



Evidence of Excellence



Ottumwa Community School District

OTTUMWA, IOWA

Faced with inconsistency and stagnant results, Ottumwa Community School District partnered with Marzano Resources, implementing the High Reliability Schools framework, the New Art and Science of Teaching, and Marzano Mastery Approaches to significantly improve behavior and academic achievement.

DEMOGRAPHICS

- › **4,594** students
- › **47.3%** free and reduced lunch
- › **26.1%** English learners
- › **11.6%** students with special needs

RACIAL/ETHNIC PERCENTAGES

- › **48.3%** White
- › **26.4%** Hispanic or Latino
- › **10.6%** Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- › **9.6%** Black
- › **3%** Asian
- › **1.6%** Multiracial
- › **0.5%** American Indian or Alaska Native

Ottumwa Community School District in Ottumwa, Iowa, serves seven elementary schools, four secondary schools, and two high schools. Their vision and mission are to engage, educate, and empower every student every day, inspiring them to think, learn, achieve, and care.

OttumwaSchools.com

All data and people mentioned in this story represent solely the timeframe in which Marzano Resources worked with the school or district and the timeframe in which the school or district committed to implementing processes and practices set forth by Marzano Resources. Building and district leaders and staff featured in Evidence of Excellence stories may have changed.

► CHALLENGE

Ottumwa Community School District faced significant challenges in 2021. Their schools were plagued by inconsistencies, and from building to building, approaches to behavior, interventions, and even data analysis varied wildly. This lack of uniformity made it challenging to establish consistent practices and build strong collaborative relationships.

As a result, a frustrating cycle of minimal progress and stagnant proficiency rates occurred, leaving students underserved and teachers struggling to meet their diverse needs. Families were increasingly choosing other districts, and a sense of complacency threatened to undermine any hope for real improvement.

Ottumwa knew they needed a change—a framework to guide their efforts, serve as a catalyst for transformation, and pave the way for a more equitable and effective learning environment for all students. That's when Maria Lantz, the district's director of curriculum and instruction, stepped in, utilizing Marzano Resources' High Reliability Schools (HRS) and the New Art and Science of Teaching (NASOT).

► IMPLEMENTATION

Ottumwa's journey toward becoming a mastery-based district, under the leadership of superintendent Michael McGrory, associate superintendent Brad McCloskey, and Maria Lantz, was deliberate and strategic. The district recognized the importance of building relationships and establishing baseline standards to ensure everyone was on the same page, adopting a "go slow to go fast" approach. This commitment to growth began in the summer of 2022, when the first group of Ottumwa staff attended an HRS Institute in Des Moines, Iowa.

The first year (2022–2023) of Ottumwa's journey focused on building a foundational understanding of HRS and NASOT. The district leadership team engaged in a book study of *A Handbook for High Reliability Schools* by Robert J. Marzano, Philip B. Warrick, and Julia A. Simms, and *The New Art and Science of Teaching* by Robert J. Marzano.

The district then concentrated on one key instructional element from NASOT: element 32, "motivating and inspiring students." Individual buildings were also given the option to select another element to focus on, and many chose element 33, "establishing rules and procedures." This building-level focus highlighted existing inconsistencies in foundational practices and the need for greater clarity around leading indicators. During the school year, Marzano Resources associate Dr. Tina H. Boogren began conducting pre-service training with new teachers and mentors. Additionally, staff attended an instructional coaching workshop with Dr. Philip B. Warrick, and Jan K. Hoegh helped lead the implementation of HRS and NASOT in the district's secondary buildings.

Midway through the 2022–2023 school year, the leadership team recognized that while NASOT provided the "how," they still needed a clearer understanding of the leading indicators. During the summer of 2023, Marzano associate and author Dr. Mike Ruyle worked directly with the leadership team at Ottumwa to help create the district's instructional vision, which clearly outlined the leading indicators that would be monitored at both HRS Levels 1 and 2, providing a much-needed framework and clarity for everyone involved.

While ongoing consultations with Drs. Ruyle and Boogren continued, Marzano associate and school improvement expert Kathy Cawthon worked with Wilson Elementary School on developing scales and rubrics.

“ I truly believe our progress this year, which has been incredible, would be significantly slower without the support from Marzano Resources. Their entire team, including Mike Ruyle and the other associates, has been absolutely essential in helping us achieve the positive momentum we’re seeing.”

—Maria Lantz, director of curriculum and instruction, Ottumwa Community School District, Iowa

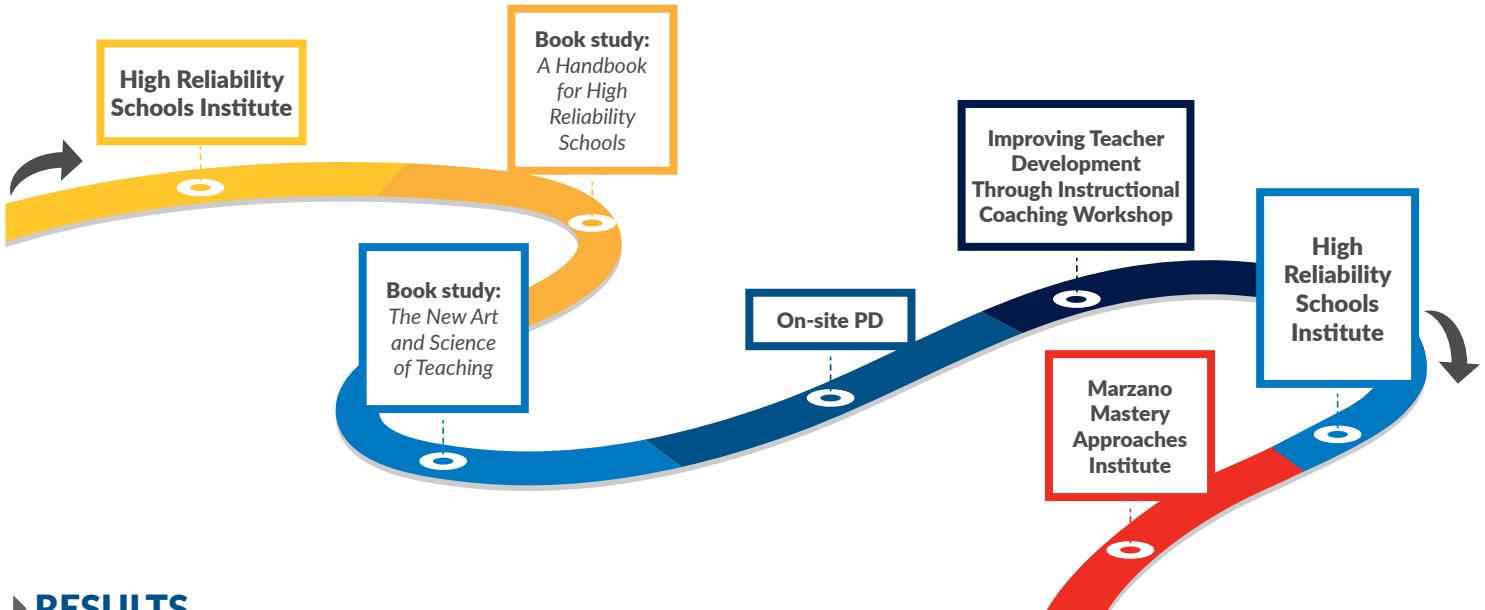
► IMPLEMENTATION (continued)

With an instructional vision in place, the district entered its third year (2024–2025) of implementation and refinement. This year emphasized continued school improvement, including developing clear expectations, defining whose voices are included in the process, establishing monitoring systems, celebrating successes, and providing reteaching and reinforcement when needed. A draft

framework for Tier 1 social-emotional behavior health was also developed, outlining the essential components that every building should have in place.

In the summer of 2024, Ottumwa’s staff attended an HRS Institute and the Marzano Mastery Approaches Institute.

Guideposts on the school improvement journey



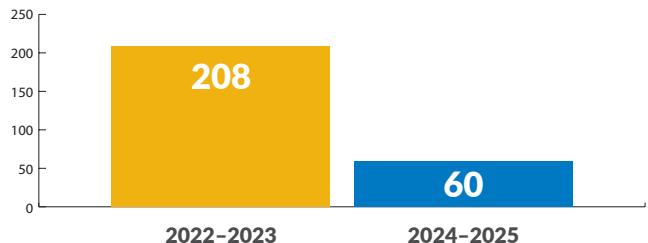
► RESULTS

The initial year of exploration with HRS and NASOT fostered a greater willingness among staff, particularly administrators, to embrace the systems-level work. This shift in mindsets paved the way for deeper engagement and a shared focus on what’s best for students. Despite the challenges, the district saw a surge in intrinsic motivation among staff to embrace this work.

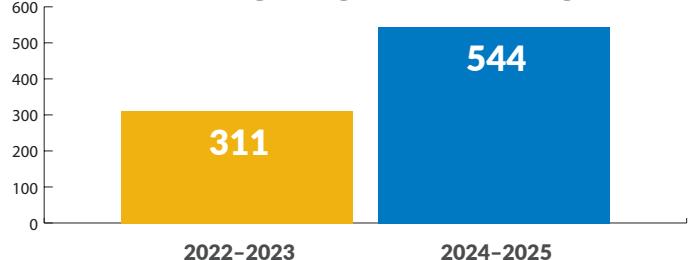
This positive momentum, coupled with the introduction of systematic monitoring, has yielded tangible results.

- Behavior incidents decreased significantly, from a high of 208 negative incidents in 2022–2023 to just 60 in the 2024–2025 school year.
- Chronic Absenteeism went from 25.44% in 2023–2024 to 17.32% in 2024–2025
- The number of eighth-graders earning Bs increased substantially—from 311 students in 2023–2024 to 544 in 2024–2025, representing an increase of 233 students.

Behavior incidents



Number of eighth-graders earning Bs





Tina H. Boogren

Kathy Cawthon

Jan K. Hoegh

Robert J. Marzano

Mike Ruyle

Philip B. Warrick

Transform teaching with research-based practice

Marzano Resources, formerly Marzano Research, is dedicated to helping K-12 educators advance student achievement. Built on the foundation of Dr. Robert J. Marzano's 50 years of education research, Marzano Resources supports teachers and administrators through customizable on-site professional development, educator events, virtual coaching, books, videos, and online courses. Our associates and authors are thought leaders in the field of education and deliver research-backed guidance for all major areas of schooling, including curriculum development, instruction, assessment, student engagement, and personalized competency-based education. Here are just a few ways we can help you achieve your goals:

Books and Videos

Browse our specialized K-12 resources to discover proven strategies on the most critical topics in education—from assessment and grading to competency-based education, technology, and student engagement.

Events

Explore our workshops and conferences to find your perfect fit. Our experts will help you maximize classroom engagement, assess student growth, foster a standards-based learning environment, and more.

High Reliability Schools Certification

Be recognized as a High Reliability School. For schools and districts that have attained one or more levels of reliability, Marzano Resources offers formal certification to share with your community and stakeholders.

Learn more

MarzanoResources.com

PD Services

Bring Dr. Marzano and his associates to your school or district. Choose from on-site or virtual options to plan a dynamic, one-day session or a series of trainings. Just tell us your goals, and we'll tailor the experience for you and your team—or, choose a carefully designed staff development option based on our most popular topics.

High Reliability Teacher Certification

Our multileveled High Reliability Teacher certification process recognizes the advancement of a teacher's pedagogical skills and knowledge in three specific areas and four online courses. This program empowers educators to grow professionally in instruction, assessment, and feedback; improve student achievement; and develop expertise and expand career opportunities.

Critical Concepts

Analysts at Marzano Research have identified, as objectively as possible, a focused set of learning progressions for each K-12 grade level in the content areas of English language arts (ELA), mathematics, and science. Maximize your instruction with this invaluable resource.