachers bring sample lessons and to think of any examples they could share of how they have been implementing A+ so they could be shared with the A+ Fellows. Looking at her watch, she dismissed the faculty to work with their teams on grade-level planning, making certain to include specials teachers as

necessary for the next hour. As she adjourned this meeting, she reminded them the A+ training would begin promptly at 1:00 p.m. in the media center.

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Fall break and the second quarter of the school year passed quickly for Mr. Arzola, whose appreciation of the A+ process and his excitement about teaching continued to grow. On a snowy January day following an afternoon meeting, he walked from the media center toward his classroom with one of the fifth-grade teachers Ms. Shaw. Mr. Arzola and Ms. Shaw noticed an exhibit of projects outside the fourth-grade teachers' rooms. **There were shelves filled with 36 student-created replicas of invertebrate animals. Sculpted from clay, each student's work rested on a sheet of colored paper or a plastic plate and included an index card on which the student provided a description of his or her animal. One card read as follows: "My insect is a butterfly. A butterfly has three body parts. It is a arthropod. A butterfly usely when it lands lays one egg. That is some information about my insect." Another example read, "I have made a mollusk. It is a jellyfish. Jellyfish have poisonous stingers. They use these stingers to catch it's food. You cannot see jellyfish sometimes. Jellyfish are neat."**

"These are great," said Mr. Arzola.

"Yeah, I agree," replied Ms. Shaw. "Mr. Bell, Ms. Gonzalez, and Ms. Engle do a great job integrating writing and hands-on activities into different subject areas. The students learn so much more than just science when these types of projects are taught. . . and they're fun!"



Mr. Arzola responded, **“Yes...it’s not just ‘play’ like some teachers at my former school might think. I have a student who struggles with just about everything, but when we do projects, she just blossoms. If it weren’t for doing the arts or projects. . .[using] multiple intelligences, she would not be successful.”**

Ms. Shaw replied, **“When. . .you try to teach children based on their needs, they know that. They know you’re looking at them, they know you care about them, they know you understand them. . . .A+ is part of that networking and support that helps. . .establish the climate. The kids know what they’re stronger in. I think the MI’s level the playing field. I think now everyone has a strength. They’re realizing their giftedness in different ways. My kids use that language in the classroom, [and] I think the kids keep telling. . .[their parents] about the multiple intelligences.** Ms. Shaw followed this remark by asking if there were differences between Scissortail and his previous school.

Mr. Arzola said he had always been one of the best at his previous school about implementing both GE and practices that he now recognized were similar to essentials of A+ (the arts and integrated curriculum, attention to multiple intelligences, and experiential learning), but since coming to Scissortail he had to **“kick up his game”** since he was not *one of the few* actually engaging in these approaches, rather *it was the norm*.

Ms. Shaw remarked that on the part of the Scissortail faculty, **“There is willingness to learn. They’re starting to realize as they keep making connections that this [utilizing A+ approaches] is not extra work, but it is refining their skills and using them in effective ways. It’s changed from ‘it’s an arts integration thing’ to**

‘this is a whole-school thing.’ It is pretty cool to see the changes that have taken place. . . .” Ms. Shaw continued to say that at first she did not have the confidence to do art activities in class, so integrating more arts was a personal challenge. **“I have no art talent, and I’m okay with that. I have other talents. But now [after her experiences with A+], I’m more likely to just pick up paper and draw.”** She mentioned that **A+ has not only affected the approaches she is willing to use with her students but also her appreciation and use of the arts outside of her career—even to the extent of drawing for fun during a camping trip with her family.** Ms. Shaw also said that **many of the ideas she has tried in the past few years have come from A+ workshops and that the A+ network serves as a “great tool” to share and gain new ideas to weave into the curriculum.**

“I can truly say I am happy here,” said Mr. Arzola. “So far, I’m really impressed with Dr. Holden, the students, the teachers, and the parents.” He continued saying that it has really been helpful the **“principal has provided each classroom with materials so the availability to integrate the arts is facilitated.”**

Ms. Shaw responded that Dr. Holden is a major reason for the success of A+ at Scissortail and her support is obvious in that there is **ongoing discussion between the principal and teachers regarding the A+ program.**

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Several weeks later during the February professional development day, Ms. Shaw and Mr. Arzola worked as a grade-level team with Ms. Howard, the music teacher and site coordinator for A+. She had consistently offered her help throughout the school year to all teachers who desired it. However, Mr. Arzola had been too busy to collaborate with



her as much as he would have liked. He had relied mostly on Ms. Shaw to help him assimilate into Scissortail.

Ms. Howard claimed, “There is really **a positive attitude this year towards being part of the A+ network!**” She attributed much of the momentum with A+ to **“great” Summer Institutes, the Oklahoma A+ Schools® Statewide Conference the previous August, and the ongoing professional development at the school.** Ms. Howard continued, “Dr. Holden has been really supportive of A+, and it seems like everyone is **‘gelling’** better than in the past. Of course, there are still **some teachers who are more committed to collaboration than others.** It’s obvious you two are, **as evidenced by your meetings to talk about doing themes together.**”

Ms. Shaw added, “Well, we are just thrilled that we have you and now a full-time art teacher, as well!” Ms. Shaw then directed a rhetorical question to Mr. Arzola, “How many schools have the art teacher who **works alongside the music teacher? They then work together with the [grade-level] teams and the media specialist. If I’m doing a project, they’re easy to go to, and they will pull something in their classroom [to integrate or to complement what I’m teaching].**” She smiled appreciatively at Ms. Howard.

Directing the conversation to Ms. Howard, Ms. Shaw said, “Something that’s been really nice is that **even the new teachers seem to be willing to learn about A+.** Mr. Arzola has really been on the ball with it.”

“That’s great!” replied Ms. Howard. She smiled and looked at Mr. Arzola, **“Teachers come up with some ideas and then we spur off of it. I enjoy. . .[when] teachers share face-to-face, and you. . .[can] hear problems and then switch.”** Ms.

Howard was quick to point out that all parties involved benefit from these conversations. Grade-level teachers benefit from developing content and activities with the assistance of the specials teachers, but special teachers also incorporate core subject area content to support the topics and concepts taught by the grade-level teachers.

Ms. Howard shared, **“This is a fantastic school for teacher collaboration. Almost all units in regular classes are reflected here [in music class].” She said that regular teachers took music into their classrooms. For example, when teaching the Civil War, teachers took songs from and about the North and the South. She further talked about specific songs used with a Native American unit, including a song about Pocahontas.**

Looking at the clock, Ms. Howard realized that she had scheduled to meet with the fourth-grade team. She expressed to Mr. Arzola that she was happy he had joined their faculty, and she invited him, as well as Ms. Shaw, to utilize a number of approaches to maintain the collaborative efforts they had worked hard to establish at Scissortail.

Ms. Howard shared, **“My job is to be an advocate for the arts and to help other teachers with integration. As an arts specialist, I try to stay ahead of the curve in terms of new A+ information or events and relay that to the school.”** She invited the two to share their perspectives when **the teachers specifically talk about the A+ program once a month at staff meetings** and she reminded them that **she also generates emails that ask if any teacher needs help with any of the A+ Essentials™, especially arts integration.** She reported that **the emails had been productive as evidenced by one teacher suggesting that the school obtain a “prop box” that would be filled with items useful to integrate drama into the curriculum. This request was**



forwarded, and later the school received it. Additionally, Ms. Howard pointed out she encourages all teachers to **share what they were doing with each other on a chalk board in the teacher’s workroom.**

Mr. Arzola nodded in agreement signifying he had seen the board.

Ms. Howard concluded by reminding Ms. Shaw and Mr. Arzola that she could help with the **“Informances”** that take place each month. She offered time to **work with their grade level stating that if there is a unit they were working on for the informance, then we can write the music [collaboratively].**

Ms. Shaw interrupted, laughing, **“I [can] make the props.”** She shared with Mr. Arzola that last year **they worked on the different genres, such as the fairytale and mythology, and that she and another fifth-grade teacher made costumes and some props for the background from paper.**

At this time, Ms. Howard said she really needed to visit with other grade-level teams, but she was really looking forward to collaborating soon.



In late March, Dr. Lula Faye, a member of the Oklahoma A+ research team composed of local university professors and occasionally doctoral students completed her third of four annual visits to the school. Dr. Faye felt she had developed an excellent rapport with Dr. Holden and the faculty at Scissortail since this was her third year as the school’s researcher. She had worked with field notes for the past month and had determined a need to include a particular item in her interview protocol: **How teachers could specifically describe changes at the school that they attributed to the A+ process.** Throughout the day, Dr. Faye interviewed numerous faculty members and

carefully recorded the perspectives they presented while making certain not to identify the source.

A third-grade teacher had claimed, **“What I do see is that we are more aware of trying to incorporate things. I meet with the third-grade team. We are trying to be aware of it [A+] and trying to find more things [to use in our lessons]. . . .We plan together and our lessons are identical. I don’t think we knew how to do integration before [A+]. We were doing some two-way [integration], but it wasn’t intentional. Now we are communicating, working on intentional two-way integration, really working together. We’re doing one overarching concept each nine weeks so that it’s manageable.”**

An arts specialist at the school shared, **“There is on-going discussion between the principal and teachers regarding...A+.”**

A special education teacher responded, **“I have worked more with occupational therapists, speech and language, and special ed. That has to do more with the group [of students] I have, but we have collaborated a lot. In years past, I may not have worked with all of these people. I think after you spend time with the whole faculty [such as at the A+ Summer Institutes], you get to know them better. If we hadn’t spent time together like at the A+ training, we would just stick to those we knew. It makes working with others easier. We try to work more as a group, a family of teachers. We feel more free about bringing things in to others and saying ‘look I found this’.”**



The media specialist observed, **“I see a lot more people working together to help their students learn concepts. It has helped to get people talking and working together.”**

On this visit to the school, she additionally wanted to garner student perspectives of their school experience. She had arranged to interview groups of students who had returned consent forms in separate grade-level focus groups. Dr. Faye found two of her questions with the students to be the most telling: **“What are some of your favorite activities that you have gotten to do in class?”** and **“Do you ever do activities with art or music or drama or movement or things like that in class?”**

During her third-grade interviews, one student contributed, **“Sometimes we get to draw pictures of stories. Sometimes we [work in groups]. . .like when there’s. . .a project like a reading project maybe you have to act out something.”**

Another third grader added, **“Sometimes, like a few days ago, we got these boxes and cut out squares of [tissue] paper and twisted them on a pencil and glued them. We’re having a book report parade. It’s an oral book report. We’re going to parade them in the hall. People can look at them.”**

During the fourth-grader interviews, a student asserted, **“We made little villages with the Native Americans set up in social studies. I learned how they lived.”**

Another fourth grader shared, **“We get to do a lot of science projects with electricity. We had to try to make a parallel circuit. We couldn’t get it to work, so we made up different kinds of circuits. It was a fun way to learn.”**

Yet another fourth grader added, **“After we read a story we make hats and props and act it out. We don’t have to sit down. We can move around. Yesterday we**

read a story. . .there were different parts in the story, and everybody got to do a part in the story. It helped us learn better...because it wasn't just someone else reading. . .you knew what voices went with what characters."

During the afternoon Dr. Faye interviewed a couple of fifth grade focus groups whose responses identified more classroom experiences.

The first fifth grader to reply offered a further reflection. **"I like in Social Studies when we did this project where we got to use clay and we got to make land forms. We had a test [as assessed through the project] about the different landforms. She wanted us to learn more hands-on than paper and pencil."** This student shared that **"it helps her to learn"** when the lessons are hand-on.

A classmate added, **"We had to use geometric shapes to create a land."**

The students invited Dr. Faye to walk down the hall with them to show her their display of **"Geometry Land."** Based on what Dr. Faye observed in the posters and the students' explanations regarding the posters, the lesson required them to pick a theme for a landmass and use geographical terms to reflect the theme. The fifth grader who first mentioned this assignment was very excited to show Dr. Faye his work. He created a land mass known as **"Mean Island,"** with locations such as **"Bossy Capital," "Beat Down Swamp," "Pushy River," "Back Talk Lake,"** and **"Suckup Desert,"** which the student indicated as his favorite.

One fifth grader reflected further. **"At the beginning of the year, our teacher showed us all the different smarts,"** and she listed them. She continued, **"She [the teacher] asked us questions, and if you got it, like if you like puzzles, you'd put a square on paper. . .and you got a chart."** The student explained that this was a



smarts [Multiple Intelligences] activity to learn how they were smart. She added, **“We’ll do a worksheet one day. Then we may color something for art smart. Then we do a song. Everyone has a chance to do it their own way, their own smart, but they also get to do other things.”**

By the end of the day, Dr. Faye was excited that the students were responsive to the interview items, yet she was exhausted from collecting data. She gathered her belongings, hoping she could exit the school grounds before parents would converge to pick up their children.



The final weeks in the school year accelerated as standardized testing arrived and departed, and then end-of-the-year activities began to surface. During the last week of school, Mr. Arzola’s fifth graders revisited the location of their “field trip” the first day of school—the construction site on campus. With construction journals in hand, today they would create their last entry. Much like the students’ writing had grown over the year, the walls and roof of the new wing of the school were in place, and the rooms were almost “finished out.”

Mr. Arzola had led discussions during the year in which his students shared their observations of the physical changes they saw—from the foundation to the support beams, from the masonry of the walls to the electrical and digital wiring. Now, they witnessed the final touches, the changes that would provide the aesthetics to already functional spaces. Pushing them to think more abstractly, Mr. Arzola had encouraged his students to think of how the beams and walls were like the structure and support of a

sentence; in fact, they had built sentences by writing each word on a separate “brick” to see if the structure were “solid.”

Students’ observations of the wiring connecting all classrooms provided Mr. Arzola the opportunity to help students see the importance of making certain their writing had a “common thread” holding it together. An imaginary journey inside the halls where students imagined what the new wing might look like allowed for Mr. Arzola to work in a lesson on transitions (as from sentence-to-sentence) and prepositions such as *under*, *across*, *from*, and *around*. The most recent journal logs reflecting the painting and trim work for aesthetic appeal served as a great way to talk about *revising* and putting the “final touches” on a piece of writing—thinking carefully about the words that were chosen, elevating vocabulary, and being deliberate with all capitalization and punctuation on the final copy.

Mr. Arzola could see growth in his students’ writing over the course of the year, and he believed that the students and parents were able to see it as well. In the next few days, he planned to have his students reflect on their entries—both written and drawn ones—and to identify specific changes revealed. He truly believed this self-monitoring would serve as a great way not only to celebrate the completed journals but also to encourage students to set writing goals for the future.



On the last day of school, Mr. Arzola thought about the fact that he had failed to maintain his blog on a daily basis as planned. However, he had written entries at least on a weekly basis, and today he arrived at school early specifically for this purpose.



While waiting for his computer to log into the school's network, he scanned the room ensuring the box of markers and colored pencils, the bin of scissors, and the multi-colored stack of construction paper were available for his class's morning project. Above the supply table, **student-made collages reflecting all of the multiple intelligences filled the length of the wall.** Mr. Arzola recognized that the use of artistic depictions of essentials such as these—not only in his classroom but throughout the building—were worth mentioning in his blog.

Mr. Arzola's thoughts poured onto the computer screen. *It's hard to believe, but the school year is near completion. I'm going to dedicate today's entry to reflecting on some of the most important lessons my students and my colleagues have taught me at Scissortail.*

- 1. The first lesson learned hit me as an epiphany this morning while looking at the multiple intelligence collages my students created that reflect their conceptualization of each of the "smarts," such as "body smart," "word smart," "people smart," and so forth. The students did a great job creating these, but equally important is that we did not just post and forget them. These posters have been visual reminders of the multiple ways in which we are all smart, and my students have done a wonderful job including the different "smarts" as part of the common classroom vocabulary. When interacting with others, students often use the "smarts" to identify the contributions and possibilities of each student in the class. With posters up in the classrooms and in the hallways. . .the exposure is there for us to use any chance we can to say "this is what we do."*

2. *I have also learned that I need to provide students the opportunity to be “smart” in all of these areas, to tap untapped potential. My principal Dr. Holden talked about how...labeling students as certain types of learners is misleading and hard to do....Most students, especially at a young age, are still developing what types of learners they are. Kids are “smart” in all of the intelligences, maybe some more than others in particular areas. However, I need to give my students encouragement and opportunities to excel in their specialty areas but also to improve on areas of weaknesses.*
3. *I have learned that it is worth my effort to apply every possible way to learn (singing, movement, etc.)...because it really helps...students learn new concepts. I definitely see a change in my teaching since I’ve been more effortful. I let each of the children do their [preferred] form of [art], whatever it is. I try to think about artwork. . . .Is it something they really gain something from? I want to make sure that I’m not just pulling in the arts haphazardly; I want to integrate them so that students are seeing connections between our content area **and** movement, music, painting, and the other arts!*
4. *I have learned that the faculty and the school’s leadership make all the difference in the success of A+ at the school. It seems like most everybody is “on board” at Scissortail. In just about every teacher’s room, there is evidence. Sometimes it’s posters and students’ artwork or projects that are displayed, and sometimes it’s obvious because Essential Questions that are connected to PASS objectives are posted. Here’s an example I saw the other day when taking my students to the art room: Visual Art, Standard 5 EQ*



[Essential Question]: How can we make the color/shade? How many different ways can we make original art? How many different media can we use? Is there always composition in both representational and abstract art?

These questions, particularly the one about how we make color and shade reminded of a way I integrated visual arts and language arts. I assigned my students to write down a noun or an adjective and all of the synonymous forms they could think of or find for their word. After giving each of my students a paint swatch of different shades of a particular color, we talked about the connotation or coloring or hue of words and how connotation “shades” the meaning of the word. Then, my students wrote the words they listed in a manner to reflect the gradations of different shades of meaning the synonymous forms might carry. In other words, the words that seemed to me to have a darker connotation or tone were written on the darker shades of the color; those words with a lighter connotation or tone were written on the lighter shades. After discussing their creations in groups, I had my students post these to encourage students to think about the importance of word choice.

All in all, I would “chalk” this year up to a great success!

.....

A+ is making a difference in the life of children [at Scissortail] because it is making a big difference in the life of the teachers. The students really seem to enjoy learning, and there is also higher attendance because the students enjoy coming to school.

.....

Rose Rock Elementary School

At Rose Rock Elementary the A+ process had not progressed as smoothly or been engaged in as deeply as at Scissortail. Mr. Vogel, a young principal who was named the school's leader one year before, inherited a faculty somewhat divided regarding their engagement in A+. Although Rose Rock had been involved in the network for four years, a small pocket of teachers demonstrated quiet, yet deliberate opposition to the changes A+ encouraged. Mr. Vogel realized that majority of teachers were simply **hesitant to engage deeply although they did not seem opposed to A+. These teachers had tried a few things but just did not seem to identify with the practices.** Certainly, Rose Rock also had those teachers who were fully committed to the A+ Essentials™. Mr. Vogel knew that the former principal of the school found great challenge in implementing A+ and in encouraging the faculty at-large to make A+ the centerpiece of their practice and professional development. The former principal responded to this challenge by remaining somewhat neutral regarding his advocacy of A+. His neutrality, though, was **recognized by some of the teachers as a lack of overt support for making A+ a priority.** In fact, the year before he left the school, the principal had commented to an A+ researcher, **“It [A+] wasn’t anything where I said we have to do it. Some teachers. . .chose not to. That was fine they had other things going.”** The arrival of Mr. Vogel as the new principal was viewed by the faculty as a critical moment in the direction of the school.

To the delight of the committed teachers, Mr. Vogel was “on-board” with A+ for numerous reasons. He believed the essentials underpinning this initiative corroborated what he intuitively knew to be “best practices.” Additionally, he recognized that popular educational practices and programs, such as professional learning communities,



differentiated instruction and Core Knowledge, seemed to fall under the larger umbrella of A+. In essence, existing programs could work harmoniously with A+, magnifying the potential of each approach. Recently, Mr. Vogel had shared with his staff and other colleagues, **“I don’t want them [Rose Rock teachers] to think ‘I have to do Great Expectations here and A+ here’ [referencing GE and A+ as two unrelated initiatives that might compete]. I want them to see how it [all of the school’s improvement initiatives] fits together—It’s just how to do school.”** Rose Rock had narrowly missed inclusion on the State’s improvement list in the recent past, so utilizing research-based approaches was particularly salient. Although he dreamed of catapulting the school to great success, he was determined to sustain the progress, even if incremental, Rose Rock had made the past few years. Mr. Vogel realized he had much to accomplish in continuing to re-form how Rose Rock was “doing” school.

In addition to using the resources and tools provided by the A+ network, his strategy included capitalizing on the talents of all his teachers by helping them see how their current practices were aligned with, yet could be advanced by, A+. Mr. Vogel believed that in the past year his faculty had been **“making progress as far as understanding the philosophy and the essentials of A+.”** He had provided his teachers with a handout, stating that he **“wanted them to correlate [current practices] with the [A+] tenets to see how they fit together.”** Additionally, he knew some of teachers had not developed an understanding that they can accomplish the state’s mandated skills and testing requirements through the arts while at the same time allowing students to benefit from what the arts provide. Mr. Vogel believed his teachers already committed to the process would be great models and advocates. The real

dilemma for him was creating a way to respect those reluctant or opposed to the process, while simultaneously moving them toward “buying-in.”

In his first year as principal at Rose Rock, he focused his efforts on learning about the culture and operations at the school, including learning about A+ through principal sessions at various A+ institutes and workshops. Bi-weekly during this past summer, he invited rotating groups of faculty members, whom he believed represented varying levels of engagement, to informal lunches to gain perspective on their instructional beliefs and to solicit ideas for “growing” Rose Rock. Now, beginning his second year, he was ready to articulate more deliberately his support and specific expectations regarding A+.

Mr. Vogel knew that initially the school needed 85 percent of the faculty commit to the A+ network in order to be accepted. He also realized that, as with many things, it was likely easier to commit to the idea of being A+ than to follow through with the demands of continual professional advancement. Mr. Vogel was hopeful he could help rekindle the interest that was once there. On another note, he also felt his school should be accountable to the network. As he would share with his faculty on numerous upcoming occasions, **“Even if you’re not originally for this, we made a commitment and we expect people to be supportive. I think that’s kind of where we get closer and closer with [developing practices reflective of] A+.”**

Yet, Mr. Vogel held that “commitment” meant more than just *believing in* the practices. His experience with some of the teachers during the past year revealed a “disconnect” with what some claimed to believe and purported to do and with the actual instructional practices demonstrated. **Mr. Vogel struggled with the challenge of getting these teachers to follow-through—to implement what they learned from [A+]**



workshops and meetings—as well as the challenge of maintaining and inspiring a high level of motivation toward A+.

During the A+ institutes, he befriended Dr. Holden from Scissortail Elementary, who proved to be of immense help. She had communicated, just as the Oklahoma A+ administration had, that the A+ process was different for every school and the process would likely look differently at Rose Rock than Scissortail. For example, as Scissortail Elementary was beginning its first days of school [rewind back to August of the previous year] with a coherent, school-wide overarching concept based on a medieval theme, Mr. Vogel had a more immediate task. He was guiding Rose Rock in determining concrete practices they could implement that would evidence growth in the essentials, practices that consequently he believed would advance students' learning, creativity, and innovative thinking.

Rose Rock simply could not be on the “same page” as Scissortail at this point in the process. They were different schools with different resources, including different levels of faculty engagement. However, since A+ was not a canned approach or “one size fits all” model, Mr. Vogel began generating ideas for how they could use the process successfully to improve what Rose Rock *did* have. Already he felt progress had been made during his first year at the school, even if that progress were somewhat minimal. Comfortable with Dr. Holden as a mentor, he had recently shared an analogy with her: **“We’re not there yet, for sure. I think we’re down the road [from where they had been]. It’s not the bumpy road still. We’ve hit the blacktop, and we could be close to the four-way highway. But, who’s to say the bridge isn’t going to go out tomorrow?”**

Prior to the in-service meetings to be conducted when faculty reported for the new school year, Mr. Vogel collaborated with the school’s site coordinator, Rock Rose veteran teacher Ms. Montgomery, relying on her institutional knowledge and expertise. Together, they designed a protocol to engage the faculty in identifying the necessary proximal steps that must re-form the path ahead. As much as Mr. Vogel wanted immense changes quickly, he believed **it would take several more years before A+ would be “completely integrated” into the school.**

.....

Early one rainy morning during early August, laughter echoed from the walls of the media center while obvious signs of the return of another school year were evident. Teachers donned new clothing and hairstyles, and some proudly display their tans. The volume of the teachers’ conversations seemed to crescendo during the first few minutes, while Mr. Vogel circled the room welcoming his faculty back and ensuring each one had picked up the materials he had prepared. At 9:00 a.m. he moved toward a head table, signaled his faculty the meeting would begin, and asked each of the teachers to share with the others something exciting that had happened over the summer. He made special efforts to introduce two new faculty members, Ms. Harper who would teach second grade and Ms. Turner who would teach third grade. After the rest of the faculty members completed introductions, Mr. Vogel immediately proceeded into his focus for the day’s meeting.

“It seems that everyone had an eventful summer, and although it went quickly, I am very excited and ready to be back for another school year,” shared Mr. Vogel. “Most all of us had a chance to meet for lunch over the summer and discuss our beliefs about



what we must continue doing to teach to the whole child and what we should begin emphasizing to make our school even better. So many wonderful ideas were shared. What we must remember is that our kids at Rose Rock deserve the best. To borrow from what we have repeatedly heard at the A+ workshops and even the statewide conference a couple of weeks ago, **“we must think about the school experiences we would want for our own children and make sure that our students receive the same.”**

Mr. Vogel continued, **“I think there have been some. . .factors that probably hindered. . .growth in A+, but. . .I’m very encouraged, I think we’re on the right track to expand and continue to grow with A+.”** He stated, however, **that the teachers have to commit to being “on-board” with the philosophy of A+ and referenced that he heard in many of the previous summer’s comments that most of the teachers can see the benefits.** He did recognize to his faculty, though, that **even when they believe in the philosophy behind A+, it is harder when one works to put it into practice.**

Although sensing reluctance from the teachers unsupportive of A+, Mr. Vogel knew that he must make his own support obvious, that if he truly believed in the power of this approach **he must demonstrate strong leadership and must communicate expectations for “putting the talking to walking.”** He commented that in the past year he could really see an increase in active learning and in engaging student projects. Mr. Vogel added that many teachers are realizing they were already doing many of the things that would be considered A+ approaches, and he claimed, **“But now they’re doing more [of these activities more consciously], and they realize that they’re doing A+ [by recognizing what these essentials look like in practice].”**

Additionally, he referenced several examples to fortify this claim. I know that “teachers may not talk about it all of the time, but every once in a while a teacher will say, ‘Now that was an A+ way’ [of teaching].”

Although his tone and demeanor communicated an understanding of where his faculty currently were in the process, **he then stated forthright that he would like to see A+ implementation even more from the teachers.** He introduced the purpose of this faculty meeting—setting clear and measurable proximal goals that would evidence A+, not simply to fulfill their professional commitment to the network but because **it was the “right thing to do” for the students.** At this point he acknowledged Ms. Montgomery as the site A+ coordinator and invited her perspective as the two of them began leading the faculty discussion toward generating proximal and distal A+ goals and actions indicative of these goals.

Ms. Montgomery began, “The first year [Rose Rock was involved in the A+ network], many of us were questioning the benefit of A+. All in all, it has been really good for our school.” She then asked, “In what ways have any of you witnessed benefits?”

Ms. Haynes, a fifth-grade teacher who had been at Rose Rock for nearly 15 years quietly shared, **“I think on a daily basis [I have worked at] providing more authentic learning experiences for students, and if you’re using the essentials, then that’s the way you teach. You are constantly providing and thinking of ways to provide the optimum learning experience. We’re still not ‘there’ [suggesting there was a destination at which she perceived was full integration]. We’re still, I think, in some classrooms tied more to pencil and paper than we should be.”**



Although usually not outspoken, fourth-grade teacher Ms. Daniels, who identified herself as being somewhat opposed to A+, retorted, “[Then] **you have parents asking why they [the students] are not doing more worksheets.**” Staring directly at Ms. Haynes, she remarked that **parents want to see what their children are doing and that it was difficult to explain grades regarding activities to parents.**

Mr. Roberts, a fifth-grade teacher popular with the students, broke the few moments of silence that this last exchange created by claiming **the A+ workshops showed him how to incorporate music and other disciplines into his classroom and that it’s been extremely beneficial.**

“**I think there are ways the arts can be used to teach the [Oklahoma PASS] skills and measure ways we are already teaching,**” echoed fellow fifth-grade teacher Ms. Hurst.

Another benefit was revealed as Ms. Haynes added that there was “**more integration among teachers.**”

Ms. Montgomery shared her own agreement to these comments stating, “**I think personally, I try to look for more ways to incorporate art than before.**”

New to the school the previous year, Ms. Denman said she was “**trying to keep A+ in mind**” as she created her lesson plans. She said although last year had been her first year trying A+, she was “**all for it.**” Admittedly, she said that it was a learning process. . .that will take time to implement. She did reemphasize she believed A+ is a “**helpful program**” for the students.

Ms. Montgomery reassured Ms. Denman, “**I think everyone is learning more and more as we go along.**”

First-grade teacher Ms. Foster said, **“For me, it has kept me focused on what I need to be doing and maybe another way to do it. I have all the first graders with different kinds of problems. It’s made me bring in more stories or acting things out or singing more songs that go with what we’re doing so that all kids can mesh into the class with us. That has helped a lot.”** Ms. Foster suggested that she now was more deliberately and more consistently choosing to utilize A+ strategies than she had in previous years by saying, **“Whereas sometimes I would do it, and sometimes I wouldn’t do it in the past.”**

Ms. Montgomery summed up this discussion sharing that **from her point of view the faculty has become more open to the idea of the integration of A+.** A number of teachers who had been talking quietly during the last few minutes allowed the volume of their discussion to rise. The sounds of criticism became more apparent in a couple of the voices in the growing murmur. Seemingly contradicting the fact there were a number of teachers who chose not to participate in this conversation and sat with arms crossed at their tables, Ms. Montgomery claimed, **“Everyone is really excited”** about the current school year, **and she shared her own personal observation that it seemed like teachers were trying to move “out of the box.”**

“Teachers *are* attempting to incorporate it [A+] more into the classroom,” Ms. Foster seconded. She added, **“Attitudes are better [as demonstrated by] the way they talk. They’re using [A+] things in the classroom.”**

Wanting to shift the conversation towards specific evidence of A+ at Rose Rock and developing future goals, Mr. Vogel interceded at this point.



“I do want to mention a great point that Ms. Daniels brought up,” stated Mr. Vogel. “We are going to have to think about how we include parents in the A+ process so that they understand what it is we’re doing. For example, if we’re not using lots of worksheets, especially since our A+ approaches may not be practices parents experienced when they were in school, we are going to have to explicitly include them in understanding the process.” He continued, **“I think our challenge with parents is that A+ still seems to be pretty nebulous, especially when new students come in. [We will have to be careful in] . . .explaining that to them or trying to get them to understand what that [A+] really is. I just think that needs to be a constant for us. Not only with parents but with the children in our classrooms—making that connection for them to those essentials and knowing that all of those essentials are valid under our A+ philosophy. I would like to get more [parental involvement], specifically in terms of A+.”**

Mr. Vogel spoke with a pleasant tone while delivering this speech. He deliberately made eye contact with each teacher around the room in an attempt to deliver his message directly and personally to each one. Subtle smiles emerged from several teachers who had been long advocates of A+. Teachers who had not demonstrated the same level of support focused attentively on his words. Even though there were teachers who still opposed A+, the demeanor of his delivery silenced any words of opposition and seemed to calm the tension.

Mr. Vogel then shared with his faculty a conversation he had recently regarding this issue with Scissortail principal Dr. Holden. He stated, “In talking to another A+ principal, she told me **‘It has been a growing process in educating the parents in what**

A+ means.’ She has handed out A+ information at PTA meetings, disseminated the information through their monthly newsletter and spoken with parents informally about the initiative. She said she believes the support in A+ will continue to grow as awareness of the initiative continues to grow.” He concluded by stating that when they developed action goals later in the meeting he wanted all of them to consider how best to include the parents as partners.

Taking the cue to transition to the next agenda item, Ms. Montgomery asked the faculty to begin listing ways in which Rose Rock was evidencing A+.

One after another, a number of teachers shared some of the school-wide approaches they believed demonstrated A+. **One teacher referenced an activity in which samples of student projects were displayed at a central, visible location in the school. Several teachers verbalized their agreement that this was a good example. Another teacher noted they have “Informances” once a month for the whole school that features each grade. That particular grade puts together a song and makes their stage decorations for a theme or topic they are covering. Providing an example, this teacher reminded the others about a previous informance on balance reminding them that the students had choices of different ways to show balance. One teacher referenced the Multicultural Fair they conducted annually while another stated, “We have had many more programs for the parents. . .in the last few years. . .[because] we now have full-time music and art teachers.”**

At this point Mr. Vogel requested the teachers to think about how their *in-class* practices demonstrated A+.



Mr. Roberts responded, **“They [his fifth graders] read a book, they did a skit, they had the music teacher come in to develop a song. There wasn’t a song and [Ms. Keener] the music teacher helped them to basically compose a song. We do have musical keyboards from a grant down in the music room that they can use to compose music.”**

Connecting to Mr. Roberts’ comment, Ms. Hurst was compelled to share her experience collaborating with the art teacher. She said, **“The art teacher [Mr. Henry] puts those words [referring to art terms that she can use in the regular classroom] into the kids early. The students receive a “double dose” of concepts by integrating the arts.”**

Referenced in the preceding comment, Mr. Henry added, **“I really like it [arts integration]. It’s fun and a great way to get the kids to learn through more than one form—learn through words in the classroom and art and music and it’s all integrated.”**

“We’ve started really working together to get all the webs [curriculum maps] together so. . .we [teachers] have a way to integrate. It’s much stronger now,” said Ms. Haynes.

“So what do you think has been the result of these approaches?” asked Mr. Vogel.

After a brief pause waiting for faculty members to state their opinions, Ms. Haynes replied, **“I’d like to think the learning has gotten better. I think they’re [the students are] getting it better. Our [student] behavior has improved a whole lot.”** She continued by saying that **the students are working better together** and that **they are enjoying themselves more**. She continued stating, **“A lot more of the students**

[are] being hands on and a part of the lesson rather than the traditional sit and listen and fill out a worksheet. More students are involved.”

Although Mr. Vogel and Ms. Montgomery were happy that the discussion so far had elicited apparent enthusiasm and support from a number of teachers, they were disconcerted by the critical tones of voice and body language of those who opposed A+, as well as some who chose not to engage in the morning’s discussion. Obviously, one meeting was not going to inspire everyone to engage.

This problem concerning buy-in was no different than what any other principal would face, Mr. Vogel reminded himself, and he thought about a quote to which he often relied when working with challenging people: *Seeds, even when properly planted and nurtured, do not always germinate in the same amount of time. However, for them to germinate he must continue “the watering.”* He also remembered that just days ago, Ms. Montgomery mentioned **that A+ was “finally winning over. . .[a third grade] teacher.”** He was certain he would hear from some of the reluctant teachers with his next question.

“So what I’d like for us to do next is to identify some of the obstacles we have had in implementing A+,” Mr. Vogel invited. “I want this to be an open discussion, yet I want everyone to be mindful that when providing an obstacle or complaint to also be thinking of possible solutions. Voicing frustrations is fine if you are solution-minded. This will not be a gripe session, though,” he said.

Ms. Daniels was the first to respond. **“I don’t think we are given time to collaborate. I don’t know how we can really work together to integrate when there isn’t any time for us to meet.”**



Mr. Vogel admitted this indeed was an issue and agreed that currently collaboration was not built into teachers' planning time. He replied, **"We are working on that right now."** As Ms. Montgomery listed "lack of time to collaborate" on a sheet of blue paper, Mr. Vogel foreshadowed that the faculty soon would have an opportunity to generate ideas for a solution for this and other infrastructure issues.

Third-grade teacher Ms. Kirby then shared that she did not feel the Summer Institutes, at least initially, were a positive experience for her. She further stated that the workshops had become **"more positive," but that the first years were "hard on us."** She shared, **"I think that this year they understood that there was a certain direction our school was going, and they A+ would work with us on that. . . .[A+ staff] wanted to tailor the experience to us."**

Ms. Hurst revealed her own contribution to this same problem stating that **she wanted to take greater advantage of the professional development opportunities offered through A+ because those experiences have been great. It is just following through and actually attending.**

Ms. Foster provided another infrastructure obstacle, this one involving physical resources. **She claimed she would really like for the school to purchase props that might facilitate their "informances" or acting activities, but she knew the school did not have necessary funds.**

During this discussion, several teachers claimed that their concern regarding standardized test scores and the time they felt it took to "teach what would be on the test" kept them from engaging to any degree in the approaches espoused by A+. In fact, one mentioned and several others agreed that A+ "things" seemed to them like

extracurricular or add-on events that were a luxury to fit in when they could find time—which admittedly, they rarely did.

Mr. Vogel was relieved that none of these teachers verbalized feelings that cross-curricular integration, experiential learning, or the arts were unimportant. Where there was some “seed” of appreciation for these approaches, Mr. Vogel believed he might have a chance of nurturing its growth.

The teachers spent the remainder of the morning’s session clarifying their long-term goals for Rose Rock, and after much discussion, they articulated several proximal goals for the upcoming semester. Although the extent of the reluctance and opposition of the teachers disengaged from A+ was not fully discernable, with specific proximal goals the school was on its way to more active investment and accountability in developing through A+.

Specific actions that would be taken immediately to address infrastructure concerns expressed by the faculty included creating a committee to propose a way Mr. Vogel could provide more collaboration time in the teachers’ schedules. Additionally, **a committee was also created that would identify and solicit teachers’, parents’, and corporate partners’ talents and means (and possibly students’ as well) to supply or create props, musical instruments (e.g., drums made from oatmeal boxes, etc.) or other resources teachers could use during instruction.**

Regarding attendance at A+ professional development workshops, Mr. Vogel **committed to contacting the administration building to negotiate how Rose Rock would be allowed to use professional days** since the school, unlike others in the district, was part of the A+ network. Although he expected teachers to attend as many A+



activities taking place outside of the normal school hours as possible, he and Ms. Montgomery committed to scheduling all of the free on-site professional development sessions provided by A+ annually at an identified “convenient time” for teachers—hopefully during professional days. Mr. Vogel also emphasized that he expected all teachers to participate fully in these sessions given that great efforts would be taken to make them accessible. To emphasize this expectation, he referenced a missed opportunity for professional development many faculty members chose not to take. He shared, **“I wish we had more people go to the Statewide Conference. . . .I was really impressed [with the conference]. . . .It was really well done. I think it’s really nice for actual teachers who are in the classroom to teach those sessions. It broadens your ability to teach [seeing other teachers teach]. It’s very valid.”** He added that there were many **ideas and lessons presented that teachers could “pick up” and “use the next day.”** He made a forthright point to remind faculty they were expected to participate in opportunities like this one.

Possibly Mr. Vogel’s greatest challenge was convincing the teachers to understand that the students’ learning and test scores would likely improve with A+ approaches. He shared that the A+ research indicated test scores did not suffer from implementing A+ approaches; on the contrary, **he provided and explained a research bulletin indicating positive relationships between higher test scores and A+ schools when comparing these schools to similar, same-district non-A+ schools.**

On the part of the teachers, **the faculty agreed they would create a system to document and share methods for utilizing experiential learning, daily arts integration, student collaboration, cross-curricular integration, and enriched**

assessments. They also agreed to share ideas regarding classroom management and creating a positive climate. Most specifically, **the faculty** in general **committed to using Multiple Intelligence terms explicitly during instruction and activities with students and parents.** The systems to gather evidence of A+ approaches generated during the day’s meeting—although not yet complete with all of the details and all necessary procedures—were at least in place.

Mr. Vogel was excited there were now obvious actions to be taken. Prior to concluding the meeting, he voiced his appreciation to the faculty for their dedication in serving the students. He also reminded them of his commitment as an A+ principal, stating, **“I’m a facilitator and a team member with the . . . coordinator to help implement A+ in the school. . . . [I] will oversee the implementation process and. . . [identify] areas of weakness. . . [in order to bring in] professional development from A+ to address those weaknesses.”** While emphasizing he was a part of the team, he also reemphasized a “winning” team needed all of the “players” to commit. A close look around the room revealed part of the team was still missing; those teachers who were reluctant or opposed to A+ had lost interest in this meeting some time ago.

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A few weeks into the school year, the teachers and students had settled into the routines and practices framing the educational experience provided at Rose Rock Elementary. Oklahoma A+ Schools® researcher Dr. Faye arrived during the first period of classes to observe the school setting, interview teachers regarding their perspectives of the A+ process, and distribute informed consent forms seeking parent permission for students to participate in interviews and surveys. Immediately past the front doors of the



school, **Dr. Faye noticed a display titled “What are your smarts?” A variety of little banners were posted, and paper streamers represented each of the “smarts.” Dr. Faye recalled a project similar to this display that was completed during the summer institute for teachers. Apparently, this faculty brought the idea back and shared it with their students.**

Dr. Faye had visited Rose Rock for the past three years and was quite familiar with a number of the teachers at the school, especially Ms. Keener, the music teacher, and Ms. Montgomery, the site coordinator. In addition to being teachers at an A+ school, they were also A+ Fellows who were heavily involved in training teachers in the network’s professional development component. Although during Dr. Faye’s first year visiting the school the faculty, including the principal at that time, seemed reluctant to share much with her, over time she seemed to have developed a good rapport with them. With the understanding that their identities would be removed from any of the reports, many of the teachers seemed willing to share frankly their passion for A+, their frustrations, and even their opposition. To develop a trusting relationship and to protect the rights of faculty willing to participate in surveys and interviews, Dr. Faye made certain to downplay any visible signs that would create division, particularly signs that might cause the faculty to view her as an evaluator.

After checking in at the office, Dr. Faye walked through the third and fourth grade hallway. In a display case between the office and first classroom, **Dr. Faye noticed dioramas that were obviously student-created depicting scenes from a popular book used with third graders.** Further down the hallway, **another display of “Story Skeletons” was posted just outside of Ms. Denman’s room. The “Story Skeletons”**

consisted of a skull and numerous cutout paper bones on which different plot pieces of numerous stories were written. Each “bone” labeled a plot element such as the setting, main characters, the climax, and the resolution. Portions of text from the stories exemplified each element. The “bones” hung from the skull by pieces of yarn and were arranged to chronologically portray the events.

Outside of one of the fourth grade classrooms **Dr. Faye noticed an “Ecosystems” display. Apparently, the students had cut out pictures from magazines and other resources, arranged them, and labeled them to reflect examples of the food chain. For example, one project began the chain with a picture of sunlight. Drawn arrows connected the sequence of pictures and labels that followed: a picture of a cactus was labeled as a “producer,” a picture of a caterpillar was labeled as a “herbivore,” a picture of a frog was labeled as an “omnivore,” a picture of an alligator was labeled as a “carnivore,” a picture of buzzards was labeled as a “scavenger,” a picture of mushrooms was labeled as a “decomposer,” and then there was a final arrow leading back to the sun.**

The door to the classroom next to this display was open, and Dr. Faye heard students discussing mathematics problems. As she walked to the doorway, the teacher Ms. McAlister, smiled at her, and Dr. Faye walked in and took a seat at the back of the room to observe. **One student stood at the front of the room at the chalkboard and solved a mathematics problem by listening to feedback provided by his fellow classmates.** After watching different students rotate up to the front of the class to record the class’s solutions to the worksheet problems for nearly fifteen minutes, Dr. Faye



smiled at Ms. McAlister and dismissed herself from the class to continue other observations.

Next door, Ms. Daniels' fourth grade class was working silently at their seats. Dr. Faye peeked into the classroom and entered, as Ms. Daniels acknowledged her but without the same welcoming smile as she experienced in the previous classroom. Ms. Daniels was sorting through materials in her closet and seemed to keep an eye on her students in between the apparent search. There was no attempt on Ms. Daniels part to engage in conversation with her, so Dr. Faye glanced at a few of the students' assignments while standing along one of the classroom walls. **She realized immediately that the students were doing the same worksheet as in the previous classroom. However, this teacher's approach to working through the worksheet was quite different.** There was no talking and some students seemed busy working, while others slowly went through the motions required to complete the assignment. Dr. Faye waited another five or six minutes during which the only interaction the teacher had with the students was an occasional reminder for particular students to "keep their minds on their work," to "stop talking," or to "finish in the next five minutes because a grade would be taken." Seemingly unnoticed, Dr. Faye excused herself from this classroom to visit others.

At the end of the hallway, Dr. Faye walked up the staircase leading to the music room and the fifth-grade classrooms. **At the top of the staircase were student-created posters of the food pyramid, ten in all with explanations of what certain foods "do for the body."** For example, plotted to reflect the vegetable group, one student created a picture of a tomato and wrote the following quote: "A tomato is needed

for your blood to clot.” Another student had drawn and colored a picture of a turkey attached to the meat portion of the pyramid, including an explanation that read, “Turkey helps cells use energy.”

Dr. Faye’s attention was drawn toward the music room as she began to hear rhythmic drumming noises and the singing of a song she knew all too well, “Oklahoma!” As she entered the room, Ms. Keener welcomed her and instructed her students to start over so that their visitor could hear what they had been practicing. The second graders seemed excited to have an audience, albeit one person, as they focused on their teacher to cue the start of the song. Dr. Faye could not hide the smile that widened on her face as the students seemed to give it their all. Although several students were not on beat with the drumming and a couple seemed unaware of just how badly they were not in tune, she enjoyed their performance. Ms. Keener made an explicit effort in front of her students to communicate that they were singing “Oklahoma!” at the next PTA meeting and that the song complemented the major theme at Rose Rock Elementary that year—celebrating the centennial of Oklahoma’s statehood. Dr. Faye made note of this statement, intending to be mindful in looking for overt evidence throughout the building that reflected this school-wide theme.

Looking at her watch, Dr. Faye realized she needed to report to the media center where she had reserved space and where the site coordinator had scheduled interviews for her with willing faculty members. She then thanked Ms. Keener and the students for the “wonderful performance,” and headed to the media center on the first floor

Walking past the fifth-grade classrooms, she noticed yet another project. **There were outlines of body organs that the teacher had copied and allowed the students to**



color and cut out. The organs were labeled, and the students had written a short paragraph detailing the function of each organ. By the way the posters were displayed, it seemed as if these projects had been completed in groups, as there were four posters total with each poster having contributions from four or five students.

During the next few hours, Dr. Faye visited with a succession of teachers. Each interview lasted between twenty and thirty minutes as the teachers had limited time to talk during their planning times. Throughout the day she heard a number of perspectives regarding how A+ was being implemented and teachers' opinions regarding its effect on the school. While eating lunch in the corner of the media center, Dr. Faye reviewed the notes she had taken thus far and highlighted a few in particular that she felt were insightful. The variance in levels of teachers' A+ engagement was suggested in a few statements, ranging from **"I really don't do A+ at all" to a teacher who reported "trying to keep A+ in mind" as she created her lesson plans.**

Regarding the importance of school leadership in A+ implementation, one teacher expressed that **"things were better now" with the new principal and that she and her last principal "buted heads," particularly when she tried to take initiative and make changes in her classes only to have the principal say, "We don't do that here."** She commented that it was **important for the principal to show support for A+ for it to work.** She followed this statement by saying that now, **"I think they're [the principal and faculty are] willing and open, in that way [in supporting A+] here. I think they [the faculty] just wait to get told they have to do it. Instead of doing like science night, I said, 'Why don't we have an art night?' Unless someone brings something up, they do the same things they have done the year before. I've tried to bring in**

some new ideas [but]. . .I don't get to share with many people because I'm not on the committee to do so."

Another teacher shared feelings of lacking efficacy and understanding of implementing some of the essentials by stating **she understands the MI influence but as far as applying and using that information for each kid, she still struggles.**

On the other hand, Dr. Faye recorded statements claiming success with implementation and enjoyment using the A+ process. In a brief interview the music teacher shared that **she is doing the most planning with particular grade levels because those teachers give her a "yearly plan."** She said she takes it from there with her plans and **"tries to gear. . .[her own lessons] toward what they're doing."** She claimed that **the teachers have been open with her ideas and accepting of her plans.**

Collaboration between the music teacher and grade-level teachers was also mentioned by one fifth-grade teacher: **"The music teacher and I have done this [collaborated] together a lot. I think she was the first one to do the A+ stuff. She gradually is getting the rest of us to come on board. It's been great for me."**

Regarding verbalized support of A+, one teacher acknowledged, **"I will say. . .[in the past] I didn't open up as freely as I could have. Now that we're doing A+ and we have music and movement, I'm free. We [my students and I] act crazy, we sing, we have fun. Before A+, we just did things [said in a way seeming to indicate that things were done in a methodical manner]."**

Dr. Faye's intuition about the school's moderate level of engagement in the process as compared to other schools seemed to be affirmed. In order to make clearer her



emerging understanding of the school, she made a note that further investigation should include targeted efforts to interview those who revealed themselves to be reluctant about the A+ process. Dr. Faye suspected that these interviews would create a fuller base of interview data allowing for more perspectives and a more complete analysis. She had heard of several teachers who were still somewhat reluctant or even opposed to A+, and only one of those teachers had been willing to be interviewed. She began contemplating ways she might be able to encourage more of these teachers to share their perspectives during her next visit.

Dr. Faye realized that with many things and certainly with school reform initiatives, inaction was still an action. Keeping her objectivity “in check,” she could not help but be extremely interested in the extent to which Rose Rock would evidence A+ implementation during this year of change, and more specifically, how the administrator would meet the challenge of encouraging those steadfast and unsupportive teachers to engage. Dr. Faye believed that the literature in educational research was saturated with studies regarding school improvement programs and approaches. She hoped, however, her investigations regarding A+ implementation would prove valuable by making clearer the change agents in school reformation and transformation; the challenges and vehicles discouraging or encouraging change, respectively; the sustainability of the A+ process; and numerous other perspectives including educators’ engagement with each A+ Essential. Dr. Faye believed any enlightenment regarding these research areas had the potential of furthering the literature in this area. Of greater importance to her, she hoped the findings might provide perspective and implications for practice, as well as reveal

tools for educators who are pursuing approaches intended to advance the quality of teaching and learning.

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One afternoon in late fall as Ms. Montgomery was preparing to go home, Ms. Harper, a fellow second-grade teacher who was new to Rose Rock this year, knocked on her classroom door. As was typical, Ms. Harper had relied on the expertise of Ms. Montgomery and had borrowed a number of lesson ideas and co-created activities during their grade-level planning time. Today, she was excited and wished to share that the lesson on which they collaborated had gone very well with her students.

She taught syllable exercises. These exercises included verbal, visual, and kinesthetic references to discriminate syllables. The students would listen to a word and repeat the word back to the teacher. Then, they would say the word again with their hands under their chins to feel the movement and followed this by tapping the word on their arms to count the syllables. Depending on the complexity of the words, she had her students clap or dance the syllables. The dance required students to stand legs spread with their weight shifted on their front foot. When saying the words, the students would raise their right hand to point at the ceiling and back down at the ground ala John Travolta style in *Saturday Night Fever*.

Ms. Harper shared that her students truly enjoyed the activity and that every student could accurately designate the syllable breaks. She also expressed how happy she was to be part of the second-grade team and a teacher at an A+ school.

Ms. Montgomery responded to the mention of A+ and shared her own perspective of how the professional development had influenced her. She stated, **“I definitely see a**



change in my teaching. I put in a time for them [the students] to get up and move—move to poems, move to songs. I try to think about artwork. . . .[I] let each of the children do their form of whatever it is—whether it is collage, painting, or just more movement. [There’s] Lots more movement. It has especially carried over to. . . [another] teacher I mentored.”

Ms. Harper responded that she thought that additionally A+ helps to build good climate, with common goals, using the arts. She said this helps students’ comprehension and retention, especially using body movements and singing songs.

Ms. Montgomery added, “The team [of second grade teachers including Ms. Harper] recognizes learning styles more than they used to. Kids are learning a lot better and more comfortably [than before].”

At this point Ms. Harper commented on the opportunity teachers had to collaborate with the full-time music and art teachers at Rose Rock. She shared, “Our specials [teachers] are wonderful. . . .[in working] with our teachers. And when we do curricular alignment, they’re real in-tune to what we’re working on and when. Our librarian will pull materials for the teachers, and she’ll even do guidance lessons for...[the students] in the library to support what they’re doing. . . .[You and the P.E. teacher] will do the same thing. . . .[I know you] work on math skills while they’re counting notes and things like that. . . .If they’re working on a book or working on a country, [you]. . .introduce a song from that country. P.E. will do things, like say they’re getting ready for a test or CRT’s [criterion-referenced tests assessing district benchmarks], they’ll play a game with them like basketball or games that have to do with [the test material]. . . .I think it’s easy for teachers

coming in [new to the school] to be given things like a curriculum map so that they better understand A+. The . . . [specials] teachers always come to us and ask if we're still doing particular lessons so they can design their lessons."

This conversation reminded Ms. Harper of another item she wished to discuss with Ms. Montgomery. She had overheard several colleagues talking in the teachers' workroom about an upcoming art auction, yet she had not heard the specifics. She asked Ms. Montgomery, "So, do you know anything about an art auction here?"

Ms. Montgomery **described Rose Rock's Art Auction, an event that takes place each spring. According to Ms. Montgomery, "All proceeds from the auction go straight to the school's A+ fund and is accessible by the faculty to fund A+ projects within the school. Parents have the ability to purchase art their children have done in class, and we use that money specifically for A+ activities."**

Ms. Harper commented that she thought the auction sounded like a great way to involve parents and see the artwork the children were creating.

Ms. Montgomery replied that the parents seemed to be more and more supportive of the school, especially since the new principal had made great efforts to invite and include them in more school activities. **She added that after the parents saw what the teachers had gone through during previous years with the former principal, they were [now] loyal to the school.**

Noticing the time, Ms. Montgomery thanked Ms. Harper for sharing the success of the lesson. She indicated she had an appointment and invited Ms. Harper to walk to the parking lot with her.

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Nearing the end of the first semester, Rose Rock held its second Parent-Teacher Conference day of the school year. Fifth-grade teacher Mr. Roberts was preparing for his last meeting of the morning, just prior to lunch, as one of his better student's parents made their way into his classroom.

“Good morning, Mr. Roberts. We’re Aaron’s parents,” reminded Maggie Emery, offering a handshake.

After welcoming the parents and sharing that Aaron was progressing very well—as he always had—he shared a bit about what the students would be studying immediately following winter break. The conversation was cordial, as the Emerys had been exceptionally supportive of Mr. Roberts since he met them at the beginning of school.

As the conference was drawing to a close, Mr. Emery shared that he had heard his son talk about being at an A+ school, and he had noticed the banner hanging by the front office advertising this recognition. “So what does that actually mean?” Mr. Emery asked.

Unsure of how to explain A+ succinctly, Mr. Roberts began listing some of the instructional approaches he practiced that he knew to be associated with A+, “Well, there are many things that we do here to make sure that we help all students learn.” He stated, **“Using art to enhance academics. The main aspect is to recognize how students learn.” He also shared that the teachers try to be more hands-on and try not having the students sit in chairs all the time.** He continued, **“There is a lot of group work, forcing the children to learn how to work together. . .[and] teachers collaborate more with art teachers.”**

Ms. Emery replied, “That sounds good. Is it helping the school?”

“Since we have become part of A+, our test scores have improved some and hopefully we’ll continue improving,” said Mr. Roberts. **“I’m real excited about the whole program. I love seeing all of the arts pulled into the school. I think they’re really important. I’m glad the school is into the program.”**

Mr. Emery nodded approvingly, but he asked an additional question, “Are all the teachers here doing this?”

That’s a loaded question, Mr. Roberts thought. Being careful not to undermine any of his colleagues, he admitted some were definitely more involved in using these approaches than others. He explained his hope was that even though some have been slow to “warm up” to more active and oftentimes noisier classrooms, he felt that there was momentum building at the school. **“I expect with the principal being so committed to A+ we’ll see more teachers get ‘on board’,”** Mr. Roberts stated.

Ms. Emery thanked Mr. Roberts once again for his time and all he was doing for Aaron, and both parents shook his hand as they left the conference.

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After the winter break, the teachers began the spring semester at Rose Rock with a professional day in which teachers participated in “Round Robin” meetings. Principal Vogel scheduled times for grade-level teams to meet one-at-a-time with the three specials teachers (physical education, music, and art) to further collaborate on arts integration.

While grade-level teams were not meeting with the specials teachers, they were scheduled to work vertically with upper- and lower-grade-level teams and a team of special education teachers.

At Rose Rock, all three of the specials teachers were supportive and engaged in the A+ process, although the physical education teacher Mr. Gutierrez felt during the first



few years of becoming A+ that it was a “stretch” for him to learn how to use movement activities, especially as they moved down the continuum towards dance. However, his eventual buy-in was the catalyst allowing him to embrace A+ professional development to learn and further develop content knowledge and integration strategies.

Mr. Gutierrez had recently shared with Mr. Vogel that **he had attended the A+ sessions for arts teachers and it helped him to understand his role as a “resource person.” He also stated he had been working with other arts teachers [in the network] and sees that as a benefit of the A+ program.**

To begin the meeting, Mr. Vogel welcomed the teachers back from the break and began discussing an observation he made the first semester. He explained that he had noticed that the way that the faculty was using the magnetic curriculum map was changing. Apparently, the teachers were now using it to reflect a broad plan for the entire school as opposed to individual teacher lesson plans. He mentioned the large magnetic curriculum map in the teacher workroom: **“Because it’s right there where I can see it, I like that, but because it’s right there and. . .[teachers] are in their rooms. . .[you] just don’t have an opportunity to use it very much, so. . .[you] are doing other things.”** Mr. Vogel exhibited a commercially-produced flip book that offered teaching suggestions for the PASS objectives across different content areas, **explaining that some of the teachers were using these booklets for their planning.**

“What I like about what we’re doing,” Mr. Vogel affirmed, **“is we’re sharing overarching concepts to design [instruction] and share.** What we need to work on is how we can communicate and collaborate with each other since we all have demands on our time. I also think a visual depiction is necessary to keep our eyes on the target and to

have a record of how we are agreeing to partner. I want you to spend today's time focusing on ways to integrate and collaborate further, but in the back of your minds I'd like for all of you to be thinking of useful ways we can document and share our collaborations."

During the first round of team meetings, fifth-grade teacher Ms. Hurst shared with her grade-level team and the fourth-grade team who they were paired with, **"The music teacher and I . . . [collaborate]. It's been great for me. I've always connected literature and articulation."** Our whole fifth-grade team is now working to integrate. **"We're adding music and the movement. It makes it more fun for the kids."**

Fourth-grade teachers Ms. Daniels, Ms. Bonner, and Ms. McAlister sat across the table from the fifth-grade team. There was silent division as everyone was aware that the fourth-grade team had not collectively embraced deliberate efforts to advance curricular integration. Ms. Daniels' opposition to change, in particular, hindered this process. She had seen numerous other "trends" come and go in her thirty years of teaching, and she was not eager to jump on the next "bandwagon." Although an opponent to the A+ process at her school, she did bring wisdom from her years of experience as she was quick to point out features undermining the success of A+ implementation. Regardless of how her attitude affected her continued professional development, she pinpointed issues needing to be addressed. During this first round of meetings, Ms. Daniels commented that if the administration really expected teachers to collaborate, then more time should be provided to do so. She voiced concern that **vertical collaboration, such as the meeting they were currently having, was extremely difficult because teachers had different planning times inhibiting them from meeting often and at once, when they need to meet.**



Showing a sophisticated understanding of the type of integration encouraged by A+—even though she was not willing to engage deeply in it—she also criticized others’ use of integration. She claimed that **most of it was done “one-way” as opposed to two-way where, for example, the music teacher would not just pass along themes to the grade-level teacher, but the grade-level teacher would pass along themes back to the music teacher.**

Ms. McAlister and the fifth-grade teachers recognized those were “considerations,” yet the tone and content of their responses were optimistic and supportive of the process—if teachers would engage and give it an opportunity to succeed. Ms. Daniels admitted she did collaborate on a couple of lessons with her grade-level colleagues, Ms. McAlister and Ms. Bonner. She remarked that Ms. McAlister **showed her how to take a particular handout and make it into a creative activity.**

At another table in the room, physical education teacher Mr. Gutierrez met with the third-grade team. He shared with them that **most teachers do not work on collaboration with dance, except for one teacher who had collaborated often integrating dance with history.** Making certain this statement did not convey blame; **he acknowledged that there was not enough time set into the teachers’ schedules to allow collaboration.** He additionally disclosed that beyond the collaboration he had developed with a few teachers, **he incorporates the language arts out of his own background and desire.** He shared how often he has the students act out vocabulary words and parts of speech.

At another table, music teacher Ms. Keener met with the second-grade team. The discussion centered on how productive the integration efforts with music had been. Ms.

Keener asserted, **“There’s an effort to work with us,”** especially the visual arts and music teachers. She then cited an example: **“Okay you guys are doing oceans. I know what I need to do to tie that in. So there’s more tie in with what . . . you’re doing in there [in the regular classroom] with what we’re [the students and I are] doing in here [the music room].”**

Mr. Vogel circulated the room listening to the ways in which teachers were offering to collaborate and integrate. He was excited there seemed to be a “buzz” created from these discussions, but he was also concerned about how to harness and maintain the teachers’ enthusiasm. He understood it was critical to move integration past a belief and into a practice that would serve as evidence of the process. He also was aware that he and his faculty would have to continue thinking of ways to find time in the schedule and to use collaboration time wisely. He thought *I need to talk more to some of the other A+ principals.*

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As the spring semester progressed, Rose Rock’s art teacher Ms. Maloy busily collaborated with a number of grade-level teams whose level of effort, admittedly, varied considerably. This morning, her own art lesson focused on the value of color, and she had designed her activities so the school’s overarching concept of “Change” was tied to the school’s theme “Oklahoma Then and Now.” **Two art prints were mounted on the white board—“Starry Night” and a Monet garden scene. She led the students in a discussion of the use of color, asking them to name colors that they could see in the prints.**



Referring to the white board, Ms. Maloy asked her students, **“What words do we see up here that name primary colors?”**She then moved the discussion to color mixing and related it to Monet’s work. She asked, **“What if we wanted turquoise? What colors would we mix?”** The discussion of the prints continued, and eventually water colors were distributed, while Ms. Maloy led the children through a color value activity, painting stripes of different primary colors and then using a wet brush to blend them. After demonstrating the blending technique, she then displayed a photo of an Indian Blanket flower, a common wildflower seen around the state of Oklahoma and often presented in Native American artwork. She asked the children to use a pencil to lightly divide their paper in quarters. She then sketched petals and used a blending technique to paint them. She asked her students to work only on one quarter of the picture at a time so that the paint would remain wet enough to blend. In concluding this class’s activity, Ms. Maloy explained how the Indian blanket was part of Oklahoma now and then, while she demonstrated prints that included the image of these flowers.

Later in the day, Ms. Maloy taught a group of third graders who were divided into stations around the room. Each station was working on building objects with different materials or shapes. Along one side of the art room were examples of the integration of mathematics and art through the fifth graders’ creation of pyramids. Ms. Maloy had stated to her fifth-grade students, **“Art has form like geometry,”** and she tied an explanation of geometric shapes to the pyramids. Soon the school day was over.

Checking her e-mail, Ms. Maloy opened a message from Mr. Vogel reminding the faculty to think of concrete ways the school could document and work on integrating

curriculum and the collaboration necessary for integration. Ms. Maloy sat at her desk contemplating any ideas that might be worth suggesting. In this process she thought about the nature of her collaborations.

It seems like many of my collaborations are one-way. Many of the teachers are not coming to me, but I feel like I have to go to the teachers if collaboration is going to happen. I'm invited to come into many of the classrooms, but not too often by one of the fifth grade teachers since "fifth grade is working on test scores." I do have a great collaboration going on with the second-grade teachers as we co-write and co-direct a musical such as the one we did last year based on bugs. [She paused in her reflection for a moment.] *I have seen more teachers using art, even if not in collaboration with me. I'm sure one reason there might be a lack of teachers coming to me is because they do not have much planning time during the school day. The younger teachers are usually more receptive to the A+ program.* [Again, she paused for a moment in her reflection.] *Regarding how to document our curricular integration. . . I like the magnetic mapping board with PASS since it emphasizes learning concepts and is flexible as the lessons evolve and change, but I guess we could do something different. I don't know what that would look like, though.*

Ms. Maloy's attention drifted from the tool for documenting integration and collaboration that Mr. Vogel was soliciting. She began thinking about **a lesson she was developing regarding embellishment and adornment using Celtic lettering.** She had shared with colleagues **she was developing this lesson stemming from a trip to Europe she recently took.** However, she still had not developed a clear line of collaboration with



regular classroom teachers. She realized she would not solve anything that afternoon as she was tired and ready to go home. She thought *4:05 p.m.! I need to get out of here!*

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One sunny morning in late spring, A+ researcher Dr. Faye visited Rose Rock once again. She planned to conduct a few group interviews with the students who had returned consent forms, and she also hoped to observe several classes and to interview the principal.

When Dr. Faye checked in at the office, Rose Rock’s secretary relayed a message from the physical education teacher that an artist-in-residence was working with the students on dance this week. As part of the message, the physical education teacher had asked the secretary to extend a welcome for Dr. Faye to “drop in.” As Dr. Faye walked toward the gym, she noticed that **several of the halls displayed student artwork, drawings and quotes. She entered the gym and shortly thereafter was announced as the “audience” in front of which the students would try their modern dance routine. Lyrical music began, and the students in groups of threes danced. The majority of the students were committed to the music and dance, showing great effort and beautiful results as the artist-in-residence reminded them of the moves. Ms. Marshall, the artist-in-residence, spoke with Dr. Faye after the class and told her the students had learned the moves only days earlier. She also shared a project idea she would like to do later in the school year, even though it dealt with visual art rather than dance. She mentioned she had received a large piece of canvas that she would like the students to paint and hang on one of the gymnasium walls.**

Close to the music room, Dr. Faye decided to drop into Ms. Keener's class. After completing a warm-up activity, **the students asked their teacher if they could do the President's song for their visitor. She obliged, and the students sang about the 43 United States presidents, mainly listing them, to the tune from "3 Little Indians."** Each student was assigned to sing the refrain of the song and a stanza grouping three to four presidents together depending on popular phrases they used and the number of syllables in the presidents' names. **Dr. Faye recorded this experience as evidencing that this teacher used music to reinforce a cross-curricular point. However, it was not clear to her that two-way integration was taking place in the sense that very little about music was taught.** It seemed to be a tool to teach history rather than a vehicle for simultaneously and overtly teaching musical terminology, concepts, or skills. **Music was just the tool to remember the names. The students were very enthusiastic about singing, and the teacher mentioned to Dr. Faye, "These kids love to sing. Not all classes are this way, but this one is."**

Shortly before the lunch rotation began, Dr. Faye made her way toward the media center where she would interview focus groups from the third, fourth, and fifth grades. Before arriving at the media center, she noticed Ms. Denman, a third-grade teacher, standing in the hall posting some of the students' work. As she passed, Ms. Denman noticed the A+ Researcher badge and smiled in a way to invite discussion about what she was displaying. Dr. Faye commented, "Those projects look interesting!" **Ms. Denman explained that her students created Martin Luther King, Jr. folders that on the cover had a picture of the historical figure, on the inside had a timeline of his life, and on the back had a poem—all of which were student-created.** Ms. Denman was



quick to say, **“Now that’s A+!”** Dr. Faye smiled in return and complimented the students’ work before heading a couple of doors down to the media center.

During the interviews, Dr. Faye asked each student group questions related to the types of activities they do in their classes, examples of lessons they enjoyed learning this year, and the like.

In the series of questions, Dr. Faye included the following: “What do you like about school?”

One third grader stated, **“I like to play with the puppets and the dollhouse. You can act out your characters [from stories and activities].”**

“We are learning about coins, how to unscramble them and put them in order,” claimed a fellow third grader.

Two fourth-grade students **explained they like their science class because they feed oatmeal and apples to worms.**

Another fourth grader shared, **“We practice music in classes.”** He further **explained that the students learn songs in music class (like “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star”) and then rehearse them in their regular classroom.**

A fifth grader interrupted, **“I like making animals and piranhas out of clay. I like coloring pictures and making little people and cutting them [out] so that I can show my mom. Sometimes me and him [referencing his friend] get to hang our pictures. . .out in the hallway.”** After a brief pause, this student interjected again, **“Making model replicas of the Statue of Liberty!”**

Dr. Faye questioned, “What is that?”

“It is on an island, and it welcomes people in New York. . . .We made it out of clay,” he answered. **He continued describing how his class once made a replica Liberty Bell, including painting a crack on the bell.**

Dr. Faye quickly recorded the bombardment of responses the students generated. It seemed that once a student mentioned a lesson, others remembered their own examples with fondness. The stream of responses turned from trickle to deluge. Included in her student-provided responses were references to the **“mean teachers”** and the teachers who **“wouldn’t let them do anything but be quiet and fill out worksheets.”**Dr. Faye completed her interviews collecting numerous pages of student perspectives and was eager to see the extent to which these responses might evidence essentials from A+.

Before leaving the building, Dr. Faye decided to observe one more classroom and had previously sought permission to visit Ms. Montgomery’s second-grade class. As she entered the classroom, Dr. Faye heard Ms. Montgomery say, **“[I]. . .thought maybe we could put on a play with this story and each of you could have a part in the play.”** **She told the students they would draw their character name from slips of paper placed in a bucket. She also instructed them that each of them would get a bandana to wear. Ms. Montgomery and the students explored different ways of wearing them, as she explained that the bandanas were to be their costumes. One student seemed critical of bandanas serving as costumes by stating, “It’s not hiding your identity.” Ms. Montgomery asked if the students could pretend that the bandanas were [hiding identity], and the student responded positively.** After getting the students situated, class members took turns completing their parts and listened with enthusiasm, especially those waiting for upcoming lines. Within fifteen minutes the students had



completed the play, and at this point Dr. Faye realized she needed to return to the University. Thanking the students and Ms. Montgomery for a “wonderful performance,” she exited the building quite exhausted.

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Nearing the end of the school year, Mr. Vogel was encouraged by the progress made in areas of A+ implementation, while at the same time he was frustrated by seemingly fruitless attempts to bring some of the teachers—just enough of them to be a critical mass—“on board.” He considered A+ the focus of the school, and he expected he would be able to evidence more gains during the past year. However, he realized that A+ was not the central focus for a number of teachers. A small group still seemed to think it was something to add on to what they were already doing, occasionally incorporating an activity, while others still demonstrated opposition, outright and verbally or simply through inaction. Even though his school was considered a *good* one—a reputation a number of the faculty seemed satisfied to maintain—he wanted Rose Rock to be *great*.

Mr. Vogel took a few moments to reflect on where the school had been with A+ and where it was now. ***The principal that started them in A+ here was on the downside, getting close to her retirement. She retired two...years after they became an A+ school. . . And then now I’m here.*** Mr. Vogel realized he must focus on the positives that resulted from their efforts thus far. He thought back to a “Yes, but” (allowing for the negatives to interfere with or cloud proactive solutions) versus a “Yes, and” (focusing on the potential that lie ahead) strategy he had learned in an A+ principal’s training session and how it might apply right now. “*Yes, but.*” *I’ve worked really hard with the faculty to support them and to get all of them engaged, but a number of them are still resistant.*

[Pause] “Yes, and.” I think a number of previously reluctant teachers are starting to come around. I think . . . [they] are starting to make the connection. . . that it is not something extra.

He continued this contemplation of thinking about some of the positives: “I know there are. . . Fellows. . . and a core group that have continued not to give up. . . [but instead] incorporate A+ into what we do. Because I came and that’s what I believe, that’s been an easy transition [for them]. . . and our new teachers, we’re sending about five or six to the [upcoming] training.” He also thought about how the focus of A+ has changed the dynamics in regularly scheduled meetings at the school. I think the teachers have gained an appreciation from one another’s abilities, at least to a certain degree.

Some negativity crept back into the thoughts of Mr. Vogel as he considered what observable evidence of the A+ Essentials he had noticed the past year while monitoring the teachers’ development towards A+ implementation. He had stopped in and observed the classrooms, but in the future he was determined to schedule longer visits with the teachers. He believed at this point in their professional development through A+ teachers should be more comfortable with trying to implement A+ into their classes. He had also read over the teachers’ lesson plans. He read them to assist the teachers in understanding the degree to which they are meeting PASS objectives as they teach. He hoped to see more carry-over from grade to grade ensuring objectives were being met. He hoped that future teachers wouldn’t have to “catch them [students] up” when it was time to take the End-of-Instruction exams. During his walk-through he had seen group work being conducted in the classrooms; however, he would like to see different



results. Mr. Vogel murmured inaudibly to himself, **“I am not seeing quite the engagement I’d like to see.”**

“Yes, AND,” Mr. Vogel said talking to himself, **“We are a whole lot farther than we were a year ago. . . .[We have talked] about how we need to be using the language in the classroom- telling the kids they are number smart or art smart. . . .I want kids to be able to go home and say my teacher thinks I’m really good at. . . .”**

There was a pause to this open-ended statement in which any student could fill in whatever their strengths were. **“I think we’re making progress there.”** He continued, **“The teachers who use A+ [approaches] really well. . . .have students who do well academically and behaviorally.”** He acknowledged that the hands-on approach of A+ was the instrumental factor in these student differences. In further reflection he stated, **“The students’ attention increases because of this approach. . . .The students do not have time to have discipline problems. If every teacher did A+, my school would be in an educational journal right now.”** He truly believed that the school’s test scores would be increased and behavior problems would continue to decrease. Mr. Vogel thought, *“There’s always next year to get even better. I just have to keep “fertilizing the soil” and nurturing the “plants” that have blossomed”*

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Mountain Boomer Elementary School

Unlike the levels of successful implementation demonstrated at Scissortail Elementary and Rose Rock Elementary schools, Mountain Boomer Elementary evidenced slow progress and more tribulation than triumph. Visible signs of support for the process were becoming less apparent daily. Whereas Scissortail Elementary and even

Rose Rock, to an extent, were experiencing levels of success in their continual development and school reformulation, the Mountain Boomer Elementary momentum had halted and been anchored by a mostly resistant faculty and an uncommitted principal. The lack of support on the part of the principal exacerbated mutinous feelings toward A+ implementation and quelled the “re-form” efforts of all except the most committed of A+ teachers whose intrinsic motives for investing stemmed from personal beliefs regarding learning. In reality, the actions of those committed to A+ seemed to have limited impact outside of their own classrooms, as their practices were not spreading. These teachers participated in A+ professional development activities, deliberately engaged in A+ approaches, and yet served as the only existing connections between A+ and the school. However, even amongst those engaged, their efforts were not coordinated.

Ms. Lutker, the music teacher and site coordinator for A+ at Mountain Boomer, knew the hardship of working “against the tide” all too well. She had been one of the original teachers who had learned about and researched A+. After attending the preliminary institutes designed to help representative faculty develop an understanding of the A+ process, Ms. Lutker and a number of her colleagues, including the principal at that time, rallied just enough support from the faculty to qualify them for the network. She had never estimated how determined some of the Mountain Boomer teachers would be to discourage the success of implementation. The opponents of A+ at her school disregarded this approach as just another trend, a passing fancy, and refused to exert forth any visible support, including the refusal to attend any of the Summer Institutes. Despite the detractors’ efforts, Ms. Lutker considered the first year of implementation somewhat successful—teachers seemed to collaborate more than they had in the past, and some



were making attempts to incorporate creative assignments including the arts in their classrooms. In retrospect, the initial success was short-lived.

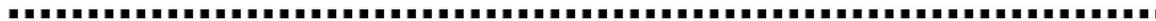
Now, its fourth year in the A+ network, Mountain Boomer faced a critical challenge as revealed by a widely held teacher perspective—**the current principal, Ms. Rupert, was not “buying in” to the process and, on the whole, there seemed to be “little leadership,” making it “extremely difficult for the teachers to . . . be able to do their job.”** Replacing the principal who had initiated A+ into Mountain Boomer and who had since retired, **Ms. Rupert joined the faculty one year into A+.** The longer she served in this role, her ambivalence and a sense of resistance towards A+ engagement had become increasingly clearer to faculty members. Researcher interviews and informal conversations between Mountain Boomer teachers and A+ Fellows and administrators revealed **a consistent view that while Ms. Rupert did not seem to actively oppose A+, she did not actively support it either. She was characterized as being willing to let those engaged in A+ teach in the manner they preferred, but she disregarded suggestions concerning efforts to promote curricular integration and cross-curricular collaboration.** The teachers’ perceptions were affirmed by the principal’s words when Ms. Rupert shared in front of a group of faculty members that A+ imposed **“too much extra work on the teachers. . . .It’s just asking too much.”**

At the conclusion of the previous school year, divisiveness among the faculty began to appear as the administrator’s support for A+ faltered, resulting in the empowerment of those teachers not engaged in the process to become more vocal and active against the process. The tension mounted to a head one particular afternoon when a teacher expressed her belief that **“the A+ way is the best way to teach.”** A heated

disagreement ensued between those few teachers still actively employing A+ practices and the majority of other teachers who had abandoned A+. The division in the faculty now clear, Ms. Rupert found it necessary to focus efforts on developing an understanding that the faculty must **“respect differences in teaching styles.”**

What had become obvious at Mountain Boomer was that whole-school collaboration was non-existent. This fact had also been evidenced in the research conducted by Oklahoma A+ Schools® researcher Dr. Faye at the school. In interviewing a teacher who had been at Mountain Boomer long before its involvement in A+, Dr. Faye had asked for ways the school used collaboration. As a response, this teacher shared that **a faculty meeting occurred once a week, but the teachers did not mention cross-curricular planning or collaboration as something that regularly occurs.** When Dr. Faye asked who the A+ site coordinator was at the school, this same teacher **was unaware who that was or if they had one.**

Just as Scissortail and Rose Rock were at very different places in their school engagement in the A+ process, teachers under one roof at Mountain Boomer were at totally different “points” of engagement. In August, the start of the 2007-08 school year, Mountain Boomer’s teachers returned to the school one early morning to attend their “Welcome Back” in-service meeting.



Consistent with the back-to-school faculty meeting at many other schools, the meeting at Mountain Boomer began with an ice breaker activity and some discussion about changes that occurred over the summer: the teachers’ contract had been agreed upon between the local union and the district, a new business would be used this year for



custodial services, and there was an addition of a new colleague to the faculty, third-grade teacher Mr. Hopper.

The majority of the meeting was spent discussing particular items in the teachers' handbook, procedures for the first few days of school, the potluck faculty luncheon held the day before the students were to report back to school, and supply needs. A+ was saved as the last discussion point on the meeting's agenda, and according to the schedule there were only ten minutes left.

Ms. Rupert decided she would provide a theme for this school year that would serve a dual purpose, to give teachers a common area to connect some of their lessons and encourage a sense of unity among teachers who left the previous year somewhat divided. **She mentioned that this year's theme** would be the Wild West. With the remaining time left in the meeting, Ms. Rupert stated she would allow teachers to consider ways that they could create activities built around the theme and believed this would be one way teachers could collaborate. She also recognized Ms. Lutker as the site coordinator of A+ and said that this year she would like everyone to consider how each could do some A+ "things."

Ms. Lutker felt the tension that still pervaded through the faculty regarding A+, but the time away from each other during the summer seemed to soften the edges from the hostility that had been apparent the previous school year. Unsure where to take the conversation regarding A+, particularly since there were only a few minutes left in the meeting, Ms. Lutker stated her willingness to take the faculty's ideas and to serve as a resource in designing cross-curricular lessons. Her offer to lead this initiative was met

with receptive smiles and polite stares. After a brief pause, Ms. Lutker asked, “Are there things any of you would suggest we do that are A+?”

Fifth-grade teacher Ms. Bryce responded, **“I think the things I do [that are A+] are things I already did. I haven’t added a whole lot just because of A+.”**

Fellow fifth-grade teacher Ms. Kelly shared, **“I use bits and pieces [of A+]. I didn’t go everyday to the five-day training. I use it some. I try to find more poems. I allow the kids to express themselves more through reader’s theatre [and] through drawing and things like that. I get the feeling that that is how most of the people around the school are doing.”**

At this point, third-grade teacher Mr. Hensley interjected that **he knew that A+ had an integrated arts focus but doesn’t really understand the organization of A+ [at the school]. He said the view is that we do lots of hands-on activities and art, but he’s still not sure how it all works. He admitted that he only attended a two-day training and that was during the third summer of the school’s involvement; however, he mentioned he recently attended the Statewide Conference.**

Ms. Lutker noticed Ms. Rupert signaling her that time was running out for the meeting, so she stated she knew some teachers were really engaged in developing lessons collaboratively and integrating curriculum. She then noted that she would like to discuss this further at an upcoming meeting and reminded the faculty that, as the music specialist, she welcomed them to talk to her about ways to integrate.

Ms. Rupert stepped in as Ms. Lutker completed this statement, and stated that those who were interested in curriculum integration should take some time to talk to Ms.



Lutker. Then, she dismissed the teachers informing them that they would have the remainder of the morning to “work in their rooms.”

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Minutes after the “Welcome Back” meeting, several of the committed A+ teachers assembled informally in the hallway but quickly decided they should “vent” more privately in fourth-grade teacher Ms. Sellon’s classroom. Disappointed by the principal’s “shallow coverage” of A+ during the meeting, Ms. Sellon, fellow fourth-grade teacher Ms. Prado, second-grade teacher Ms. Hardeman, and Ms. Lutker discussed their frustration.

Stating the obvious, Ms. Prado said, **“I don’t think A+ is going as well as it could be. Top-down influence [is important]. If there’s not a strong influence from the top, the perspective from the staff is going to be the same. I think it is more of a title than an ideal. I’m not blaming her [Ms. Rupert], but she doesn’t want to dive in [with A+]. She does other stuff [referring to multiple other educational initiatives] as well that has her focus.”**

Responding to the reference to the school’s other initiatives, Ms. Sellon quipped, **“We’re not sure what we are! We’re not Core Knowledge; we’re not GE. We’re not IB yet. We all know we’re supposed to be A+. . . .it’s just if. . .the teachers are willing to incorporate it on their own.”**

Ms. Lutker’s disappointment about the lack of administrative support and the lack of faculty engagement was apparent from the sad expression on her face. Looking for the “bright side” of the situation as she was always apt to do, she commented that **at least there are a few teachers still “very strong in their practice of the A+ philosophy.”**

She pointed out, for example, how Ms. Prado and Ms. Sellon had made great efforts to team teach and pursue integrated activities.

Ms. Prado nodded in agreement stating that **their team teaching began as an occasional activity but had grown to team teaching on a daily basis** by the end of the previous school year.

“But, of course, we’re not doing anything with other grade-level teachers,” criticized Ms. Sellon. “The only collaboration we’ve really had is among the fourth-grade teachers and with Ms. Lutker.” Ms. Sellon reemphasized her frustration. **The Mountain Boomer faculty “haven’t really followed through. Like vertical planning. We had a Fellow do a workshop, then we met once and did it. Then, nothing else.”**

Attributing the lack of A+ engagement to the building principal, Ms. Lutker asserted, **“It’s the leadership. We just can’t move forward without her support.”**

Ms. Hardeman reiterated that **teacher indifference to A+ will be “impossible to overcome” as long as principal support and buy-in are absent.** She reminded the others that during their first year in the network under a different principal, **“We were an A+ School and. . .[the teachers, overall] were really doing great things, but then the principal changed and now they just aren’t doing it anymore.”** Ms. Hardeman specified that **faculty planning committees are no longer active, the principal is making all of the decisions about school-wide policy and activities without any collaboration, and even the parent MI nights had been discontinued.**

“That’s not the only thing that’s changed,” retorted Ms. Sellon, “Look at our art teacher who was new last year!”



Ms. Hardeman affirmed, **“The children don’t embrace going to art. . . .It’s the personality of the teachers. . . .It doesn’t carry over as something fun. I don’t know that it’s going to change.”** Ms. Folds, the part-time art teacher **“is not here very much.”**

Ms. Sellon interrupted, **“We had artists-in-residence that the PTA paid for. Some of the old Bidy teachers said, ‘What did they really do?’ [Pause] The teachers aren’t going to change their ways; we’re going to have to get people from outside to come in.”**

“I don’t think we’re really deserving of the title of A+ School. I think we have it because it looks good. I think at. . . .Mistletoe Elementary [referring to a sister school in the district], not an A+ school, they are pushed harder to integrate the arts. Here, it’s just not pushed,” reported Ms. Lutker.

“So, what are we to do?” asked Ms. Prado pointedly, “It doesn’t seem like we’re going to change anything.”

Ms. Sellon responded, “At least you and I can continue our collaboration, and we’ve got Lutker here.” Referencing the fact that Ms. Hardeman’s counterpart teachers in the second grade were less than receptive to A+, Ms. Sellon joked, “Hardeman, you’re on your own!”

“Thanks!” she responded.

“I guess we’ll do what we can,” said Ms. Lutker matter-of-factly. “That’s all we can do.”



Weeks into the school year, A+ researcher Dr. Faye made her first 2007-08 school visit to Mountain Boomer Elementary. Her past experiences at the school varied somewhat. Initially, she had witnessed excitement among the faculty when A+ was first implemented under the leadership of a popular principal who had since retired. However, during the past two years there was visible evidence of tension between teachers, reports of dwindling support for collaboration and the integration of numerous A+ essentials (e.g., cross-curricular instruction, approaches utilizing the multiple intelligences, experiential learning, and arts-based activities), as well as a lack of commitment from the school's leader.

Upon walking through the main doors of the school, Dr. Faye **realized that the A+ banner provided to each school when it was accepted into the network was moved from the entry of the school. In fact, she would not see it displayed anywhere in the building during the day's visit. With years of experience as a public school teacher, university professor, and researcher out in the schools, Dr. Faye also perceived that the climate was not warm and inviting.** While walking toward the office, **she could hear from a classroom down the hall a teacher's voice yelling, "Now, if you guys want to be a bunch of first graders, I'll treat you that way!"** **Papers and trash on the ground were also visible; they had not been picked up from the floor.**

Dr. Faye first interview of the day was scheduled with Principal Rupert, who upon the researcher's arrival mentioned **she only had a few minutes because of other meetings she needed to attend.** With limited time for the interview, Dr. Faye asked her a general question, "How are things going regarding A+ implementation at your school?"



Ms. Rupert responded that when she first began working with A+, **“It was a little overwhelming. Administrators felt that if. . .they didn’t do all of this [implementing the A+ Essentials™]. . .they wouldn’t be doing it right. I look at the professional development of A+ as information that is being shared with me. I haven’t made it difficult.”**

In response to how the teachers were engaging in the process at her school, Ms. Rupert replied, **“I have those who are good at integrating the arts and those who still feel that. . .that they need to do book learning. I think understanding that it [A+] is not separate [from traditional approaches] is an important thing because they [all the teachers] value time. I think that as the teachers become more and more comfortable and [realize] that it [an A+ instructional approach] doesn’t just end in chaos, they’ll do more and more. The kids want to do this. If you can do this in a way to calm them down, then you do have control over the classroom behavior.”**

Dr. Faye followed, “So, would you say that Mountain Boomer is making progress with implementing A+?”

“We’re making progress as far as understanding the philosophy and the essentials of A+. I gave the faculty a handout [about the A+ Essentials] to make sure everyone had one,” Ms. Rupert replied.

Dr. Faye noticed that Ms. Rupert **was looking at the clock and that she began sifting through some papers on her desk, seemingly suggesting that she wanted to conclude the interview.** Providing one more opportunity for the principal to share more information regarding how the A+ process and its essentials were being utilized, Dr. Faye asked Ms. Rupert **if there was anything else she would like to share about A+.**Ms.

Rupert shook her head from side to side **indicating that she was not sure that there was anything else to say.**

Next on Dr. Faye's schedule were teacher interviews that had been scheduled on a volunteer basis by A+ site coordinator Ms. Lutker. Dr. Faye noticed that of the six teachers who signed up—not including Ms. Lutker—that three seemed committed to A+, while the other three seemed to vary between being neutral and oppositional.

The interviews with teachers more committed to the process revealed a repetitive theme, **not many of the teachers at the school were willing to engage in the process, and the principal was not demonstrating expectations for the teachers to engage meaningfully in A+.** In fact, one teacher reported, **“I don't know that a single teacher [from their faculty] went to the Statewide Conference last year. Now, if Ms. Rupert said, ‘I want you two to go, they might do it.’”**

Interviews with those neutral or opposed to A+ painted a quite different picture. For example, there seemed to be a widely held belief that A+ was nothing new to them, the teachers asserting that **“they were already doing A+ before A+.”** Contradictory to what the more committed teachers reported, one of the more reluctant teachers to engage, fifth-grade teacher Ms. Kelly, claimed, **“The teachers are much better here than. . .years ago, and it is getting better. [Pause] It's getting better, even the principal is coming along.”**

Surprised by the lack of consistency in the teacher statements, Dr. Faye asked a follow-up question inquiring if there were anything in particular that Ms. Kelly thought showed that the principal was “coming along.” The teacher shared that Ms. Rupert had come up with a school theme she considered a part of A+.



“When Ms. Rupert told us the theme, we were all unsure how to do it. But it has built unity,” Ms. Kelly stated.

Dr. Faye continued questioning Ms. Kelly asking how she personally explained what A+ was to people who did not know about it. Ms. Kelly responded that **“it’s an arts infusion program.”** She gave examples of what happens in school, particularly how **art and music were used in classes, and how it affects the kids. For example, she said, “On the standardized tests [the previous year], some kids were humming stuff to help them remember.”**

Between two of the interviews, the physical education teacher Mr. Wimple entered the small office that had been reserved for Dr. Faye’s interviews, and upon noticing her, abruptly walked straight to the phone resting on a desk in the corner. Without a word to Dr. Faye, he made a phone call regarding a coaching schedule. Dr. Faye excused herself from the room and waited a few minutes outside in the main office. As she heard the phone call end, she walked back into the room. Mumbling in seeming anger, Mr. Wimple brushed by Dr. Faye and slammed the door to the office on his way out.

After a few deep breaths, Dr. Faye calmed herself and regained her focus on making notes about the nature of the interviews. **She noticed that the interviews were considerably shorter at Mountain Boomer than at the other schools she visited,** including Scissortail Elementary and Rose Rock Elementary. It seemed to her that although the protocol of questions was identical for each school—with exception to follow-up questions—the teachers at Mountain Boomer were unable to expand with

specifics regarding the implementation of A+. With time to spare during the afternoon, she decided to visit some classrooms to acquire additional field notes.

As Dr. Faye walked by numerous classrooms in the fourth- and fifth-grade wing of the school, **she noticed that most of the teachers were using traditional lecture, and the students were working independently on worksheets.** She entered Ms. Bryce's room and quietly situated herself at the back. The class was focused on a geography lesson as **Ms. Bryce led the whole-group instruction through lecture. The students sat in straight rows of desks. While Ms. Bryce was teaching, Dr. Faye noticed only a few pieces of student work posted; instead, numerous commercially made posters decorated the room. She also noticed that there were no signs on the walls that conveyed any of the A+ essentials [awareness of multiple intelligences, etc.]** After nearly thirty minutes of observation, she moved to another classroom.

Next, she observed a joint classroom. Ms. Sellon and Ms. Prado had opened the divider between their rooms in order for their students to work together. **Several Oklahoma displays filled different parts of the room.** Combined together as one large class, both teachers' **students created an acrostic for the word *Oklahoma* listing characteristics of the state. For example, the students decided that the "m" in Oklahoma would be used to begin the phrase "mining for oil," while the last "a" began the phrase "always changing."** There were also cutouts of the shape of **Oklahoma, and during the lesson each student wrote some identical teacher-provided facts about the state, including the number of Native American tribes and the four most populated cities. Additionally, there were photocopied pictures that the students colored with many Oklahoma features: the state animal, bison; the**



state flower, mistletoe; the state bird, a scissortail; and so forth. Later, Ms. Sellon and Ms. Prado would assemble these pictures into packets for display.

During observations in the second- and third-grade wing of the building, **Dr. Faye noticed artwork hung in the hall, a collection of teacher cutouts and fill-in-the-blank art that was complete with the same poem on each sheet. Seemingly, this assignment reflected penmanship practice. Just down the hall, another collection of fill-in-the-blank art was displayed. Students had written identical responses about a fall theme, yet the students colored their leaf-shaped papers differently. While walking toward one classroom, Dr. Faye looked in at third-grade teacher Mr. Hensley, who when noticing her, walked across the front of the classroom, and shut the door.**

Dr. Faye peered into an open door to the third-grade classroom across the hall. **Mr. Hopper was trying to work with a student at the chalkboard, while the others were having conversations and engaging in other activities instead of following along on their worksheet. Dr. Faye stepped into the classroom and found a seat next to the pencil sharpener. During the ten-minute observation, only two problems from the worksheet were covered. Apparently, the students were allowed to get up when needed, as one student seemed to roam around the room without any response from the teacher. Another student crawled under a table, while another student chewed on his jacket zipper. Several others were involved in out-of-turn speaking and playing footsies. All of this activity occurred while Mr. Hopper was trying to teach one student.**

For her final visit of the day, **Dr. Faye observed a kindergarten classroom where the students attempted to take naps with soft music playing in the**

background. This classroom was one of the few places in the school where A+ signs were on display. Kindergarten teacher Ms. Tidwell had illustrated the multiple intelligences.

Dr. Faye thought about the discrepancy of A+ implementation among the schools she visited. She reminded herself of the importance of not being biased in developing negative expectations. A salient point emerged as she recalled discussions she observed among the A+ Fellows and administration—the schools in the A+ network were certainly at different “entry points” and as such would progress differentially.

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After the teachers settled into the first few weeks of school, Ms. Lutker made time to drop by Ms. Rupert’ office one late September afternoon to talk about her role as the school’s A+ site coordinator. After waiting for the principal to complete a phone call, Ms. Lutker stepped into Ms. Rupert’ office.

Early in their discussion, Ms. Rupert **acknowledged she knew A+ was not progressing as well at Mountain Boomer as she knew some teachers would like.** She made pointed remarks that since this was her first job as a principal, the implementation of numerous educational initiatives made Mountain Boomer a steep learning curve for her. In a moment of reflection, Ms. Rupert revealed that **she always doubted herself when people would say, “We can’t do this” and “It takes too much time.”** However, **she admitted that it had been reaffirming to hear from the A+ administration and Fellows at the institutes that we can do this.**

Empathizing with Ms. Rupert and placing some accountability on the teachers for their lack of engagement, Ms. Lutker **expressed her own disappointment that most of**



the teachers tend to hold an extrinsic view of A+, as if it were, at best, an add-on to what they were already doing rather than using their talents to restructure *how* they taught. She claimed the faculty had not yet reached an understanding that the A+ philosophy should permeate all aspects of the school experience for teachers and students. Ms. Lutker then reminded Ms. Rupert that she herself was “green” at being the site coordinator since she was asked to fulfill this role at the end of the previous school year when kindergarten teacher Ms. Tidwell decided to relinquish the responsibility. She bluntly stated that **she was not provided with a manual informing her how to function as the coordinator, and she openly expressed she was not sure what the expectation was of her.**

Ms. Rupert chuckled, “I guess we’ll get through this together, then.” She did share **she was looking forward to working with Ms. Lutker as the new A+ site coordinator. She stated there were no plans, as of yet, for the free on-site professional development offered by A+, but she would like to take advantage more of the training they offered.**

One of the first steps for Ms. Lutker in this role, as Ms. Rupert suggested, was **to survey the faculty for workshops they might want and then “possibly bring in some A+ personnel for staff development opportunities.”**

Glad to hear that Ms. Rupert was somewhat supportive of A+, even if her commitment in the past had wavered, Ms. Lutker agreed that scheduling professional development would be a good start. She tactfully asserted she believed it was imperative for Ms. Rupert to communicate to the faculty that she thought these sessions were

important. Ms. Lutker also mentioned that **in the past, they had not used all of these opportunities, and the teachers might actually want more workshops.**

“We asked for only one on-site training last year,” clarified Ms. Rupert.

Feeling that this conversation was progressing well, Ms. Lutker claimed, **“We’ve [referring to herself, the media specialist and the former art teacher] been working for years to get the teachers to tell us specials teachers what they’re doing [with their students]. There is not much discussion between teachers about developing skills or curriculum with each other.”** She suggested a workshop focused on integration might be helpful if they can overcome the teachers’ resistance to A+, but she also agreed to follow through with Ms. Rupert’s suggestion to survey the teachers.

Ms. Rupert shrugged, seeming to suggest that Ms. Lutker’s suggestion was satisfactory. Realizing that the momentum of the meeting was slowing to an imminent halt, Ms. Lutker excused herself from the office. Willing to carry out the plan they contrived, she was as anxious as she was eager. She had approval to pursue A+ training for the faculty, but she did not feel certain she had the necessary backing to make it work, or even more importantly to make it meaningful. If Ms. Rupert’s past actions were indicative of how she would support this year’s attempts regarding A+, she knew her efforts would at best be futile and at worst be further divisive.

.....

By early November, only small strides had been made in A+ implementation. Ms. Lutker had attended the fall institute held by A+ and met fellow site coordinators from the other schools in the network. She was amazed at where some of the schools seemed to be in the A+ process, and she found herself envious of the creative approaches and



levels of engagement of the other A+ schools. Her only alternative to acknowledging defeat was to focus on the Mountain Boomer teachers, albeit a small group, who were committed to the Essentials.

In addition to serving as the resource for the explaining the A+ Essentials and as the organizer of A+ activities, Ms. Lutker learned she also had to be cheerleader for the process. In conversations with Ms. Prado, Ms. Sellon, Ms. Hardeman, and several other teachers whose neutrality had recently been replaced with curiosity regarding A+ approaches, **she focused on implementing instructional strategies utilizing the multiple intelligences. Some of the teachers crafted wonderful lessons, while others still demonstrated trouble incorporating the MI's and the arts. Ms. Lutker recognized that although several seemed overwhelmed, they might be able to improve and "find their way" in time. The main hurdle she recognized for the faculty in general was impelling more teachers to integrate. She felt they still wanted to isolate rather than integrate.** Of course, for integration to happen, the teachers would have to collaborate.

Adding to her reflective journal, she made during one of the A+ workshops, Ms. Lutker expressed frustration numerous times throughout the first four months of school, including the following passage:

October 9, 2007

Grade levels were to meet once a week. They get an hour, and of course, there's some housekeeping that they need to do, but it was supposed to be for collaboration. . . Ms. Rupert used to be a part of it, but now she's let the teachers take over. . . and then the afternoon was supposed to be [for] the

specials. . .but that just didn't work out that way. . . .But what I didn't like about it was that she [Ms. Rupert] just gave up; she didn't try other things. . . .I brought up the need to have collaborative time with specials with. . . the principal, but. . .eventually gave up. And I asked about it twice, and it never materialized, and you don't ask a third time.

Another of her entries dated November 6, 2007 noted, “**We haven't really done much [with collaboration and integration] other than reinforce arts vocabulary.**” She explained that collaboration is not possible before the students have the basics mastered in the subject area. After basics are understood (such as students understanding their body and movement terms such as in dance), then she believed that collaboration could be possible.

By the end of the fall semester, Ms. Lutker would make another entry. She would document that Mountain Boomer **still had not had on-site professional development from the A+ program that school year, even though now she would really like to see staff development in the Essentials of climate and infrastructure**, as those were most pertinent to faculty needs. She continued stating in this entry that as of yet, **the school still has not had** or made plans for **any A+ nights for parents, such as using the Multiple Intelligences or other Essentials.**

Ms. Lutker was not willing to abandon the struggle, however. If anything, the bonds and collaboration among the few teachers “on board” with A+ were stronger than ever. She knew she could not give up because she believed “**A+ is the right way to teach.**” She could not let her instructional practices contradict her educational beliefs and values. Unfortunately, Principal Rupert was not providing the leadership nor teacher



accountability that was likely to encourage school-wide progress. Even if it was unlikely that the A+ approaches would be integrated by the entire faculty, Ms. Lutker felt that at least A+ could make a difference for those teachers who invested in it.

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After the winter holidays, Ms. Lutker felt renewed from the time away from school and was eager to see her students. Knowing this school year she had worked harder than ever before—much of that due to A+ implementation—**she also knew she was more satisfied than she had ever been as a teacher.** Most importantly, she believed her students demonstrated **more interest, more enjoyment, and more learning** than her previous students. This awareness inspired Ms. Lutker to be confident not only in the approaches she was using but also in leading and advocating for A+ at Mountain Boomer.

As good fortune would have it, Ms. Rupert’s fluctuating levels of commitment to A+ seemed to be on the upswing as well. She agreed to dedicate half an hour of a January faculty meeting to the topic of A+ and allowed Ms. Lutker to lead this portion of the meeting.

Wanting to begin the meeting on a positive note, Ms. Lutker shared her belief that she felt the students at Mountain Boomer should have all the same wonderful opportunities as those at other schools. She mentioned a few specific examples of activities and lessons occurring at Scissortail Elementary and said she had already gained enormous insight as site coordinator by networking with other A+ schools. She continued stating that **she has seen progress regarding A+. She said that. . .this year the faculty seems to be working better together.** Mindful of the divisiveness of the faculty, she

deliberately recognized that there were those who did not accept the A+ philosophy just as there were those who did.

Ms. Lutker sincerely pleaded, “I know we all care about our students and want the best for them. None of us would provide anything but our best efforts to make a difference. Regardless of how much time you think you have to develop lessons or to teach, I just ask that everyone keep an open mind to always learning more—just like we expect our students to do—and to use every tool we feel would make our classes better for students. That being said, I’d like to quickly share some of the responses I received about A+ professional development.”

“Future professional development” that you stated you **“would like to see includes more games for the classroom, MI assessment and how to use that and incorporating more music in the classroom,”** Ms. Lutker reported.

Ms. Kelly, one of the fifth-grade teachers opposed to A+, replied that **she finds herself using another education-related program more, just because she has the catch-phrases and “slogans” already learned.**

Ms. Lutker bit her tongue to keep from making an impulsive statement and thought *why can’t she just give it a try!*

Ms. Kelly **mentioned that this program she was using was used in her previous school, so she is more comfortable with that and is not as familiar with A+.**

Recognizing she needed to be straightforward, yet respectful in order to advocate for A+, Ms. Lutker asserted politely, **“Time could be given if we were really dedicated [to using A+ approaches more]. I think we have the resources to do what we want,**



but we don't necessarily use them." She maintained her direct eye contact with Ms. Kelly.

An advocate of A+, fourth-grade teacher Ms. Sellon leaned over to her counterpart Ms. Prado and stated bluntly, **"If A+ is going to survive [at Mountain Boomer], it needs to be taken more seriously. Personal interest plays a big role. Not everyone here is interested in the arts. If you want to be a good A+ school, they need to find teachers who have a desire for arts integration, MI's, etc."**

Typically oppositional, third-grade teacher Mr. Hensley raised another issue but stated matter-of-factly, **"Figuring how to do what they [A+] want us to do in 50 minutes is the largest challenge."**

Ms. Lutker recognized the legitimacy of this underlying issue and remarked that at her A+ network meetings, **the A+ administration and Fellows emphasized that they consider schools' responses at training sessions in planning for future professional development.** She claimed that **the A+ Fellows have been very helpful in trying to show those involved in the training how to practice what they preach.** Ms. Lutker again politely reminded her colleagues the support was there for them to grow if the faculty were willing to put forth the effort. Looking for affirmation from the Mountain Boomer teachers who had attended the Summer Institutes or an on-site professional development activity in the past years, Ms. Lutker remarked, **"I think that is one of the great things about this staff development because they [A+ Fellows] modeled. They came and they modeled exactly how you do it and what to do and that, I believe, helps more than anything."**

Ms. Rupert interjected here that **she had heard teachers say that they want “someone to come show. . .them what to do, show. . .them *how* to do it (A+).”**

The emphasis on this point troubled Ms. Lutker since she knew there was not full faculty buy-in. Those who expressed opposition or who were not actively pursuing A+ did not seem to trust the system of the professional development and were not willing to even participate.

Riled by the insinuation that the teachers had not been provided enough specifics to be engage in A+ approaches, Ms. Sellon reminded the faculty that **she and Ms. Prado created some integrated lesson plans to share with the faculty and advertised that these were filed in a drawer in the teachers’ workroom a couple of years ago. However, she pointed out, they were never touched.**

Trying to hold her tongue at least publicly, Ms. Sellon then whispered to Ms. Prado in an irritated tone, **“Do they ever ask for our opinions or feedback? No. They say, ‘Give me my sheet’ and if it [the entire, spelled-out lesson] is not on it, they don’t do it!”**

Hoping that Ms. Sellon might further her public statement or some of the other advocates might encourage the faculty to attempt more collaboration, Ms. Lutker looked at the table at which Ms. Sellon was sitting. Noticing that Ms. Rupert seemed uncomfortable with the brewing tension and not wanting to place any of supportive colleagues in an awkward position, Ms. Lutker withheld from inviting any teachers to share their viewpoint.

Mr. Hensley ended the silence offering his own perspective. Pointing out that teachers’ comfort level with using artistic approaches may vary, he acknowledged,



“Some teachers are comfortable with that [the hands-on, experiential, arts-based lessons]. You know, it’s something they know. My . . .wife is a music teacher, so I have more resources at home that I can put in here. Maybe other teachers don’t feel as comfortable.” For example, using music **“can be something silly such as singing their [the students’] names to get their attention or singing a jingle to help them remember something. Sometimes something that is not even planned can bring some music in.”**

Exposing another issue, first-grade teacher Ms. Hepner contended, **“In first grade I still feel like we have so much to do. I try to incorporate A+ into things. When we’re doing phonics, if I can think of anything I can do—a song or a rhyme—I try to use it.”**

Once again recognizing the importance for building peaceful, professional relations rather than adding to the underlying division and hostility, Ms. Lutker honored the fact that developing A+ approaches was likely frustrating and overwhelming for some. Calmly, she empathized, **“I think we’re all struggling with how to integrate everything because our district has changed some things. It’s harder to integrate our themes, our units. . .I’m hearing that from people.”**

Mr. Hensley commented, **“Our guided reading is very good and makes good readers. And I love our everyday math, but it’s hard to pull things from them to integrate. It’s on its course, and that’s hard to change.”**

Responsive to Ms. Lutker’s professional manner, one of the opponents to A+ Ms. Kelly declared, **“I don’t know. Maybe we could refocus. I don’t think we’re communicating as much as we could. When we have to do a lesson study, there’s**

tons of collaboration, but maybe not with an A+ or an arts focus. It's more now of a technology focus. I thought at first it was with an A+ focus, but it's not. Now we're talking less than once a month when we were talking once a month before. I don't think A+ is coming together as a whole." She followed this statement with a question to Ms. Lutker, "What do *you* think needs to be done?"

Ms. Lutker had been thinking of this question quite often recently, and she replied, **"The biggest thing [immediately] is collaboration with specials teachers."** She explained from her perspective that it would help with the **Multiple Intelligences Essential and teaching hands-on, etc.** She also stated the teachers need **more planning time and that last school year, teachers came up with ideas.**

Ms. Prado whispered to Ms. Sellon, **"But I haven't seen any of it in action."** Realizing she needed be positive and productive rather than negative, she added, **"But I know it takes time."**

If anything were accomplished during the faculty meeting, it was that issues relevant to the Mountain Boomer faculty were discussed openly and without too much hostility. The seeds for having professional conversations regarding A+ had been planted. Ms. Lutker fully intended to nurture this small success, and in her optimistic spirit she imagined the incremental steps she wished to encourage the faculty to take.

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Weeks later, a slight but noticeable change was palpable in the teachers' moods and definitely in their attitudes toward A+. In no sense had all the faculty come "on board" with A+ since the last meeting. However, Ms. Lutker's ability to diffuse faculty hostility and her professionalism in keeping the focus of conversations on *what was in the*



best interest of the students had won her respect, if not support. Ms. Lutker believed that without the principal's overt support of A+, the best she could do as coordinator was to make it appealing—primarily because the students seemed responsive to the approaches but also because it was **fun to teach this way.**

First-grade teacher Ms. Hepner sat in the teachers' workroom at Mountain Boomer and planned her next unit that she hoped to begin later in the week. Even though she had not invested a great deal of energy in utilizing integrated, experiential, and arts-based activities, she was receptive to taking small steps in that direction. While mulling over a set of worksheets and the lesson plans she had used in past years, Ms. Hepner noticed that the part-time art teacher Ms. Folds, who was new to the school two years ago, walked into the room. Ms. Hepner **felt it was a shame the school did not have a full-time art teacher, and she was aware that Ms. Folds hadn't really connected with the faculty, probably because she seemed to drift in and out of the school.**

After exchanging greetings, Ms. Folds stated the obvious, "It looks like you're working hard."

Ms. Hepner revealed that she was rethinking a unit she was teaching and was considering how she might use a hands-on activity or some art or music. She admitted to Ms. Folds that recently she felt inspired to consider what A+ strategies she could use, and she rekindled efforts to collaborate with Ms. Lutker, the music teacher.

"When you need her [Ms. Lutker], she is just very open and genuine, and she is always working with the staff. She can think up a song with lyrics and a tune for any occasion very easily," claimed Ms. Hepner. **She continued by mentioning that sometimes she plays CD's in her classes as part of music integration.**

“Did you use music today?” asked Ms. Folds.

Ms. Hepner replied, **“No, We [referring to herself and the other first-grade teacher] practiced the writing test today, even though the students are first graders. We’re trying to train them early. My students enjoyed it. The students thought it was fun how we were talking it up.”** She added, **“Ms. Rupert is also very test focused.”**

Ms. Hepner’s attention was drawn back to her lesson planning, while Ms. Folds began making photocopies of some pictures she intended for the students to color. After several minutes, Ms. Hepner broke the silence asking Ms. Folds, “Have you used A+ much? Do you work with other teachers to integrate art activities?”

Ms. Folds declared, **“I’m the new person. I don’t want to tell them [grade-level teachers] what to do. I’m a resource person here.”** She further stated she leaves her door open for them to come to her with units they are doing in the classroom and ask her how to incorporate art into those units if they want. She shared, though, that relatively few had done that.

After several minutes of silence, Ms. Folds commented on things she had heard about A+ from a friend of hers who was an art teacher at another A+ school. Specifically she talked about how they recently had an Arts Night where parents were invited to the school to participate in arts activities and learn more about A+. Ms. Folds asked Ms. Hepner, “Does Mountain Boomer do anything like that for the parents?”

Ms. Hepner claimed they once talked about A+ with the parents at PTO meetings when the school first joined A+, but they had not done much in the way of having special nights with activities. She also mentioned that Ms. Rupert did organize **a newsletter that**



was sent out containing information from “all the teachers and their grade levels and . . .staff bios, like doing a personal information sheet. . .with our picture, like ‘Do you have a pet?’ and hobbies and things.”

Ms. Folds said, “I bet the parents liked that.”

“I haven’t really heard anything from parents,” responded Ms. Hepner, “Usually you don’t hear the good things; you only hear about stuff that is not great.” Still thinking about the parents’ awareness of A+, Ms. Hepner commented that only a few really know about it, and she added, “the ones you would expect to anyway.” After a brief pause, Ms. Hepner spoke straightforwardly, “I don’t know about the ones [parents] you would really want to try to get. This is a very low-income community.” She elaborated that from her perspective, the parents really weren’t too interested in the school’s A+ program as long as their kids were doing “what they were supposed to.” Ms. Hepner pointed out that just getting the kids to school was an issue and that the school was working on attendance. She continued, “I think it is part of our society here. . . .I don’t know, but the [academic] work ethic is not real wonderful. It is hard to get parents to realize that first grade is important.” She concluded by claiming that poor attendance and a lack of interest in school were expected by-products, considering the community.

That’s encouraging, Ms. Folds thought to herself. Simultaneously, both teachers recognized the time and quickly gathered materials to head in their own directions to teach.

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While the faculty attitudes toward A+ slowly continued to become more positive throughout the spring semester, the truth was that the growth in applying A+ strategies was much slower to follow. The vital signs of Mountain Boomer indicated a slightly stronger heartbeat, suggesting A+ was alive, though barely.

In late April, Dr. Faye once again visited the school and noticed subtle differences in the climate. Although the physical appearance of the building had changed little, the atmosphere in the building seemed friendlier than during previous visits. Also, she found more smiles among the teachers, as well as more cordiality and more welcoming than she remembered. However, she had not yet encountered Mr. Wimple. Her focus today was to examine the *source*, in this case the students. She had learned that, on the whole, the receivers of the instruction could paint a fairly accurate picture of their educational experiences. Although the teachers could explain their intentions and objectives and how they wanted the students to learn, the students could characterize what actually happened from their perspectives.

Dr. Faye's protocol for questions included several areas she believed would tap into students' daily experiences, and as she had done at the other schools, she interviewed the students in small, grade-level focus groups. Throughout the interviews, there were several *telling* responses.

“What are the kinds of things you do in your classes?” she asked.

One third grader responded, **“We get to write. . .a story and then draw pictures.”**

A fellow student said that his class does not make pictures to go along with the stories.



Dr. Faye asked the first responder, **“Do you ever get to hang them up?”**

“No,” the student replied.

A classmate of his chimed, **“Sometimes.”**

One other third grader proudly announced, **“I like to learn, like my teacher explains it to us then we can know how to finish it and how to do it and get it all right.”**

As a follow-up, Dr. Faye asked this student to tell her how her teacher explains information if she does not understand. The student replied the teacher will show her on the board how to do long-division.

Dr. Faye noticed a considerable difference in the responses of the fourth-grade students of Ms. Sellon and Ms. Prado.

One fourth grader said, **“In reading assignments or sometimes even science assignments, she’ll, if it’s something where we can work together, she’ll give us partners. Sometimes we get to choose them. When you have a partner, sometimes they may know something you may have missed or forgotten. It helps me a lot.”**

Another claimed, **“I like science because we do a lot of fun experiments. Like yesterday, it was like a track meet. It was like a pole vault and a discus. We had to figure how long it was and measure. . .and figure out distances. It makes it easier for me to understand.”**

Dr. Faye then asked, **“Do you do activities like this in most of your subjects?”**

A fellow fourth grader declared, **“Yes, in every class. We. . .didn’t do as many in hers [pointing to a particular third-grade teacher’s classroom].”**

Next, during interviews with some fifth-grade students, one claimed, **“We were learning about countries.”** The student said they looked at magazines about the countries they were studying, and his group got China. The teacher had picked out magazine pages describing the country.

Dr. Faye inquired if the students shared what they learned with other groups or the class or if they hung up the pictures, etc. The student stated they **“did not do anything, just look at the pictures.”**

Another student described using a **“Neo,”** that he described as a **“kind of like a laptop, but it isn’t.”** He said that students could write stories on this machine. Dr. Faye asked if the students were able to choose what story to write about, and he stated the teacher would tell the students **“what to write about.”**

A fellow fifth grader explained that in her classroom the teacher kept track of how much students were reading. **“She tests us on how many minutes we read,”** she said.

Yet another student declared, **“I don’t really like doing the workbook pages and being quiet and all that.”**

Dr. Faye asked what they do in groups or with partners. Collectively, the students stated they complete worksheets or study guides, but in the science class, they work on labs.

Seeming to evidence support for the notion Dr. Faye had developed that the fourth-grade teachers were more apt to use A+ approaches, one fifth grader shared, **“Last year in science we did a project every day; this year in. . .class it’s just every once in a while.”**



Addressing another line of questioning, **Dr. Faye inquired, from each of the grade-level focus groups, whether or not music or art or drama or other activities were used in the students' classes.**

“We sing, and we play the marimba,” said one third grader, **“in the music room.”**

Dr. Faye followed, **“Do you do any music in your regular classroom?”**

“No,” the student responded.

Another third grader remarked, **“When we are a little wiggly, we get to play Simon Says.”**

A fourth grader explained, **“We told about an animal.”** She added that they **had to present their animals through words (a story) and a drawing.**

Sparked by the response of her classmate, another student shared, **“We had to draw a character what we think he looked like.”**

Yet, another fourth grader shared, **“In music class we do songs, and in language we do songs like Predicate Man. In social studies, sometimes we act out the scripts. Whenever we did “Tax on Paper. . .Tax on Tea” there were maybe six verses, and we would act out the part of the song we did. We would make up our own part. . . .Sometimes we get to color these activity books that help you study for a test. It helps because we have a picture in our mind of what it [the material being studied] would look like. But in art, most of the time we just learn about artists and famous people. We don't really get to do free art. If it's not exactly like how she wants it, we get points taken off.”**

Several fellow fourth graders agreed when this student finished her comment stating, **“It can be the greatest art project, but you can get points taken off.”**

A fifth grader observed, **“Yes, sometimes right before we read. . .sometimes when we are fixing to take a test or something. . .[our teacher] will put some thinking music on to help us think about our test, so, um, so we’ll get to listen to some music. But then after. . .that when we take our test, she’ll sometimes, when we are working, she’ll put the music on so it will help us think better.”**

Another fifth grader stated, **“We do a lot of art in social studies because we get to color books that talk about social studies. . . .In social studies the sheets are already drawn, but we get to color them in.”**

Among the multitude of comments the students made regarding other topics, Dr. Faye noted that one student suggested, **“I want teachers to actually follow the homework schedules and not give us homework in every class every day.”** The student claimed they are only supposed to have homework in three subjects a day.

Another student stated she and her classmates would **“like more open-mindedness.”** She referred to a teacher no longer at the school who this student felt was open-minded and claimed that they **“learned best from him.”**

One particularly verbal female fifth-grade student interjected, **“One thing I don’t like about this school is that they won’t let you wear tank tops.”**

A fifth-grade male counterpart interrupted, **“It’s because you’re showing skin.”**

The female student replied, **“I know, but it’s elementary skin.”**

Dr. Faye chuckled, as this comic ending to a full day of research work was cathartic. At the end of her visit to Mountain Boomer, Dr. Faye thought about the



variation in the experiences provided at the schools she visited. She had heard similar reports of variation from other members of the Oklahoma A+ Schools® research team. Her gut-level response prompted concern for the students she did not feel were getting opportunities that others were getting.

As the school year was soon closing for all the Oklahoma A+ schools she visited, including Scissortail, Rose Rock, and Mountain Boomer, Dr. Faye’s own semester at the university was concluding. Whereas the students at these schools would hopefully be enjoying summer throughout the upcoming months, Dr. Faye felt eager, yet somewhat overwhelmed to begin the arduous, collaborative task ahead of looking at the longitudinal data compiled during the past five years to investigate what the data would reveal.

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Looking out the window of the music room, Ms. Lutker saw Dr. Faye walking toward the parking lot. Her visits to the school always seemed to induce feelings of anxiety. Ms. Lutker wished the school’s engagement in A+ was stronger. During times like these when she was frustrated with the challenges of implementation, she had to remind herself that at least there were others who were as passionate about A+ as she was. For added perspective, she reflected on the positive activities and accomplishments regarding A+. She was certain she was giving her best effort and that she was making a difference, even if it seemed that her circle of influence was limited. Essentially, she believed that what she gained from her commitment to A+ processes benefited her students. All she wanted was to enrich the lives of every single one of them.

As the school buses started to arrive and line up in the circular drive in front of Mountain Boomer, she began collecting materials she planned to review that evening.

There was work to be done. Summer was approaching, and she was determined to derive the most from it.





Glossary of Terms

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|----------------------------------|---|
| A+ Fellows: | An A+ Schools professional facilitator (“Common A+ Terms and Definitions”) |
| Arts [A+ Essential]: | A commitment in which the arts are taught daily; inclusive of drama, dance, music, visual art, and writing; integrated; valued as essential to learning; included in planning; practiced; and a part of personal experience (Oklahoma A+ Schools [®]) |
| “Child in the Chair”: | A metaphor (attributed to Heidi Hayes Jacobs) used during professional development, A+ faculty and Fellows’ institutes and retreats, the Statewide Conference, etc., to contextualize and focus the work so that materials, approaches, and strategies all reflect student-centeredness—making decisions about school operations and instructional practices that provide the best quality experience for every child |
| Climate [A+ Essential]: | A commitment in which the school’s approaches encourage teachers to manage the arts in their classrooms, encourage a reduction in stress, ensure that teachers are treated as professionals, encourage morale to improve, encourage excitement about A+ as the implementation grows, and encourages invigoration toward the whole school reform process (Oklahoma A+ Schools [®]) |
| Collaboration [A+ Essential]: | A commitment in which the collaboration is intentional; occurs within and outside of school; occurs during planning time, including classroom teachers working with the arts teachers; occurs with teachers, students, families, the community, and local businesses; and includes broad-based leadership (Oklahoma A+ Schools [®]) |
| Core Knowledge (CK): | An educational program based on “an Idea. . .that for the sake of academic excellence, greater fairness, and higher literacy, elementary and middle schools need a solid, specific, shared core curriculum in order to help children establish strong foundations of knowledge, grade by grade” (Core Knowledge Foundation) |

Curriculum

- [A+ Essential]: A commitment in which the curriculum is addressed through the use of mapping that reflects alignment, thematic webbing, development of essential questions, creation and use of interdisciplinary thematic units, and cross-curricular integration (Oklahoma A+ Schools[®])
- The A+ Essentials™: A set of commitments that include collaborative, research-based practices; that include daily arts instruction, experiential learning and enriched assessment; that encourage collaborating around curriculum by mapping the instruction so that interdisciplinary concepts emerge that encourage cross-curricular integration; that use the multiple intelligences to structure learning opportunities for students; that encourage positive changes in school climate and the learning environment; and that deliberately develops an infrastructure supporting common planning time, shared vision, and faculty commitment to the goal of schools that work for everyone(Oklahoma A+ Schools[®])
- Enriched Assessment
[A+ Essential]: A commitment in which assessment is on-going, designed for learning, used as documentation, is a reflective practice, helps meet school system requirements, and is used to self-assess by teachers and students (Oklahoma A+ Schools[®])
- Essential Questions (EQ): Main thematic unit question; broad, over-arching, big ideas question (“Common A+ Terms and Definitions”)
- Experiential Learning
[A+ Essential]: A commitment in which experiential learning is grounded in arts-based instruction, is a creative process, acknowledges entry points, includes differentiated instruction, and provides multi-faceted assessment opportunities (Oklahoma A+ Schools[®])
- Great Expectations (GE): “(GE) is a teacher/administrator professional development program that provides teachers and administrators with the skills and knowledge needed to improve academic achievement, school climate, attendance, and parent involvement. GE is founded on the fundamental belief that education is the key to solving the problems of our society that educators want to become more skilled in their quest to educate students, and that students want to learn. . . .The main objective of GE is to increase students’ intellectual knowledge, self-esteem, and social competencies. To accomplish this, GE focuses on the transformation of



educators (through professional development) and the transformation of schools (through organizational change). GE strives to help educators re-examine their teaching methods and interactions with students as well as assist them in redefining their values and beliefs about learning processes” (Great Expectations).

Infrastructure
[A+ Essential]:

A commitment in which the infrastructure supports A+ philosophy by addressing logistics such as schedules that support planning time, providing appropriate space for the arts, continually developing faculty commitment, creating a shared vision, providing related professional development, and continually building a sense of “team” (Oklahoma A+ Schools[®])

International Baccalaureate (IB):

“The International Baccalaureate aims to develop inquiring, knowledgeable and caring young people who help to create a better and more peaceful world through intercultural understanding and respect. . . . The IB works in four areas: the development of curriculum, the assessment of students, the training and professional development of teachers, [and] the authorization and evaluation of schools. The five essential elements—concepts, knowledge, skills, attitudes, action—are incorporated into this framework, so that students are given the opportunity to: gain knowledge that is relevant and of global significance; develop an understanding of concepts, which allows them to make connections throughout their learning; acquire transdisciplinary and disciplinary skills; develop attitudes that will lead to international-mindedness; take action as a consequence of their learning” (International Baccalaureate).

Multiple Intelligences (MI)
[A+ Essential]:

A commitment in which multiple learning pathways are used within planning and assessment; are understood by students and parents; are studied, and new research is explored; and are used to create balanced learning opportunities (Oklahoma A+ Schools[®])

Oklahoma A+ Network:

A professional network that includes A+ administration and staff, A+ Fellows and faculty-in-training, artists and experts in the community, partner organizations and institutions around the globe, and the 60+ schools, ranging from urban,

suburban, rural, public, and private, that have been accepted as a partner with Oklahoma A+ Schools[®]

Oklahoma Priority Academic Student Skills (PASS):

State-adopted standards by which curriculum and assessments are designed (Oklahoma PASS)

Responsive Classroom Training:

“The *Responsive Classroom* is an approach to elementary teaching that emphasizes social, emotional, and academic growth in a strong and safe school community. The goal is to enable optimal student learning. . . .Seven principles. . . guide the *Responsive Classroom* approach: the social curriculum is as important as the academic curriculum, how children learn is as important as what they learn: process and content go hand in hand, the greatest cognitive growth occurs through social interaction, to be successful academically and socially, children need a set of social skills: cooperation, assertion, responsibility, empathy, and self-control; knowing the children we teach—individually, culturally, and developmentally—is as important as knowing the content we teach; knowing the families of the children we teach and working with them as partners is essential to children’s education; [and] how the adults at school work together is as important as their individual competence: lasting change begins with the adult community” (Responsive Classroom Training).

Site Coordinator:

The coordinator at each A+ school who is responsible for working with the administrator to develop the A+ whole school reform initiative at that site

Statewide Conference:

An annual conference that includes presentations and hands-on professional development involving teachers, administrators, parents and district officials from A+ and non-A+ schools, A+ staff, Fellows and Faculty, artists, legislators, community and educational partners, and the Oklahoma A+ Schools[®] research team



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NOTES





All five volumes of the research report can be found in full on the Oklahoma A+ Schools website:
<http://www.aplusok.org/history/reports/>

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Deepest appreciation for the funding support of our generous partners including the Kirkpatrick Foundation, the Donald W. Reynolds Foundation, the University of Central Oklahoma, the Oklahoma State Legislature, the Oklahoma State Department of Education and our additional foundation supporters.

Special thanks to the dedicated and talented team of scholars whose work is detailed within the five volumes of this important report.

Particular gratitude to the students, teachers, principals, OK A+ Fellows, OK A+ Advisory Board, OK A+ staff and the North Carolina A+ Schools Program without whose work this publication would not be possible.