

Ensuring Kids Are Mastering Concepts: **MORGAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL**



Competency-Based Education

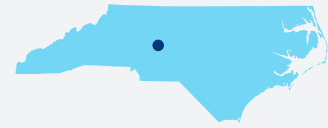
At Rowan-Salisbury Schools (RSS), we have a guiding belief: **children are more than their test scores.** We know not every student learns in the same way—and that when educators have the flexibility to try new, innovative teaching approaches, we can truly help students learn and succeed.

That's why the RSS team called state legislators with a bold request. **We asked for charter-like flexibility that would empower our schools and local Board of Education with more autonomy.** The policymakers were inspired by our data and experience-backed vision. They introduced legislation, which passed in less than a month. North Carolina's Renewal district was born!

Through our Renewal status, we enjoy curriculum, personnel, financial and scheduling flexibility. Every school in our district has created a plan to serve their students' specific needs, while building academic and interpersonal skills—and helping students pursue their unique life goals, too.

Now, through our case studies, we're sharing more specifics about what we've done, how we've done it and what school leaders across the country can try in their own districts.

ABOUT MORGAN ELEMENTARY



LOCATION
GOLD HILL, NC

GRADES
PRE-K-5

SIZE
~300 STUDENTS

CHALLENGE:

Kids mastered concepts at different speeds—with some falling behind and others held back from their full potential as a result.

SOLUTION:

The school launched competency-based education and updated grading systems.

RENEWAL FLEXIBILITIES USED:

The school used their budget, hiring and grading flexibilities.



THE CHALLENGE

Morgan Elementary faced two major obstacles:

1

CONCEPT MASTERY.

Students were learning concepts at different speeds, which meant that while some kids might be excelling (or bored and ready for more advanced work), some kids were getting left behind.

In the traditional education system, kids have a set amount of time to learn a concept. Then they move on, whether or not they understand the materials. This means kids who are behind won't learn the next materials, which build on the initial lessons—and they fall further and further behind.

2

A BROKEN GRADING SYSTEM.

The team found that there are biases when it comes to our country's overall grading system, from socioeconomic to gender biases. Not only that, the traditional grading system doesn't motivate students to learn.

For example, if a student receives a zero for not turning in an assignment and then moves on, they won't be motivated to learn. However, if they have to work on concepts until they master them, it builds a different mentality for students and teachers alike!



All 33 Rowan-Salisbury Schools have created unique Renewal plans that serve their students' specific challenges and opportunities. Learn more about the work at [INSERT URL](#).

How the Team Identified the Need

Morgan Elementary started the Renewal process by analyzing the school's data, conducting in-depth research and engaging the community.



Staff Engagement

The principal invited every staff member who wanted to get involved with Renewal to join a **teacher-led design team**. Both certified and non-certified staff joined, ensuring every point of view was represented. The team met regularly throughout the Renewal planning process. These meetings included learning about concepts together, sharing brainstorm ideas and making in-depth plans for how education concepts would become reality in the classroom. During these meetings, staff members identified that many students weren't learning at the same pace—but calendar restrictions meant they couldn't slow down for the students who needed it.



Data Analysis + Research

The team conducted a **full data analysis** to figure out where the biggest needs were as a school, from grade retention to testing scores. This ensured the team made decisions based on their students' experiences specifically. The data made it clear that not all students were learning at the same speed.

They looked at **research** focused on grading and grading biases, and how to successfully eliminate these biases. They also studied **concepts** such as proficiency scales, along with literature focused on how to ensure kids are understanding content.

The team prioritized learning from other experts as well. For example, several team members went out into the field to visit a Colorado school district that was teaching through a competency-based education model. The educators toured classrooms, met students and got to learn from teachers and staff successfully teaching through this innovative model—one that addressed many of the challenges Morgan's students face.



Family Engagement

Community engagement is important to Morgan Elementary. The team **engaged parents and the PTA**—from hosting parent nights to asking for direct feedback to sharing about each step of the process. Families shared how important it is for their children to truly learn and thrive in schools.

The team explained the teaching and learning theories behind the approach, shared why the school was implementing new education practices and continued asking for feedback. They also held parent nights for every grade level, individually.



Continuous Improvement

The team continues **meeting at least once a month** to discuss what's working well, where there may be opportunities for updates and improvement and new ideas. The team completes each school year without making major changes and then makes decisions about next steps the summer before the next school year.

THE SOLUTION

Competency-Based Education and Updated Grading



Based on this extensive Renewal planning process, the team decided to launch a **competency-based education system or CBE**. Simply put, CBE provides every student with the right amount of time to master each concept before moving on to the next.

As a result of the holistic engagement, the team designed and launched **an updated grading process**. Through this system, students no longer receive numerical (100-0) or letter-based (A-F) grades. Now, they are graded on a proficiency scale. They are graded as remedial, near mastery, mastery and exceeds mastery. Teachers only report the grades when a student reaches mastery!

“

In many traditional schools, students are simply exposed to learning materials, versus being given the time to master the content. That's what we want to change. This work is about meeting kids where they are, rather than asking kids to meet us where we are.”

PRINCIPAL DEREK DISTEFANO

2021-2022 RSS PRINCIPAL
OF THE YEAR



The Work in Action

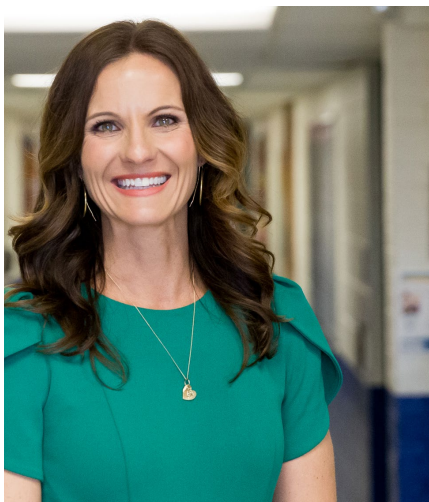
When you walk through Morgan Elementary's hallways, you hear the happy sound of bells ringing throughout the school day. As a matter of fact, every classroom has a bell. When a student masters a concept, they get to ring the bell as their classmates cheer them on.

To make these joyful moments a reality, the Morgan Elementary team took a number of steps.

Once the team agreed on the school's Renewal direction—CBE—they started by building an **in-depth understanding** with every Morgan team member.

They prioritized creating a shared vision for the school, working toward buy-in with every educator.

They spent **two years looking at data, best practices and creating an implementation plan.**



CASSIE THOMPSON

RSS EDUCATOR AND
2014-2015 RSS TEACHER
OF THE YEAR

“When kids play on the playground, they aren't grouping themselves by age—eight year olds aren't only playing with other eight year olds. Why do we still pigeonhole them based on their age in their classes? When we give kids the time they need to learn, we are helping them build a strong foundation they will take on to middle school, high school and on.”



Kids Learn at Their Own Speed

The team created a system that is set up to truly allow every child to learn and master concepts at their own pace. At Morgan Elementary:

- **Students start each concept by taking a pre-test** that helps establish how much they know about the topic.
- **Students are then grouped based on their skill** in that topic.
 - Some students may take two days to learn a concept—while others may need a week. This model gives them the time and space they need to master the materials.
 - Students who need more support from the teacher or a teacher assistant receive personalized attention.
- **Students take a posttest**—which is the assessment kids take after they are taught a concept—to **evaluate concept mastery**.
- **Students move on to the next topic** when their posttest shows that they mastered a concept—this is when they ring the bell and celebrate!



Students Learn in “Levels,” Not Grades

The school now uses levels instead of school grades. For example, a student may be learning level two math, as opposed to “being in the second grade.” This also **empowers students to move at different paces in different classes**. A student may be learning level three reading, while studying level two math.



Teachers Build Understanding and Excitement With Students

As part of this work, teachers prioritize building understanding with students, along with excitement. **They explain why students are learning the materials** they are focused on and how it all connects to what students are interested in.

For example, if you ask a Morgan Elementary student what they are doing, they won't just tell you they are completing a worksheet. They can tell you what it's focused on and what it relates to in their lives, too!

They also make learning a celebration. The entire class celebrates when a student succeeds—no matter how long it took them to learn a concept.

Lessons From the Morgan Team

The Morgan team wants all principals, superintendents and education leaders to know that this work is not easy. However, it is worth it when you see students—in many cases, students who disliked school or struggled in the past—truly starting to thrive. Their biggest advice includes:

- **Start with the big picture.** What do you want your school to look like? Why? What do YOUR students need? You need this vision to create a strong plan.
- **Build buy-in.** Ensure that your entire staff understands the work, buys-in to the work and shares a unified vision. When your staff is passionate about the work, you are significantly more likely to succeed.
- **Consult experts.** You don't have to do this work alone—talking with others already doing the work, visiting their schools and learning from them is invaluable.
- **Keep going!** Remember that the first year is the hardest—and don't give up when you face challenges.



Morgan Elementary's Vision

At Morgan Elementary, kids learn at their own pace and master skills before moving to the next one, building a strong foundation. Teachers are empowered with the autonomy and flexibility to respond to and engage with each child's unique needs so every day, everyone discovers and achieves the extraordinary. As a result, kids don't simply master the concepts. They understand what they are learning and why they are learning it—and get excited to do so. Through these personalized and unique learning experiences, every Morgan Elementary student starts middle school with the right skills to succeed.

Learn More about our Renewal work

- Download more case studies at resources.rssrenewal.org
- Reach out to principal Derek DiStefano at distefanod@rss.k12.nc.us to schedule a conversation or school visit.

