Triple R Teaching

Hello, this is Anna Geiger from Reach All Readers and the author of "Reach All
my
book written by David Pelk on Amazon.

He wrote, "'Reach All Readers' is a great learning tool and resource for all educators. Anna Geiger has a true gift of summarizing research and then connecting it with practical ways to use it. She has given you the support, including additional ideas and materials to make it practical. Her layout of her learning will not only point you in the direction you want to go, but will also provide the next places you might go as you figure out your own next steps. This is a book you want to have in your resource collection to support all readers."

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Today is the first in a four-part series. I'm interviewing Candice Johnson, reading specialist at a small school in Cudahy, Wisconsin. Her district worked with an organization called Schools Cubed to help improve literacy learning across the board. In this episode, she walks us through what that looked like and how their school has implemented particular systems, high-impact instructional routines, and more to improve reading outcomes for everyone. Then she talks about where they're going next.

Anna Geiger: Welcome, Candice!

Candice Johnson: Hi, Anna! Thanks for having me.

Anna Geiger: This last spring you and I met at a presentation that I was giving about the science of reading, and you invited me to your school in Cudahy to see all the changes that your school's made. That was a wonderful morning of visiting different classrooms and talking with teachers about the systems changes you guys have made, so I'm really excited to dive into the details today.

Before we do that, could you introduce us to yourself and talk about how you got into education?

Candice Johnson: Absolutely. My name is Candice Johnson, and I am a reading specialist instructional coach for the school district of Cudahy. I really love my job and the work that we're doing, but I definitely did not see myself as being in this role and doing the work that I'm doing.

My journey kind of started off a little bit different. I've been teaching for almost 15 years. I started off as a substitute teacher and that's where I landed my first job, and I was really excited. My first couple years as a teacher, one of the things that I realized and did a lot of reflecting on was that I wasn't trained to teach kids to read. We did some of the things that you hear about. We did the assessment system three times a year, and we would collect this data, but we really didn't do much with it. We would look at it and go, "Oh, that's too bad."

I had so many questions, and I had so much responsibility sitting on my plate, looking at 25 kids in front of me. My expectation is we've got to get these kids to read, and I knew that I didn't have the capacity to do that in the way that I wanted to.

About five years into my journey, I took a risk and went back to school, and I got a master's degree from Cardinal Stritch University. As I evolved with my education, things started changing in my classroom, and it was really amazing. I will never forget I had gone on a field trip one day and my building administrator had asked me to meet her in her office. She asked me to be the building reading specialist, and I looked her dead in the eye and I said, "Absolutely not."

That classroom, those kids, those were my people. That's what I love doing. Those are my community of kids. It took about five or six times of having the same conversation and pulling me into the office.

What really got me to put my foot into this role is she sat me down and she said, "Listen, Candice, I have seen you go from being that new teacher to what you are today. You can see and you can feel the change that has happened in your classroom, and it is remarkable. I need that change to happen across our building. The impact that you're making is great, but we can make a bigger impact together, and I need that knowledge and that coaching to go along with me as your building administrator."

Anna Geiger: Have you been in Cudahy this whole time?

Candice Johnson: I have, yeah.

Anna Geiger: Could you talk to us a little bit about the Cudahy school system and what that looks like?

Candice Johnson: The Cudahy School district serves roughly 2000 students. We have gone through some challenges in the last couple years. As our community has been growing, I've watched the particular elementary school that I work in go from being over 400 students to now, we have declined to less than 200 students. We have faced a school closure and potential more school closures, and that's a really devastating feeling to have in education.

But we're a very proud district. We are a district who has done some reflecting and has made some very positive changes. Several years ago, my curriculum director, Karen Savaglia, who is wonderful, really recognized that in looking at our school data from the state report card, we were underserving our community.

Anna Geiger: Okay.

Candice Johnson: And we needed some outside help. She had reached out to a company they called Schools Cubed. It's a consulting firm that is run by Pati Montgomery based out of Colorado.

Anna Geiger: Okay.

Candice Johnson: She and her team stepped in during the time where we were seeing that we were really failing our students. Especially after that pandemic, I think a lot of schools saw a very big decline in their numbers. I know in my school, we, I think historically, were always around the 30th percentile, which is not good. Reflecting back, I don't even think I knew what those numbers were.

Anna Geiger: Right. Right.

Candice Johnson: Nobody talked about them. So we started having conversations and we started looking at graphs together, and we had dropped to 21% and went, "Oh my gosh, this is not okay."

Anna Geiger: For people who are listening, does that mean 21% of kids were reaching benchmark for reading achievement? Is that what you're saying?

Candice Johnson: Yes, according to the state reading assessments, the Forward assessments.

Anna Geiger: Okay.

Candice Johnson: We said we have to make this change. We have to be reflective, and we need to move forward.

It has been quite the journey. It has been a difficult journey, but it has been the most amazing and rewarding journey because of the results that we have seen in the three years. We're going into our fourth year.

For my school in particular, we were at, according to state testing, 21% of students reading at proficiency. After one year with Pati Montgomery, we raised that to 42%.

Anna Geiger: Great!

Candice Johnson: That was huge. Three years into that journey, we are now at 47%, building that momentum and continuing to grow our students.

Our goal is to really follow some of the statistics that we're hearing from research. The National Institute of Health has come out and said the brain has the cognitive capacity to read, and that should be reaching 95% of our population, with the other 5% roughly having cognitive disabilities.

Our goal is to continue to prove to the Cudahy community that we can take a community that has low socioeconomic status, it is a diverse community of learners... In the past, there have been a lot of excuses as to why these kids could not learn, and we've been able to push those aside and say, "Yes, they can." That's our journey right now and moving forward to that 95%.

Anna Geiger: Talk to me about what the teachers were told initially and maybe what kind of pushback you may have gotten.

Candice Johnson: The unfortunate thing about being in the teaching profession is that you have a very short window before you are sitting with kids to get professional development. You're coming off of summer break, and so when our teachers, including me because I didn't have much information either, sat down with our first presentation and were hit with a lot of information really fast, then it was just zero to 100. It was incredibly overwhelming, and it kind of just felt like everybody was just drowning in new information and figuring it out as we went, but things got better. I think it's just the nature of what education is in not having that time that we need to prepare in advance.

What we learned in this process is that Schools Cubed is all about systems, structures, and instructional routines. Pati has developed some really great tools that have really helped us along.

She has what she calls a literacy evaluation tool. It is a tab that sits on my computer every single day. It's essentially a rubric, and that rubric is compromised of six categories. That's universal instruction, intervention assessment, data-based decision making, professional development, and school leadership. All of those categories have a rating system that has been the tool that my team... When I say team I mean the amazing teachers that I work with who are the ones in the classrooms implementing all of this work, and my amazing administrator who is leading this work.

The part that really changed the mindset with our implementers, our teachers... At first it is so hard to hear, especially when you've been teaching for 20 plus years, that there are all these changes to make, and to undo and unlearn things is really challenging. And so people, of course, are going to be very resistant to wanting to make that change.

But there was a school board meeting where Pati had gone to the school board and presented some information. In her discussion with the school board, a light bulb moment went off with all of our staff. In that moment, she basically told them that the

purpose of her consulting firm and what sets her apart from other consulting firms is that this isn't about critiquing teachers. This isn't about going in and telling them they're doing everything wrong. This is about building leadership. So Pati's belief is that when we have principals who are literacy leaders and are evaluators, that is when the change is going to happen.

When Schools Cubed started coming in to do visits, which happened once a month, they would visit classrooms, but they didn't really sit down and talk with teachers as much as they did sit in and have a two-day discussion once a month with the building administrator and myself. It really came down to building that strong team and teaching a principal, what are those look-fors? What does that research say? Because when I leave here, you are the one who has to do the work, and you are the one that has to hold these teachers accountable, and you are the one who is going to set the tone for the expectations moving forward.

That was a very pivotal moment for the staff that I work with. When they saw that their leader had to do the learning first, it was much more impactful.

Anna Geiger: When you had this leadership, you all became basically forced to be on the same page. Can you talk about that, about before and after? How did things change with Schools Cubed kind of taking leadership here?

Candice Johnson: I can be super honest and tell you that as I have to make my schedule based off of other people's schedules, I realized reading really wasn't being taught. It wasn't in the schedule for some classrooms, and that was really alarming to me. I think there was an upsurge in Teachers Pay Teachers, with good intent, but not a lot of direction on how to use materials. Walking into classrooms, oftentimes reading was just a mixture of worksheets that students were working on that really didn't have a solid objective to the learning that needed to be had.

We had a 90 minute literacy block, and half an hour of that was shared reading and maybe ten minutes of phonics. Then it was an hour of what we call the Guided Reading, using a lot of Fountas and Pinnell and a lot of LLI kits during that time.

The transition that we first made with Schools Cubed was that our principal now had to make the master schedule. Teachers were not in charge of that anymore. That ensured that our literacy blocks were put down at a certain time, and so when an evaluator was to walk into your classroom with that schedule, you should be teaching your ELA block when you said you were teaching that ELA block.

Anna Geiger: Gotcha.

Candice Johnson: Because a lot of times that was a problem.

Our 21% proficiency was very low. As a school who was deemed high need at that time, we moved into 120 minute literacy block.

Anna Geiger: Okay.

Candice Johnson: We had to invest the time in to make the changes. Since then, we've brought it down to 90 minutes that we're rolling into this year because we've seen great growth and success, but that was a transition that we had to make. So fidelity to the master schedule was important.

The next part was pacing. Within our block, we really tried to base the block off of the five pillars, and starting in a very specific order. We're going to start with phonemic awareness, we're going to roll into phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, and then really the belief is that fluency and oral language development, that should be woven into all of the components that we're doing. We should see that everywhere. It's not its own component.

The belief is if your literacy block starts at 8:30, and I know when you came to visit my school, I'm like, "No, we start at 8:30!" If you are not on your pacing, if you have too many kids that need to use the restroom and you take a classroom break, and then you come back, you're eating time, and so we had to be really critical about sticking to that. It was a really hard adjustment at first because we were never clock watchers, I guess, if you want to call it that. But then we got into a groove and to a pacing, and we started to see a difference with that.

Anna Geiger: So in a way, you're accepting this urgency of this situation, right?

Candice Johnson: Absolutely.

Anna Geiger: And urgency requires absolutely that we're sticking to the time that

we've committed and we're not letting other things suck time out of it, which is hard for teachers because so many things can suck time out, right? How did you help the teachers stay on track with that?

Candice Johnson: One of the things that changed within my role when Pati and her team came in, the role evolved into more of an instructional coaching role. Another very profound thing that was said to me by my coach, Jill, who we worked with, is... The first time we ever met her, she sat my administrator and myself down, and she really clarified those roles. She looked at me and she said, "Candice, you are the coach. You are the cheerleader. You are the grower. You are going to go into classrooms once a week, and you're going to watch those teachers, and you are going to be their best friend, giving them the advice and the feedback that they need."

By feedback, what I learned was being able to transcribe what I was seeing so that a teacher could read it back, but then providing them some feedback in terms of, let's reflect on some things. I'm going to ask you some questions, and we'll develop from there.

Then she looked at my administrator and she said, you are also a grower, but you are the evaluator. That is very different from being the coach, the grower.

The distinct differences between us are that I really had to form relationships and trust with teachers for them to be able to accept feedback. It is very scary to have someone like me walk in and sit in the corner or sit down next to your students and watch you teach. That was a very rough start to our journey because it had never been done.

Anna Geiger: Sure.

Candice Johnson: It was only really accepted when the evaluator came in once in a while to do those evaluations. Whatever feedback or discussions that I have with teachers was never to go to my administrator. That was between me and the teacher, unless the teacher decided that they wanted to talk to the administrator about it.

Anna Geiger: Okay.

Candice Johnson: Same thing with my administrator. Whatever she saw in her evaluations that was between her and the teacher.

Anna Geiger: Okay.

Candice Johnson: We could have general conversations and say, "Hey, I'm seeing a common thread happening in our K-2. Maybe it would be nice if the two of us could go in together to do some observations and talk about some of those things, and do some reflecting on that tool with our universal instruction." That would allow us to have some conversations, but I think that really helped bridge a trustworthy relationship with myself and with the staff that I work with.

Anna Geiger: So you've talked about basically reestablishing of roles and understanding what everyone's job is, and then a handing of the schedule to the teachers versus teachers developing it on their own, and also this pacing, keeping on track with the schedule. Is there anything else that was a big shift for everyone?

Candice Johnson: Instructional routines. What you were doing within that time limit was really important, and it had to be purposeful.

School districts adopt programs, and sometimes we get too much training, sometimes we get too little training, sometimes we get no training. These textbooks are thick, and there's a lot of information in there.

One of the things that my teachers have come to realize is that we have to be really grounded in what we believe. As we made the shift to structured literacy and this body of reading research, we have to be up to date on our knowledge and be able to be consumers of a curriculum, rather than have that curriculum textbook be able to... Because it's a program, it can't tell us what to do. We have to be able to be educated professionals who can go in and say, "This is what's going to fit our needs for our community," and be able to pick and choose what that is. That was a really huge part in the instructional routines that we did.

Anna Geiger: To that, I would say, in the past, that may have been happening as well. People were just picking and choosing, but they didn't have the shared knowledge. Would you agree?

Candice Johnson: I would absolutely agree because there's a time limit, right? You could spend a full day trying to get all of the things done in that book. You have to pick

and choose what you do, but I think it was based more on, oh, this is just what I want to do versus what my data is telling me what I need to do.

Anna Geiger: Exactly.

Candice Johnson: Because when I look at this classroom, each classroom every year is going to be different. They have different needs and different changes need to happen with that. But within those instructional routines, what Schools Cubed really brought us back to that were not strong at all in our school, was equity of instruction and making sure that all students were required to participate. No one gets to put their head down, no students are getting pulled out of the classroom.

During that time, we formulated what we refer to as focus walls that are really a great visual tool for both a student and teacher, but also someone like me who's walking into multiple classrooms in a day, or an evaluator who is coming in to know what your focus is of that day or that week and the purpose, your objectives.

We really started to dive really deep into Anita Archer and really understand explicit and scaffolded language. We had to develop very intimidating lesson plans. I think that was maybe something that started early on in those August dates that kind of hit us with the brick, is that we were going to now have to plan our lessons, very detailed, by the way, and submit those into a Google Drive where our administrator or myself could pull them up and follow along as you're teaching.

Anna Geiger: Sure.

Candice Johnson: That was a really hard shift for teachers too. At first, I'm not going to lie, I had my head down on my desk and I had doors slamming in my faces, and people didn't want to hear or see from me, but there was a relationship that grew over time.

I had an amazing team who was really open to listening to some of my crazy ideas, and they were willing to try them in their planning process, and then let me watch them teach it and give me feedback and say, "You know what, Candice, this was too much. We need to tone it down here. This isn't realistic. Or maybe we take a little bit of the planning out of this and shift it here where there's a lot more going on in this department that I need to focus on. This seems more routine, and I kind of got this piece." So yes, I would say it took about a year or two to really fold into that.

I'll also say, which is really interesting, when we first had Pati and her team come in year one, we moved to structured literacy still using our old programming.

Anna Geiger: Okay.

Candice Johnson: So we were using all of the things we had used from Benchmark for years, but we had to really learn how to be consumers of that. Then in year two, we adopted Wonders.

Anna Geiger: Okay.

Candice Johnson: So there was some lesson plan changing there. We were feeling really good year one, and then year two came and there were more changes, but we were, I think, more ready for them within the instructional routines.

The other things that Schools Cubed really brought, you mentioned it earlier, is that urgency in that pacing, and we really honed in on our culturally responsive practices, and student management, and engagement. If students are not engaged, they are not learning.

We also really toned down teacher talk. Teachers view themselves more as a facilitator, as a coach, but we have to give kids time to be able to collaborate with each other and be able to have that think time to be part of that learning. That was very different for us.

We also learned how to engage students in frequent responses. We learned how to navigate turn and talk routines. We also went from picking on students who had raised their hands, because what we've found is that it's always the same kids and the expectations of learning are only going to the kids who are willing, and sometimes those aren't the kids who need it the most. So we kind of started a policy where we just don't call on hands, and we cold call and the students know that and I think they like it.

At first, it was a little different, but it keeps them on their toes and they're really excited, and we have procedures in place, right? You may call on a student who doesn't have an answer, and that's okay. But the system may be that we will say, "Okay, we're

going to come back to you. We're going to jump to somebody else who's going to help us find that answer." Then that student's going to repeat that answer so that we can confirm that they have a better understanding. But we also like to set them up so that they can have maybe a partner talk before we do that cold calling as well.

Also, I think the last important thing for anybody who's listening, who teaches the real little ones who are very wiggly, and you're thinking 90 to 120 minute reading block, that's not sustainable. We had to, again, reflect and evolve into understanding that we had to build in movement breaks. We've had to be really strategic about when we're standing, when we're sitting, what movements they're doing, at what time. The kids really look forward to it and they really enjoy it, and you can see the engagement in the classrooms.

Anna Geiger: So you've basically doubled your numbers, but I know you're still working towards that 95%. Can you talk about what are your next steps to keep raising those numbers and helping more kids reach benchmark or exceed it?

Candice Johnson: One of the pieces that we have been evolving and learning and working on is understanding data. Data can be very complex, especially when it comes to students and the varying data points that we do collect. We started off in year one with a data system that really helped us see a bigger picture. Now what we're learning to do is to dive really deep into that data and really break apart what some of those categories mean. Let's take these results and let's use it to reflect on our teaching.

We're in that process of going slowly because it can be very complicated to understand those results and to think about the impact of maybe what we feel versus what our data is saying, because we might think we're doing amazing at teaching vocabulary, but our scores maybe weren't as high as those feelings. So we have to do some hard reflection and some navigating and go back to some of those routines, and really think about the progress.

Our kids are not the same that they were in this journey three years ago. They're growing, and those numbers are becoming more proficient. We have to evolve with those students and meet their needs where they're at. So I would say that's where we're at, really navigating that data right now.

Anna Geiger: Well there are so many things we could pick out of this episode. For teachers, or maybe administrators, who want to start making school-wide changes, but may not be at a point where they're able to hire someone, some things you talked about were being sure we understand everyone's role, having a system where if you hopefully have a reading specialist they have a schedule for visiting teachers and a

time to provide that positive and helpful feedback. Like you said, that can be slow going at first, but slowly building that relationship, and then having expectations for what classrooms are doing at different times of the day.

I know that can be really hard for teachers because I know one thing I loved as a teacher was my autonomy, which I thought was a good thing at the time, but looking back, there was a lot I was doing that was definitely not supported by research in it, and I would've benefited from some leadership that helped me understand that.

Also, school-wide professional development that's shared versus you're going here, you're going there. We're all going to learn this, and here's what we're learning, and we're making time for that as well as providing it in a way that teachers can digest it. Then learning to own that data as a school, not just by classroom, but this is our data and working together on it. A lot of it, I think, comes down to the fact that we're not little islands. We're a whole community, and we're all responsible for everyone's success. Would you agree?

Candice Johnson: Absolutely. I think you really defined the work that we've done. That was beautiful.

Anna Geiger: I will make sure that if people leave a comment on the blog post or send me an email hello@reachallreaders.com with questions that I can direct them to you

Candice Johnson: Perfect.

Anna Geiger: All right, well thank you so much, Candice! This was very exciting, and I know the teachers are going to enjoy also listening to the other teachers from your district that have things to share as well.

Candice Johnson: Thank you, Anna!

Anna Geiger: You can find the show notes for today's episode at reachallreaders.com/episode184. Talk to you next time!

Closing: That's all for this episode of Triple R Teaching. For more educational resources, visit Anna at her home base, reachallreaders.com, and join our teaching

episode of Triple R Teaching.