



# TURNING AROUND. MOVING AHEAD.

A Progress Report on Des Moines Public Schools and the  
**SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT GRANT**



Think. Learn. **Grow.**

[www.dmschools.org](http://www.dmschools.org) | [facebook.com/dmschools](https://facebook.com/dmschools)

March 2013



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 4** Overview
- 6** North High School
- 8** Hoyt Middle School
- 11** Weeks Middle School
- 14** Edmunds Elementary School
- 16** Findley Elementary School
- 18** Harding Middle School



When the conversation turns to education, it usually revolves around numbers. Test scores. Funding. Graduation rates. Demographics.

And yet, walk into any school and you see people, not numbers. Dedicated educators and staff throughout the building. Students eager to learn. Parents and volunteers providing support.

This report provides a look at both numbers and people. Specifically, student proficiency results at our schools receiving School Improvement Grants (SIG) and stories on the work underway within those schools.

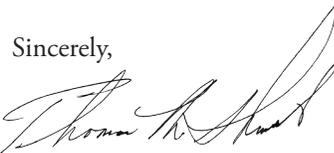
The SIG program was begun by the federal government to provide extra help to persistently lowest-achieving schools and to advance our efforts at education reform.

In Des Moines, six of our schools are receiving support thanks to this program.

As the U.S. Department of Education provides information on SIG schools across the nation, we want to give you a closer look at our schools here at home.

As you will see, many of these schools saw student proficiency numbers go up since receiving SIG funding. And in a few cases, the numbers went down.

But, in every case, great work is underway to support our students and provide them with great educational opportunities.

Sincerely,  


Thomas Ahart  
Superintendent

**“Walk into  
any school  
and you see  
people, not  
numbers.”**

– Thomas Ahart





AN OVERVIEW OF

## The School Improvement Grant Program

The School Improvement Grant (SIG) program was approved by Congress and signed into law by the President in 2009. Administered by the U.S. Department of Education, it provides additional support and focus to help turn around schools identified as persistently lowest achieving.

When a school receives SIG funding, it must then implement one of the following four federal intervention models:

- **Turnaround Model:** Replace the principal, screen existing school staff, and rehire no more than half the teachers; adopt a new governance structure; and improve the school through curriculum reform, professional development, extended learning time, and other strategies.
- **Restart Model:** Convert a school or close it and re-open it as a charter school or under an education management organization.
- **School Closure:** Close the school and send the students to higher-achieving schools in the district.
- **Transformation Model:** Replace the principal and improve the school through comprehensive curriculum reform, professional development, extended learning time, and other strategies.

---

### SIG Schools in Des Moines and Iowa

Since 2010, the Iowa Department of Education has awarded SIG funding to nine schools in Iowa: six in Des Moines and three in Waterloo.

Des Moines Public Schools will receive approximately \$18.5 million in federal funds to support SIG-related work at two cohorts of schools. The first began receiving SIG funds in the 2010-11 school year and includes:

- North High School (\$3,750,000)
- Hoyt Middle School (\$3,395,000)
- Weeks Middle School (\$3,395,000)
- Edmunds Elementary School (\$2,792,033)

The second cohort was awarded SIG funds starting in the 2011-12 school year and includes:

- Findley Elementary School (\$2,860,496)
- Harding Middle School (\$2,344,716)

*The total estimated three-year amount of SIG funds is noted in parentheses.*

All of the DMPS schools receiving SIG funds are using the Transformation Model, as described above, with the exception of Harding Middle School which is using the Turnaround Model.



### **School Activities Supported by SIG**

SIG grants support a range of special initiatives at schools to help raise student achievement. Some examples include:

- Ongoing, high-quality professional development
- Using data to identify and implement an instructional program that is research-based
- Using student data to differentiate instruction to meet the academic needs of individual students
- Establishing schedules and strategies that provide increased learning time
- Providing ongoing mechanisms for family and community engagement

---

### **About this Report**

For the first cohort of SIG schools – North, Hoyt, Weeks and Edmunds – this report compares student proficiency after their first year of participation (2010-11) to the previous two school years. These figures are based on the results of the ITBS/ITED tests. Starting with the 2011-12 school year, the State of Iowa began using a new test to measure proficiency: the Iowa Assessments. An “apples to apples” comparison of the Iowa Assessments to ITBS/ITED results from previous years is not possible. When Iowa Assessments results are available for the 2012-13 school year this report will be updated to include data on Findley and Harding as well as additional information on the first cohort of SIG schools.



# NORTH HIGH SCHOOL

Matthew Smith, Principal  
501 Holcomb Avenue  
Des Moines, IA 50313  
515-242-7200  
[north.dmschools.org](http://north.dmschools.org)

	Total Enrollment	1,182
	Free/Reduced Lunch	84%
	Minority	65%
	ELL	11%
	Special Education	24%

SIG Intervention Model:  
**TRANSFORMATION**

## NORTH STARS POINTING THE WAY

The North High School Academic Decathlon team often dominates the competition. For example, at Drake University recently, they beat out all competitors for the third year in a row.

The Polar Bears broke several records and came away with 23 total awards.

That's just the latest example of the storm brewing at the new North, a perfect one of rising student achievement, campus renovation, dynamic new leadership, and technological innovation.

Right on the heels of the school's impressive gains in the 2010-11 Iowa Test of Educational Development [ITED], North High became the largest school in Iowa to implement a 1:1 laptop program in 2011-12. The program was made possible by the School Improvement Grant. It's just the latest in a series of energizing developments and represents a fitting capstone for the extreme makeover there, the bricks-and-mortar aspect of which was already completed when the students returned to their remodeled campus in August, 2011.

## North High became the largest school in Iowa to implement a 1:1 laptop program in 2011.

Overseeing the turnaround at North is Principal Matt Smith. He says that since the remodeling work was finished, the campus "looks the way we feel." North's ITED scores were up 8.2 percent in math in 2010-11. As impressive as those results were, they were doubled by 18.39 percent gains in both science and reading. And the school's 98.5 percent participation rate was an all-time high.

Smith and Mike Vukovich, Vice Principal at North and the coordinator of the laptop initiative, emphasize that the computers are a means to sustain improvement that was already underway, not devices brought in to spur improvements in



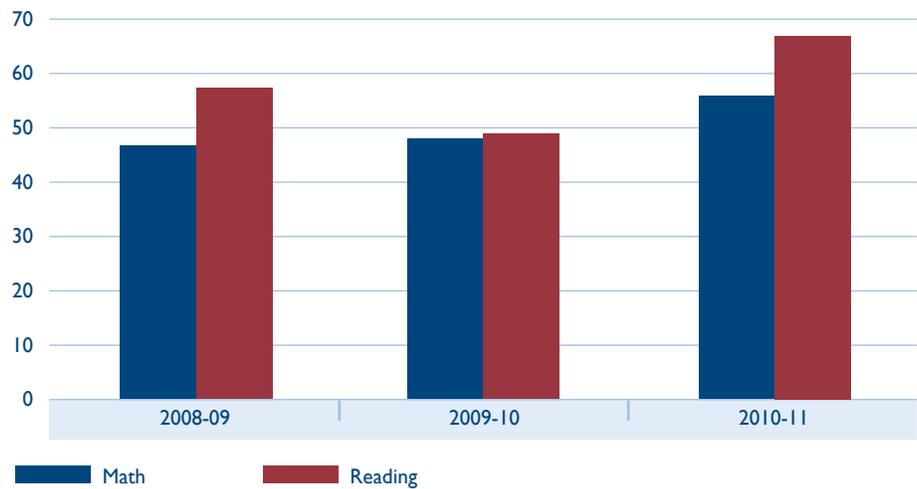
From the academic decathlon team to athletics, extracurricular activities are also an important part of the turnaround at North High.

student achievement from scratch. And besides the new technology there's been a substantial expansion of the Advanced Placement program at North, in terms of both availability and enrollment.

“We had a pep assembly right before ITEDs,” said Vukovich, “and a celebration assembly when the scores came back.”

Smith and Vukovich have made low expectations North's arch rival and use them to motivate their kids the way coaches have been known to use disparaging remarks about their team as “bulletin board material” in the locker room.

“We let them know right from the start that our expectations for them were high,” said Smith. And the students have risen to meet them. The way things are going at North the Polar Bears may become better known as the Scholar Bears! ■



### Math Proficiency Data

	All	Free & Reduced Price Lunch	Special Education	ELL	African American	Asian	Latino	White	Multi-Racial
10-11 % Proficient	55.61	44.96	21.21	5.88	27.59	52.17	51.52	64.44	72.73
09-10 % Proficient	47.40	41.84	18.97	21.43	30.61	58.33	43.18	58.23	57.14
08-09 % Proficient	46.15	42.86	25.45	21.43	33.33	50.00	31.43	54.63	

### Reading Proficiency Data

	All	Free & Reduced Price Lunch	Special Education	ELL	African American	Asian	Latino	White	Multi-Racial
10-11 % Proficient	66.31	58.91	33.33	0.00	44.83	43.48	66.67	77.78	72.73
09-10 % Proficient	47.92	42.55	17.24	21.43	32.65	58.33	40.91	58.23	71.43
08-09 % Proficient	57.83	44.44	23.08	7.69	27.69	57.14	59.09	72.06	



# HOYT

## MIDDLE SCHOOL

Laura Kacer, Principal  
 2700 E. 42nd Street  
 Des Moines, IA 50317  
 515-242-8446  
[hoyt.dmschools.org](http://hoyt.dmschools.org)

	Total Enrollment	518
	Free/Reduced Lunch	87%
	Minority	42%
	ELL	11%
	Special Education	22%

SIG Intervention Model:  
**TRANSFORMATION**

### INTERVENTION A KEY TO SUCCESS AT HOYT

You don't have to convince Laura Kacer that Response to Intervention, or RtI, is the way to go for screening student performance. She knows it works.

Consider: In the time since this principal at Hoyt Middle School in Des Moines rolled out RtI building-wide in 2012, proficiencies have soared. Whereas only 33 percent of the sixth-through-eighth graders were considered proficient last fall, this winter's testing revealed that a full 49 percent are proficient. And they expect those percentages will continue to rise.

There's no question it was a labor of love and necessity. Proficiency scores at this school in which nearly 9 out of 10 students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches were abysmally low and unacceptable to Kacer.

"We needed to be diagnostic and break down the complex reading skills," she said. "We needed to determine what components were missing from each individual child." Enter RtI, which focuses on individuals.

"This year is different than before because our work has been specifically targeted at individual needs of students," Laura said. "We care very little about the age, but focus on their needs. It made for a messy schedule for adults but it's great for kids."

Liz Griesel, the academic achievement coach, said the frequency of progress monitoring depends upon the individual student. Some receive it weekly or more, while others are monitored every other week.

Heartland Area Education Agency's Sue Severson, who has worked closely with the school on implementation with fidelity, says it has been interesting watching the school transform.

**"It is not an option for it not to work. Each student will succeed."**

— Laura Kacer



Hoyt's Health Chef Academy was a summer program where students teamed up with local chefs to learn more about food and nutrition.

**“Teachers are really talking about what’s happening. I have seen teachers become truly effective.”**

– Sue Severson

“Everybody is looking at each kid and asking ‘what is happening here?’ and ‘what do we need to do differently?’ These students are lucky.”

“What’s going on here is not so much about materials, it’s about routine,” Severson said. “How do we develop routine to ensure the effort becomes self-sustaining? It is very explicit in nature.”

“Teachers are really talking about what’s happening,” she added. “I have seen teachers become truly effective.”

“It’s no longer guesswork,” according to Kacer. “No time is wasted. We take into consideration each student. If the intervention isn’t working, we adjust. It is not an option for it not to work. Each student will succeed.”

When a student is determined to need interventions, the information is shared with student and parent alike, outlining the student’s deficit and the trajectory of improvement that is expected.

“Teachers are feeling more empowered,” Kacer said.

With the elaborate screening underway, students’ deficiencies are readily spotted. “Especially in middle school, if you can’t read by then, the student has developed coping skills to get by,” Giesel said. “With diagnostics, they can no longer fool us.”

Today, the students at Hoyt are much more engaged – particularly noteworthy at the middle school level.

“Students are looking at their (trajectory) graphs and watching their progress,” Giesel said. “We also share with the parents and make suggestions on what they can do at home to help reinforce classroom work.”

For Kacer, this approach is about dignity.

“I talk with the students, saying ‘this is where you are, and this is where we are going with you.’ Students know you have a plan for them.”

There’s no question in Giesel’s mind that other schools will soon be scrambling to launch RtI. “When other schools see the incredible growth, they will do this, too.”

Giesel previously taught social studies, and remembers well the challenging behaviors of some of her middle school students.

“But I understand that when there are behavior issues, oftentimes it’s because the student feels frustrated when you ask him to do something he cannot do.”

Severson says that without Kacer’s leadership, the plan would have never taken off.

“Laura’s leadership makes a huge difference,” she said.

Kacer hastened to add, “You’re only as strong as the teachers who are around you.”



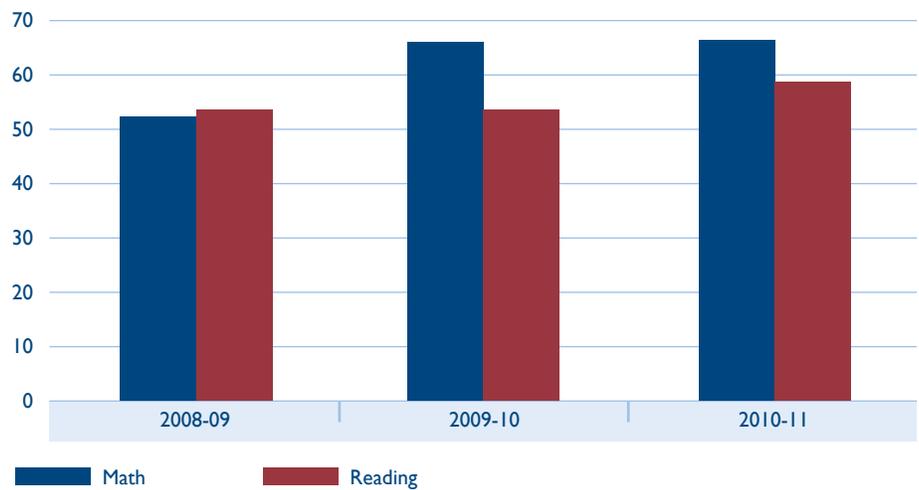
When Teacher Kristi Brown came to Hoyt, she was concerned.

“I have a special education background, and I’m used to using data,” Brown said. “But when I started, I didn’t feel like everyone knew the children. There were a lot of assumptions.”

The implementation of RtI makes all the difference, she noted. But does RtI take up more time?

“At first, yes, while you are setting up the routine,” according to Brown. “Now that the kids know the routine, it just flows.” ■

*NOTE: This article first appeared in the February 2013 edition of the “Each and Every Child” newsletter published by the Iowa Department of Education, and is reprinted here with their permission.*



### Math Proficiency Data

	All	Free & Reduced Price Lunch	Special Education	ELL	African American	Asian	Latino	White	Multi-Racial
10-11 % Proficient	66.60	64.40	47.19	45.31	62.75	76.19	61.67	69.44	62.96
09-10 % Proficient	65.84	62.44	29.79	41.10	59.38	78.26	59.06	68.55	73.68
08-09 % Proficient	52.43	48.79	25.0	41.67	38.00	50.00	48.61	57.01	

### Reading Proficiency Data

	All	Free & Reduced Price Lunch	Special Education	ELL	African American	Asian	Latino	White	Multi-Racial
10-11 % Proficient	58.35	54.71	32.58	31.25	49.02	71.43	53.33	62.30	51.85
09-10 % Proficient	54.12	51.02	34.04	28.77	43.75	52.17	44.88	60.07	47.37
08-09 % Proficient	53.37	49.76	35.19	40.15	48.98	37.50	44.44	59.01	



# WEEKS

## MIDDLE SCHOOL

Aubrey Rieken, Principal  
901 SE Park Avenue  
Des Moines, IA 50315  
515-242-8449  
[weeks.dmschools.org](http://weeks.dmschools.org)

	Total Enrollment	689
	Free/Reduced Lunch	85%
	Minority	66%
	ELL	22%
	Special Education	18%

SIG Intervention Model:  
**TRANSFORMATION**

### THE RIGHT DIAGNOSIS AT WEEKS

When you're chronically sick and the right medicine is prescribed, recovery doesn't happen all at once, overnight. Symptoms of illness disappear one at a time and are replaced by signs of wellness. So it is with schools.

Weeks Middle School is a case in point.

Some of the vital signs are measureable. For instance, days lost to student suspension have been slashed by two-thirds during the grant years. Office referrals for behavior are down by half. Daily attendance rates are rising.

According to Principal Audrey Rieken, climate change, something with a negative connotation in the context of global weather patterns, has been a key agent of the turnaround underway at Weeks. That can be a tricky thing to measure but it's easy to see in different ways.

"Three years ago interventions had a stigma with both students and parents," she says. "Now they're part of the culture here. Students even ask for them to get extra help and parents are supportive when we suggest them as a means of helping their children be successful."

A deliberate point has been made to display more student work throughout the building and Rieken sees kids taking more pride in their achievements as a consequence. Failing grades have been drastically reduced which in turn makes it easier to emphasize achievement rather than failure. Students earn rewards for everything from attendance to behavior to academics. Whole classes as well as individual students are provided with incentives for school-wide recognition, encouraging a "we're-all-in-this-together" mindset that makes students and staff feel like teammates instead of adversaries.

**The pallor of negativity has given way  
to a flush of pride that's contagious.**



Weeks Middle School held its first National Junior Honor Society induction ceremony, becoming the second middle school in Des Moines with a NJHS chapter.

Rieken cites several specific strategies that have been catalysts for positive change at Weeks:

- Writing is emphasized in all classes, regardless of subject matter.
- School Improvement Leaders, one for each grade level, function as liaisons between students and their teachers. They are seen as allies and resources by both groups.
- Weeks teachers have trained in a process called Teacher to Teacher Reflections whereby peer observations lead to improved pedagogy and a stronger sense of collaboration.
- There is a constant drumbeat of new perspectives redefining the school and driving home the point that things are different now. The phrase “on the bus” is Weeks shorthand for moving ahead. What started as faculty-speak has become part of the students’ jargon too and, more importantly, is reflected in their attitudes towards school.
- Increased emphases on technology, including the support of a tech educator, and data-driven decisions.
- Professional development focused on student learning. The teachers’ tool box includes new strategies for engagement and behavior management along with new insights about struggling learners and adolescent brain function.

There’s also an annual student talent show. A Boy Scout troop is headquartered there and so is a Police Explorer program. In March of 2013 Weeks joined Hoyt as the only DMPS middle schools with active chapters of the National Junior Honor Society. More than a hundred students across grades 6-8 were inducted. These are all additions that would have seemed out of place pre-SIG. Project Wisdom is a daily message read over the intercom by a student or staff member selected by Rieken. It is always a positive message in the spirit of the school motto: Weeks Means Success.

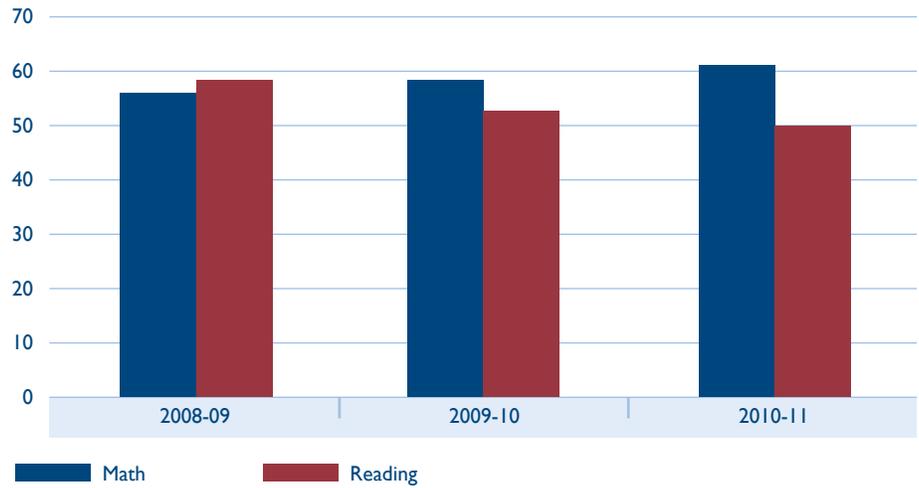


**There is a constant drumbeat of new perspectives redefining the school and driving home the point that things are different now. The phrase “on the bus” is Weeks shorthand for moving ahead.**



“Staff members love starting the day this way and students love to read them over the intercom,” says Rieken about the first thirty seconds that set the tone for the rest of the day.

It’s one small dose of the good medicine that’s got Weeks feeling and looking so much better these days. The pallor of negativity has given way to a flush of pride that’s contagious – and just the kind of fever that schools want to catch. ■



### Math Proficiency Data

	All	Free & Reduced Price Lunch	Special Education	ELL	African American	Asian	Latino	White	Multi-Racial
10-11 % Proficient	60.91	58.48	20.73	47.01	38.46	64.91	56.98	69.27	69.77
09-10 % Proficient	58.17	52.94	15.74	35.20	41.77	76.60	53.03	62.81	63.64
08-09 % Proficient	55.52	50.93	16.81	41.18	31.58	67.31	52.27	60.82	

### Reading Proficiency Data

	All	Free & Reduced Price Lunch	Special Education	ELL	African American	Asian	Latino	White	Multi-Racial
10-11 % Proficient	50.19	46.21	13.25	24.63	32.31	52.63	41.67	60.89	65.12
09-10 % Proficient	52.69	47.18	13.89	32.00	34.18	70.21	44.95	60.49	56.82
08-09 % Proficient	58.05	52.31	35.40	39.42	38.16	76.92	49.15	64.38	



# EDMUNDS

## ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Raul De Anda, Interim Principal  
 1601 Crocker Street  
 Des Moines, IA 50314  
 515-243-1174  
[edmunds.dmschools.org](http://edmunds.dmschools.org)

	Total Enrollment	287
	Free/Reduced Lunch	94%
	Minority	92%
	ELL	52%
	Special Education	7%

SIG Intervention Model:  
**TRANSFORMATION**

### A NEW EDMUNDS IS RISING

If you've driven on I-235 near downtown Des Moines recently, you probably noticed the new Edmunds Elementary School beginning to take shape. On clear mornings, when the sun peeks above the red-bricked skeleton, the metaphor for fresh beginnings is especially powerful. No wonder optimism abounds as students and staff prepare for new headquarters.

In concert with the symbolic construction of their new school, the students at Edmunds are also working to improve their academic proficiency.

Many trends at the school reflect the adoption of the Responsive Classroom approach, a research and evidence-based model for elementary education that increases academic achievement, decreases problem behaviors, improves social skills, and leads to more high-quality instruction. Where there used to be 20 or more behavior office referrals per day at Edmunds, now the average is less than half as many.

Beginning with the 2012-13 school year Edmunds is one of three DMPS elementary schools using an alternate calendar that starts in advance of most other district schools. Students have a six-week break in the summer and week-long breaks in October, February and May.

The President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities (PCAH) conducted a recent study that demonstrates the positive effect of arts education on student academic achievement. Schools in even the most depressed areas are improving test scores by investing in arts education.

**In concert with the symbolic construction of their new school, the students at Edmunds are also working to improve their academic proficiency.**

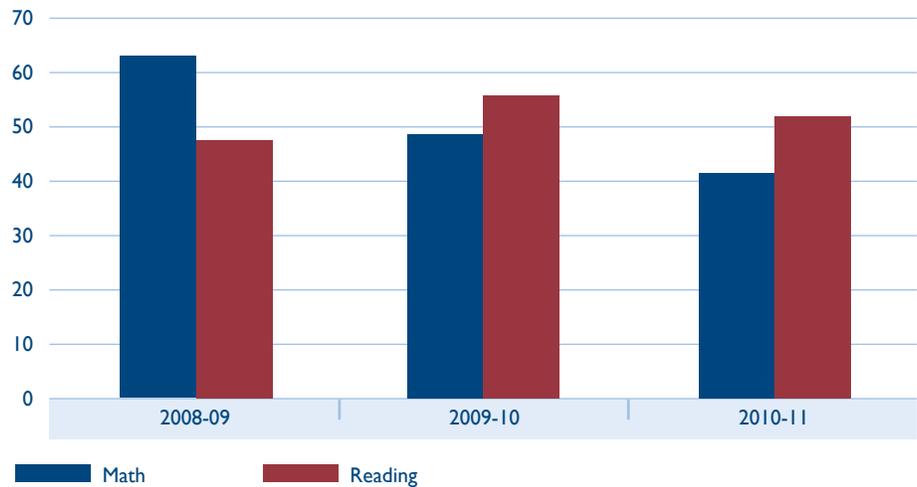


Lt. Governor Kim Reynolds works with an Edmunds student to make a poster about the importance of volunteering.



Accordingly, Edmunds is employing an assortment of strategies to capitalize on that research. Anecdotal examples include:

- Fourth and fifth graders took part in a contest to create a piece of public art for the new school. The students were challenged to develop ideas for an artistic and cultural statement to act as an artistic conduit to the new Edmunds.
- Fifth grade students took a field trip to help unveil “Dangos,” a sculpture project along the Principal Riverwalk in downtown Des Moines.
- Lt. Gov. Kim Reynolds visited Edmunds Elementary the same day she and Governor Terry Branstad formally issued a “call to service” challenging all Iowans to volunteer at least 50 hours per year. She helped students in art teacher David Borzo’s class create posters for the campaign.
- The Edmunds “After School Players,” is an after-school drama class that produces and stages productions under the direction of music teacher Vanessa Brady and ELL instructor Kim Evans. ■



### Math Proficiency Data

	All	Free & Reduced Price Lunch	Special Education	ELL	African American	Asian	Latino	White	Multi-Racial
10-11 % Proficient	41.67	41.67	18.75	31.58	32.50	75.00	100.00	44.44	-
09-10 % Proficient	48.08	48.08	28.57	30.00	42.42	-	100.00	37.50	-
08-09 % Proficient	63.27	61.70	0.00	-	45.83	-	-	78.95	-

### Reading Proficiency Data

	All	Free & Reduced Price Lunch	Special Education	ELL	African American	Asian	Latino	White	Multi-Racial
10-11 % Proficient	51.67	51.67	25.00	31.58	42.50	-	66.67	77.78	-
09-10 % Proficient	55.77	55.77	35.71	70.00	54.55	-	100.00	50.00	-
08-09 % Proficient	46.94	44.68	33.33	-	45.83	-	-	42.11	-



# FINDLEY

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Tara Owen, Principal  
 3000 Cambridge Street  
 Des Moines, IA 50313  
 515-242-8407  
[findley.dmschools.org](http://findley.dmschools.org)

	Total Enrollment	315
	Free/Reduced Lunch	96%
	Minority	62%
	ELL	9%
	Special Education	15%

SIG Intervention Model:  
**TRANSFORMATION**

## FINDLEY GETS ATTENTION FROM WHITE HOUSE AND OSCAR WINNER

There are nearly 100,000 public schools throughout the United States. Findley Elementary School is one of eight to get the attention of the White House for a new arts-based education initiative.

Turnaround Arts is a public-private partnership that designated eight schools nationwide for participation. It's designed to narrow the achievement gap and improve student engagement through the arts at SIG schools. It was developed in cooperation with the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, the U.S. Department of Education and the White House Domestic Policy Council.

For Findley, it also means an Oscar-winning actor will serve as their mentor. Forest Whitaker has held Skype sessions and made a personal visit to work with Findley students and teachers on how the arts support great education.

Findley is incorporating the arts into a range of its teaching and learning. Fifth graders went to the Civic Center for a behind-the-scenes look at how Joey, the title character in the touring production of *War Horse*, played his part under the spell of master puppeteers. It was like having a magician explain how the tricks are done. They then went to see the live show as a group.

"It was phenomenal," according to student Veronika Jones, "and besides that we had a field trip yesterday to John Deere (the school's community business partner) where we performed our fine arts concert!"

**Learning at Findley is becoming a world-widening art form.**



Oscar-winning actor Forest Whitaker is the artist assigned to Findley as part of the Turnaround Arts program.

Veronika wore a tiara and grinned as she delivered her wide-eyed account at Findley’s Royal Breakfast, an event marking the culmination of the school’s joint, month-long effort with Lovejoy Elementary called Two Schools, One Book. The project was designed to engage whole families and create communities of readers around Roald Dahl’s *The BFG (The Big Friendly Giant)*, the whimsical tale of a girl named Sophie and the big-eared behemoth with a long, special trumpet that blows dreams called phizzwizards into children’s bedrooms.

“I think it’s been successful in getting families engaged in reading together,” Principal Tara Owen commented while dispensing scones and snozzcumbers and frobscottles to a steady stream of kids in crowns. Hopefully, the classrooms didn’t break out in whizzpoppers later. “Next spring we’re going to use the same approach with *Charlotte’s Web*. And as far as *War Horse* goes, yes, that whole experience was fabulous for the kids.”

Another example of Findley’s flourishing arts scene was performed onstage by the school’s drama club, one of the district’s few at the elementary level.

Learning at Findley is becoming a world-widening art form. ■



**Findley is incorporating the arts into a range of its teaching and learning.**



# HARDING

## MIDDLE SCHOOL

Maureen Taylor, Principal  
 203 E. Euclid Avenue  
 Des Moines, IA 50313  
 515-242-8445  
[harding.dmschools.org](http://harding.dmschools.org)

	Total Enrollment	619
	Free/Reduced Lunch	96%
	Minority	72%
	ELL	17%
	Special Education	25%

SIG Intervention Model:  
**TURNAROUND**

### BRAVE NEW VOICES SHOUT SUCCESS AT HARDING

Not long ago, about all you heard coming from Harding Middle School was bad news. Now you hear Brave New Voices.

And at one point Harding seemed to be a holding pen for hundreds of lone wolves. Now it's the home of the Wolf Pack, a growing group of student leaders with pride in themselves and their school.

Not long after the school instituted a uniform dress code policy a few years ago, a program called the Wolf Pack was launched, playing off of the school mascot, the Timberwolves. Students were given the opportunity to join once they agreed to a pledge requiring them to be positive role models and perform some community service. Last year over half of the student body took the pledge and, not coincidentally, Harding led all DMPS middle schools with the lowest number of days lost to suspension.

Last summer Vice Principal Jake Troja decided to build on the Wolf Pack foundation with an invitational leadership academy.

Troja explains that the whole idea behind the Wolf Pack and the leadership academy is to exploit the natural social dynamics of adolescents and use peer pressure in positive ways. "We are just taking principles from business that are well-researched and documented in changing behavior within groups and applying them to a middle school environment," he says. "We are redefining what it means to be cool at school."

**Harding is the home of the Wolf Pack, a growing group of student leaders with pride in themselves and their school.**



Wolf Pack members prepared 5,000 meals at the annual Meals from the Heartland event at Wells Fargo Arena last year, just one big example of Harding's new direction.

And as for those Brave New Voices, that's the annual youth poetry festival that six Harding and North High School students attended in San Francisco thanks to Minorities on the Move and Movement 515, the creative writing programs started by Harding teachers Kristopher Rollins and Emily Lang. Kids are welcome from schools all over the district, but most of them are Harding students who move on to North. They meet weekly after school throughout the year and over the summer.

Teachers don't come any more dedicated than Rollins and Lang. Their poetic protégés now hold a series of Share the Mic spoken word performances during the year at public venues, proceeds from which have already benefitted community non-profit organizations. The students have also developed and maintain their own website. The school's poets have been taught to preach and practice the twin gospels of energetic reciprocity, and respect the pack. What do they mean? At the new and improving Harding they mean that everyone has everyone's back. ■

**“We are redefining  
what it means to  
be cool at school.”**

*– Jake Troja*



## **Des Moines Public Schools**

901 Walnut Street  
Des Moines, IA 50309  
(515) 242-7911  
[www.dmschools.org](http://www.dmschools.org)

## **2012-2013 Board of Directors**

Dick Murphy, Chair  
Cindy Elsbernd, Vice Chair  
Connie Boesen  
Teree Caldwell-Johnson  
Bill Howard  
Joe Jongewaard  
Pat Sweeney

Thomas Ahart, Superintendent  
Holly Crandell, Executive Director – Curriculum, Instruction & Assessment  
Wilma Gajdel, Director of Federal Programs

The Des Moines Independent Community School District does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, gender, disability, religion, creed, age (for employment), marital status (for programs), sexual orientation, gender identity and socioeconomic status (for programs) in its educational programs and its employment practices. There is a grievance procedure for processing complaints of discrimination. If you have questions or a grievance related to this policy, please contact the district's Equity Coordinator Patricia Lantz, General Counsel, 901 Walnut Street, Des Moines, IA 50309; phone: 515.242.7837; email: [patricia.lantz@dmschools.org](mailto:patricia.lantz@dmschools.org).

The design, copy and photography for this special report was produced by the Community Relations Office of Des Moines Public Schools.