

January 30, 2017

Superintendent Article

At the annual State Education Convention in Milwaukee this month, I listened to keynote speaker Liz Murray share her life journey from homelessness to Harvard graduate. Her biography read,

"While it is an unlikely turn of events, Liz Murray's life is a triumph over adversity and a stunning example of the importance of dreaming big. Her life as the child of cocaine-addicted parents in the Bronx was bitterly grim. There was never food in the house, everything was filthy, drugs were everywhere, and the welfare checks were spent before they arrived. By age 15, Murray's mom had died and she was homeless—living on the streets, riding the subway all night, and eating from dumpsters. Amidst this pain, Murray always imagined her life could be much better than it was."

Ms. Murray used the obstacles she faced everyday as valuable lessons to build upon. She certainly had grit. Grit is defined as courage, resolve, and strength of character. Ms. Murray also had a mentor who assisted her to set goals and adjust her practices to stay on target to reach the goals. Together, Liz and her mentor used the process of continuous improvement to change her circumstance.

Organizations that embrace continuous improvement consistently achieve impressive results because they maintain a focus on the entire system, simultaneously looking at the parts and how all the parts are connected. Continuous improvement requires the engagement of all staff to use improvement processes in their daily work. It is about developing a culture of improvement that asks questions such as what is working, what is challenging, and what needs to happen to get better results?

Ripon Area School District's journey with continuous improvement began with the launch of a new mission and vision during the 2015-2016 school year. Then, prior to the start of the 2016-2017 school year, the district leadership team began realigning key work under the four core strategies of Student Engagement and Learning, Human Resources, Service and Partnerships, and Finance and Operations. The team also began using 60-day improvement cycles to track progress on initiatives.

This year, a team of 3rd-8th grade math teachers from legacy and charter schools began working together to learn the continuous improvement process and use it to impact math achievement across 3rd-8th grade math classrooms. This spring, the Board is meeting with the administrative team to determine district level indicators for success and to develop a process for reporting out on the impact of improvement efforts on those indicators.

At the State Education Convention, Liz Murray commented, "I started to grasp the value of the lessons learned while living on the streets. I knew after overcoming those daily obstacles that next to nothing could hold me down." Determined to take charge of her life, Murray finished high school in just two years and was awarded a full scholarship to Harvard University, all while

camping out in New York City parks and subway stations. Truly the ability to grow as individuals or as an organization lies within each of us.

The Ripon Area School District's continuous improvement work will allow us to better meet the needs of our students, staff and parents. Through the diligent efforts and commitment of staff, RASD continues to raise student achievement and maximize district resources. Moving forward into the second half of the 2016-17 school year, the focus on continuous improvement through the four core strategies will allow us to live out the District's mission of inspiring learners, engaging community, and enriching the world.