

Historical Case Study

January 2024

Stolley Park &  
Starr Elementary

# Stronger Together: A Review of How Two Schools Improved Instruction After Consolidating



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EMPOWERMENT**

**For more of the consulting team members'\* historical work visit  
[InstructionalEmpowerment.com](https://www.instructionalempowerment.com)**

\*Instructional Empowerment's team members served Starr and Stolley Park Elementary School under another company led by CEO and Executive Director of Research, Michael Toth, before Instructional Empowerment was founded. Michael Toth and the Instructional Empowerment team have perfected and applied their own evidence-based school improvement approach. Team members who served Starr and Stolley Park Elementary include: Amy Spicher, Lisa Lienemann, Joan Pinkerton, Gwen Marr, Jan Matthews, Diane Stultz, Lindsay Elliot, Gail Charles-Walters, and Kate Wolf.

## Stolley Park Elementary School

Principal: Michael Persampieri

Number of students: 230

Percent free and reduced lunch: 11%

## Starr Elementary School

Principal: John Hauser

Number of students: 290

Percent free or reduced lunch: 93%

### A Look at School Consolidation: Past & Present

School enrollment rates across the United States have fallen by around 1.2 million students in recent years (Dee, 2023). Facing declining attendance, many school districts now confront tough choices regarding potential closures or consolidation of schools. With the topic of school consolidation becoming even more relevant, this is a historical look at two Grand Island, Nebraska schools our team members supported through the transition of school consolidation.

This case study demonstrates what is possible for schools throughout the nation. By examining the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning that allowed these schools to unite smoothly, districts facing similar realities today can envision a future of seamless consolidation.

### Navigating Change, Uncertainty, and New Beginnings

In 2017, as a new school year approached, Stolley Park Elementary was preparing for a monumental change. After over 150 years in their historic campus, the school would be leaving its long-time home. To construct a more functional and innovative building,

the existing campus structure would be demolished. While construction took place, Stolley Park would be merging with the newly built Starr Elementary, combining two rich histories into one new, short-term future. Despite the temporary nature of the transition, with Stolley Park Elementary's new building slated for completion before the 2019-2020 academic year, uncertainty and apprehension still lingered through the community.

"Some families were hesitant about the transition," said Michael Persampieri, former principal of Stolley Park. "They were planning to send their kids to a school with only around 200 students, and now their children might be going to a place with 500."

Although the community was concerned about the number of students on campus, there were also concerns from administration about how two vastly different schools could become blended.

"Talk about different dynamics," former Grand Island Public Schools Superintendent Dr. Tawana Grover said. While only 11% of students at Stolley Park Elementary qualified for free or reduced lunch, they would be merging with the student body at Starr Elementary, where 93% of students met the criteria for meal assistance.

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## A Diverse District Striving for Change

### Serving a Diverse Range of Demographics

Grand Island Public Schools in Nebraska faced unique challenges due to its diverse mix of urban and rural communities. While located in the city of Grand Island, with around 50,000 residents, the district also serves surrounding agricultural areas. This leads to an economically diverse student population—68% qualify for free and reduced lunch, yet more affluent families cluster in certain neighborhoods. With 22 schools, including the largest high school in Nebraska, the district must meet the needs of all students across a range of socioeconomic backgrounds.

Both Stolley Park and Starr Elementary had distinct cultural makeups within their student populations. At Stolley Park, there was little to no economic diversity within the classroom. The school was located “where some of our most influential patrons live,” said Dr. Grover. Starr Elementary “didn’t even have a parent council,” said Dr. Grover.

### Proficiency Data Shows Room for Improvement

Stolley Park and Starr Elementary schools’ proficiency data on standardized tests in the year before consolidation showed room for improvement. In the 2016-17 school year, 50% of Stolley Park 3rd graders scored as proficient in English Language Arts (ELA), with lower rates for 4th (39%) and 5th (24%) grades. Starr saw similarly low ELA proficiency, with 21% of 3rd grade students, 33% of 4th grade students, and 15% of 5th grade students scoring as proficient.

Math proficiency posed similar challenges, with proficiency rates of 67% for 3rd grade, 48% for 4th grade, and 52% for 5th grade at Stolley Park. Starr saw 52% math proficiency for 3rd grade, 23% for 4th grade, and 62% for 5th grade.

English Language Arts Proficiency Rates 2016-17 (pre-partnership)			Mathematics Proficiency Rates 2016-17 (pre-partnership)		
	Stolley Park Elementary	Starr Elementary		Stolley Park Elementary	Starr Elementary
3rd	50%	21%	3rd	67%	52%
4th	39%	33%	4th	48%	23%
5th	24%	15%	5th	52%	62%

As the decision to consolidate campuses was finalized, district officials were introduced to an additional concern. “Staff members at Stolley had never had the opportunity to teach an EL student before. Their Special Education numbers were low, so they were very fearful about whether or not they were even going to be able to reach these kids, not being properly trained,” Dr. Grover stated.

To support their newly consolidated staff, the principals aligned their leadership. Former Stolley Park principal Persampieri transitioned into becoming Starr Elementary’s assistant principal. Together with John Hauser, the principal of Starr at the time, both leaders united behind a shared vision of achieving academic improvement.

## A Partnership for Student-Focused Core Instruction

While the two elementary schools strategized how to integrate their student bodies harmoniously, the district was forming a collaborative consulting partnership to nurture student-focused instruction spanning prekindergarten through 12th grade.

Eager to employ innovative strategies that would engage and serve every learner, Dr. Grover recognized the urgent need for change. Students at Grand Island Public Schools had become disengaged and were struggling both academically and behaviorally—challenges that the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning was designed to rectify. It would also provide the support the teachers of Stolley Park needed to thrive on a new campus.

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As the consolidation plans took shape, Starr Elementary emerged as one of three schools being considered to embark on this transformative partnership. When presented

### Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning

The Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning centers on student-led teaming, which involves students organized into small, diverse teams with clear protocols for engaging in rigorous standards-based academic work, as defined in the book *The Power of Student Teams: Achieving Social, Emotional, and Cognitive Learning in Every Classroom Through Academic Teaming* (Toth & Sousa, 2019).

This Model of Instruction cultivates independent, critical thinking instead of dependent, compliant learning. It builds students’ academic agency through structures that develop their ability to self-direct their own learning. Students are empowered with real roles and responsibilities within their team structures and become highly motivated to drive their own learning. The Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning works in all subjects and grade levels K-12.



with the opportunity to partner, Principal Persampieri was eager to pursue it, saying “John and I are not much for the status quo. So, when we knew we had the opportunity to develop our culture even more and push instruction in a really dynamic way, we wanted to pursue that.” He explained further, “We knew our district was wanting to increase rigor, increase performance, and we didn’t want to be on the sidelines watching. We wanted to be one of the first to partner. We really wanted to jump on board from the beginning.”

Although there was uncertainty as to how conditions for learning would change with the merger of two elementary schools, neither principal felt it was an area of concern. “Neither one of us has ever had issues with behavior,” said Principal Hauser. “Our learning conditions had been positive.” With that in mind, the focus shifted to strengthening instruction. “We were interested in taking our school to the next level,” said Principal Hauser. “That’s what we saw this as a possible bridge for.”

## United Behind Student Success

Wanting to ensure the decision was made in consideration to staff, principals Hauser and Persampieri put it to a vote. “Our teachers were the ones who voted on it,” said Principal Hauser. With schools across the nation frequently experiencing a continuous implementation of short-term initiatives, teachers are often resistant to adopting change. Yet, with Starr’s newly blended staff, this wasn’t a barrier. An overwhelming percentage of educators voted in favor of partnering. “I would go back to our climate and culture,” said Principal Hauser. “I think part of this is both schools are a safe space for staff. We’re a team.” Principal Hauser understood the need to involve staff early on to highlight that the partnership would support student success. “There’s also a lot less resistance to be a part in this when they know that we’re going to do this, it’s going to make us better, and we’re doing this for the kids.”

Though consolidating posed challenges, the campus united behind the decision to move forward. After coming to an agreement, they notified the district of their plans. “It was interesting to have those dynamics come together, and they really felt like they could learn from each other,” Dr. Grover said of the decision to include the newly consolidated



campus in the initial implementation year of the partnership. “But we wanted it to be one school. That’s really where the vision work came in. We saw it as a challenge, but also as an opportunity.”

When asked about their schools’ ability to merge and implement a cohesive strategy for core instruction, the principals agreed, saying, “We were ready for the challenge.”

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## More Focused PLCs Lead to More Effective Instructional Practice

One year after consolidation, and one year into their partnership, Starr Elementary students and staff were blended. “We cannot tell who is a Starr kid and who is a Stolley Park kid,” said previous Starr principal, Hauser.

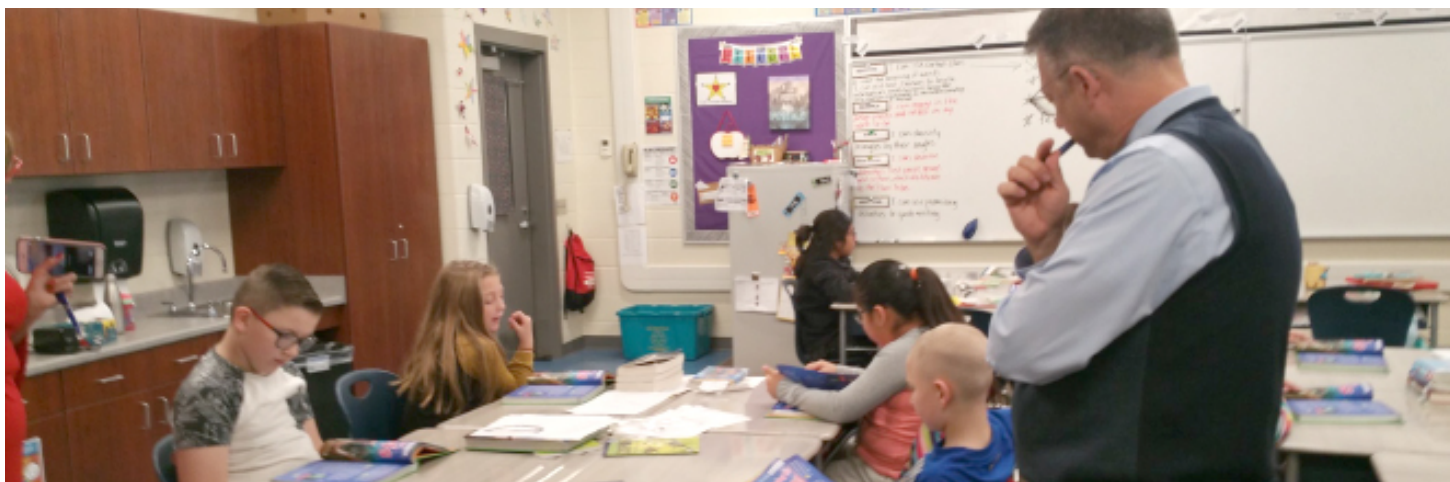
In addition, by focusing on strengthening instruction, Starr was seeing changes throughout the campus. “The biggest change that we’ve seen to start off with, because we just finished year one, was intentionality,” said Starr Principal at the time, Hauser. “I mean, we have a purpose for what we’re doing. We’re very intentional with what we’re doing.”

Through a shared vision for student success, the school was able to focus their efforts on strengthening instruction at every level. Principal Hauser reflects:

When you start thinking about the changes we’ve seen with our staff, our PLC becomes more than just a time to get together and do lesson plans. It’s talking about student data. It’s making sure we’re differentiating to meet student needs. It’s focusing more on learning targets to ensure they align with standards rather than counting on curriculum to take care of it for us. To summarize, it’s that intentionality. We are much more purposeful in what we do.

Starr’s assistant principal at the time, Michael Persampieri noticed changes in how teaching was happening in the classroom compared to traditional instruction:

Usually, it’s the teacher show. They’re working through and they’re trying to accomplish whatever their agenda was set for the day. It was intended to benefit students, but teachers couldn’t monitor how students were progressing towards the target. The partnership has made it so that they’re being a lot more attentive to that. They’re making changes on the fly. They’re being more responsive to student need versus whatever their to do list was.



# Student-Led Learning Transforms Classrooms and Academic Culture

## Teacher's Role Shifts to Enhance Student Learning Experience

This change was evident for educators as well. "We get feedback and then we're able to adjust our teaching to meet the needs of students," said former 3rd grade teacher Hearther Gearhart. "While meeting those standards, we can adjust our success criteria to really hone in on the standard and make sure students are understanding."

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With a newfound focus on student-led learning in the classroom, the role of the teacher shifted. "Well, my role as a teacher has changed drastically," said Gearhart. "I feel like I'm just getting the kids more engaged in their own learning and they're taking more responsibility for their learning."

Tyler Lucas, a former Starr 5th grade teacher, shared that the partnership has allowed students to "create their own learning experiences and solve problems on their own. It's really changed the way that I ask questions and the way that I allow conversations to go on without giving answers." Students also recognized this shift, with one former Starr fifth grader stating that they saw a "big difference in the way the teacher teaches."

## Deepening Student Learning and Community

As the partnership continued, both Gearhart and Lucas saw changes in student learning. Gearhart shared:

They are going beyond their comfort zone, and they are digging deeper. Students are realizing that they're capable of way more than they realized. They're able to communicate amongst each other and have those wonderful conversations. They're able to talk about it instead of just writing it down. They can brainstorm together. I think that they've just done a really nice job working cohesively together.



Lucas agreed, stating that “They’re able to extend their learning. They’re able to explain their thinking a little bit better, and so they actually understand why the answer is correct.”

Students agreed, with one Starr fifth grader saying, “I like working in a team because you can hear each other’s ideas and like feed off of them. If one person has an idea and the other person disagrees, they can explain, and you have a better understanding.”

Educators not only saw an improvement in student learning, but they also witnessed stronger bonds forming within the classroom community, even after consolidating campuses. “They’ve really built that community with each other because of all the wonderful conversations they’ve had,” said Gearhart. “The group of kids are tighter than maybe I’ve seen in some of the other years because of all the collaboration that they’ve had.”

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## Empowering EL Students and Educators

### Students Reach Higher Achievement and Confidence

For English Learner (EL) educators, the partnership provided them with resources to enhance student discussion. “In my classroom,” said former Starr EL teacher Shawna Senff, “I faced the fear of students not being able to talk to each other because they’re very limited with their English. But now looking back, it’s amazing how far that they’ve come, and they can talk with their peers.”

With instruction, the inclusion of success criteria helped not only educators, but students understand if they’ve reached their learning target. “The most important thing that I’ve changed,” said Starr EL teacher Laura Johnson, “is that I no longer just have a target for a day or a couple of days or the week. We have our success criteria. Students know what it looks like to be successful.” Senff agreed, sharing that “Students are able to see the expectations. They see the desired outcome. Being aware of what it looks like to meet that target is critical for EL

students.” This intentionality in the classroom has supported students at every level, leading to higher achievement and confidence while engaging students in rigorous work.

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“The work that we’ve done has benefited our students tremendously,” says Johnson, “English learners are naturally more shy or quiet in the classroom. As the year has progressed, they are way more confident and they’re sharing not only their answers but their reasoning behind their thinking.” Senff agreed, sharing that one of the biggest changes she witnessed in the classroom was that “students are more willing to take risks and kind of put themselves out there because they’re used to working with their peers. It’s had them step out of their comfort zone.”



## EL Teachers Create Empowering Student Support Structures

Students aren't the only ones changing their approach to learning. "My role as a teacher has changed significantly," said Johnson. "I used to feel like I was being effective because I was differentiating for my students. I felt good because I was busy. I was all over helping all these students. Now, the support and the help are coming from within their teams. I'm taking a step back and it's easier for me to monitor their learning."

Senff agreed, sharing her own experience with the strategies she's learned from the partnership. "I'm letting go of my control. I'm letting them be in charge of their learning. They're working with their peers and knowing that they can do it." In terms of support within the classroom, Senff had even seen changes in who students rely on to work through complex tasks. "Instead of the students leaning on me for all of the support, they lean on their friends and their classmates in their teams. They work together to help each other."

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## Empowering Student Futures

Participating in the collaborative Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning has provided students with real-world connections, which has been a highlight of the partnership for Lucas:

One of the most memorable moments is when you walk around the classroom and you're talking to different groups of students, or you hear them remind a student of another concept and they make a connection to it. When they're doing that, they're coming up with reasons why things can happen. They're reasoning through their own process and as they do that, they're challenging one another. Those deep conversations of figuring out how the world works and how to problem-solve together is a connection to the real world.

By cultivating a student-led environment that promoted collaboration and productive struggle, students were able to take ownership

of rigorous learning. One Starr fifth grader agreed, saying "I own my own learning, it's like, you do your own future."

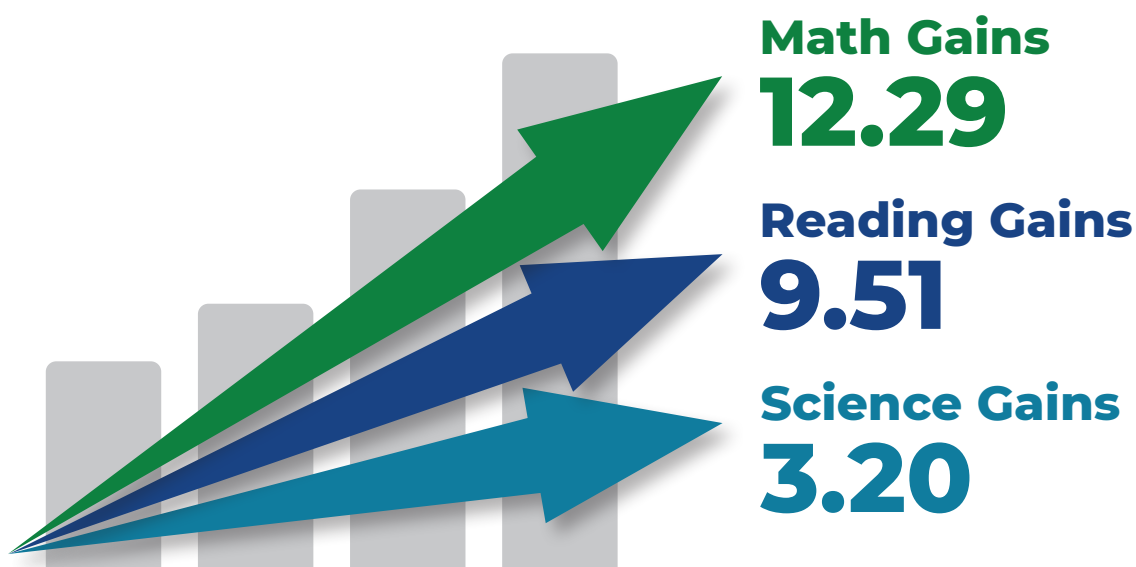
## Increased Learning Gains

After two years of partnership to implement the Model of Instruction for Deeper Learning, Stolley Park Elementary School completed their campus construction at the end of the 2018-19 school year—just in time to welcome a new class of students in the fall. While this marked the end of consolidation, the blended student body found academic success as Starr Elementary students.

Starr Elementary students made learning gains in all subjects, with a 9.51 increase in reading, a 12.29 increase in math, and a 3.20 increase in science. These gains represent the average gains on assessment.

Pleased with student achievement gains, both Stolley Park and Starr Elementary chose to continue their partnership individually for the 2019-2020 school year.

## Fall 2018 to Spring 2019 Average Learning Gains







## Earning National Recognition for Rigorous Learning

In October of 2020, Stolley Park and Starr came together once again—this time, to celebrate. After three years of continued partnership, Stolley Park Elementary and Starr Elementary were recognized as Nebraska’s first Demonstration Schools for Rigor, along with Jefferson Elementary and Walnut Middle School. This designation from a national organization highlighted these schools as models for implementing academic rigor while driving student achievement.

The Demonstration Schools recognition meant that Stolley Park, Starr, Jefferson, and Walnut welcomed other educators to their schools and shared best practices within and beyond their district in an effort to bring academic excellence to all students in all classrooms.

At the ceremony, Grand Island Superintendent Dr. Tawana Grover spoke to the schools’ focus on ensuring all students had access to rigorous core instruction, stating that “instructional core is the greatest lever for ensuring our mission: Every Student, Every Day, A Success!”

The partnership’s CEO and Executive Director of Research, Michael Toth agreed, sharing:

It’s been amazing watching the classroom environments change in these schools as students became more confident and engaged learners. The principals at all four schools have faced challenges—especially during the pandemic—but they’ve led the [partnership] process like heroes. We’re proud to partner with a district that is full of heroes, from Dr. Grover to Dr. Palmer and everyone at the district to all the principals and their school teams. Grand Island Public Schools always puts student learning first.



# References

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- Toth, M. D. & Sousa, D. A. (2019). *The power of student teams: Achieving social, emotional, and cognitive learning in every classroom through academic teaming*.



## **Instructional Empowerment's Social Mission**

**Our social mission is to end generational poverty and eliminate racial achievement gaps through transformed core instruction.**

**Learn more about Instructional Empowerment's Comprehensive School Improvement Services:  
[InstructionalEmpowerment.com](https://InstructionalEmpowerment.com)**



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