



# The Power to Change

**High Schools that Help  
All Students Achieve**



The  
Education  
Trust

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# Introduction

It is generally acknowledged that American high schools are not nearly as good as they need to be. Large numbers of students – 30 percent or more – do not even make it to graduation. And even among those who do, far too few are prepared for post-secondary education or work.

Among high schools serving low-income students and students of color, the numbers are much worse. Nearly half of these students don't graduate on time. Those who do graduate have skills at the end of high school that are on average similar to the skills that White and more affluent students have at the end of middle school.

The nation's governors have put high school reform at the top of their agendas, charging their association – the National Governors Association – with energizing a multi-year effort to overhaul high school education. Across the country, reformers are stepping forward with new high school “designs” aimed at preparing students for the challenges of 21st-century life.

The Education Trust decided to look underneath the rather dismal overall averages at some high schools that are producing unusually strong results for all students. We thought these schools might have something to teach us.

In this report, we examine three schools that serve mostly low-income or minority students. Two of the three

schools are performing in the top tiers of their respective states; the other is one of the fastest improving high schools in its state. What makes these schools special is that they are succeeding with students who usually are on the wrong end of the achievement gap—poor students and students of color. Such schools are not common, but they do exist. Their very existence stands as proof that high schools can do more than we have ever expected.

University Park Campus School in Worcester, Massachusetts, and Elmont Memorial Junior-Senior High School in Nassau County, New York, are the two highly successful schools profiled here. They have high overall student proficiency rates, small or nonexistent achievement gaps, and better than average ability to hold on to students through the 12th grade<sup>1</sup>.

Except for the fact that they are both in urban areas, University Park and Elmont could not be more different from each other. University Park is small, with 200 students, 12 teachers, a principal and a school secretary. Most University Park students enter seventh grade reading well below grade level, but by 10th grade they all pass the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System high school exit test. Elmont, on the other hand, is a large, urban school with almost 2,000 students in a big, sprawling building. Through careful organization and high

expectations, most students make it to senior year and all seniors graduate, 69 percent with the rigorous Regents diploma.

The third school is Granger High School, a rural school in the Yakima Valley of Washington state. It was selected because it has made significant achievement gains in recent years. We hope that it will provide an idea of how a school can get started on the path to improvement. Granger had horrific achievement data just six years ago, when only 20 percent of the 10th-graders met state reading standards, and fewer than half of that met state writing and math standards. Today, though it continues to serve students much poorer than the state average, it is closing in on state achievement averages and is poised to make even greater gains.

It is our hope that this report, in tandem with another on schools that are accelerating the academic growth of students, “Gaining Traction, Gaining Ground: How Some High Schools Accelerate Learning for Struggling Students,” will help give people who care about high school reform some examples of schools that are succeeding at a difficult task, as well as serve as a welcome reminder that it really is possible to teach all children to high levels. As the license plate of one of the principals in the report says: *Se puede*. (It can be done.)

<sup>1</sup> Promoting Power Index (PPI), which was created by researchers at Johns Hopkins University, was used. PPI compares the number of 12th-graders enrolled to the number of ninth-graders enrolled four years earlier.

# Elmont Memorial Junior-Senior High School:

## The expectation is excellence



Exterior of Elmont Memorial Junior-Senior High School.

By Karin Chenoweth

**E**lmont Memorial Junior-Senior High School in Elmont, New York, is a big, intimidating brick building housing almost 2,000 students in seventh through 12th grades. It draws from surrounding neighborhoods of small, tidy, working class homes on narrow, densely packed streets in Nassau County, Long Island, just over the border from Queens and blocks from the Belmont Racetrack. About three-quarters of the students are African Americans. A sizable minority are recent immigrants from the Caribbean and Africa; 11 percent are Hispanic; and 11 percent Asian, Pacific Islander, or American Indian.

About 16 percent of the students qualify for free lunch, and another 8 percent qualify for reduced-price lunch, a measure of poverty. Between 11 and 20 percent of the students qualify for public assistance.

Unlike many other schools

the New York State Education Department identifies as “similar,” it posts very high achievement, with very small achievement gaps among groups of students. It also holds onto its students in much higher proportions than schools with similar demographics – its senior class is 83 percent the size of its freshman class – and 100 percent of its seniors graduate, 97 percent of whom go on to college.

“But we’re not aiming our students to go to college,” says Elmont’s principal, Al Harper.\* “We’re aiming higher than that – we’re aiming them at graduating from college.”

Partly for that reason, Elmont encourages students to take Advanced Placement classes and tests. In fact, Elmont was recently recognized by The College Board as the high school that gets more African-American students taking and passing (getting a score of 3 or higher) AP World History than any other school in the country (23 in 2004).

Harper has been principal for three years, but before

that he was assistant principal for nine years, and he has both been shaped by and has helped shape the culture of the school – a culture of high expectations where every student is expected to behave well and perform well, and where every teacher is expected to teach well.

At a lunchtime gathering of the school’s “cabinet,” – the principal, the three assistant principals, and the chairs of the departments – Peter Gaffney, the chair of the athletic department, described the culture of Elmont, to the approbation of his colleagues, as follows: “Mr. Harper sets the bar very high for the cabinet; the cabinet sets the bar high for the teachers; and the teachers set the bar high for the kids.”

Throughout the school, the emphasis is on instruction – instruction by teachers of students and by administrators of teachers.

“I taught in the city for four years and thought I was a pretty good teacher,” says eighth-grade English teacher Wendy Tague who came from teaching in New York City. “But until I came here I had never taught a lesson.”

She credits the intense system of observations by administrators with helping her become a better teacher. “We’re observed seven times a year until tenure, and, once tenured, we observe each other,” she says. The observation process is

\* Since this profile was completed, Al Harper has become a superintendent and John Capozzi has assumed the principalship of Elmont.

“designed to help the teacher,” she says.

That observation process is at the core of what Elmont is about, not only according to Tague but also according to Harper and his cabinet members.

Department chairs and assistant principals are responsible for observing lessons and making detailed suggestions for improvement in presentations, questioning techniques, how to engage students in the lesson, and more. A lesson which has very little to improve is often identified as needing to be taught to another teacher.

### The school's schedule is built around opportunities for teachers to work together.

Assistant Principal John Capozzi calls observation the “tool” for instructional growth. “Instruction drives the building,” he says. “We talk about it all day.” Before observing a teacher, for example, the observer is supposed to look at the previous observation to see what the recommendation for improvement was. “Next time, you want to see an improvement in that area.” A common “action plan” for new teachers is to observe other teachers teach a lesson in order to learn new techniques or strategies.

And the administrators themselves are expected to improve their observation techniques – periodically, lessons are videotaped and administrators all watch the lesson together, then write up their observations at home overnight. They then meet

the next day to discuss their observations. This way they develop insight into other ways to observe as well as other things to recommend.

Tague said that when she first arrived, she thought that a lesson might consist of introducing a poetic term to a class and giving a few examples from some poems. Now, she says, she knows that she needs to “scaffold learning” by linking back to previous lessons, making sure that each student understands the concept, and giving multiple opportunities to students to learn the term and incorporate it in their own

writing.

The systematic observation of teachers that Tague credits with helping her improve is one way it is clear that teachers at Elmont are considered to be part of a larger enterprise with a lot of support and encouragement, not punishment.

For example, a teacher whose class did less well on the Regents Exams or the Advanced Placement exams than was hoped is not assumed to have done something wrong, according to Harper. “How can you ask someone who has worked her heart out and tried so hard, ‘What went wrong?’ No, you sit down and say, ‘You did really well. Is there something more we can do?’”

“We are all responsible for training our teachers,” is the way Eileen Kramer, chair of the music department, puts it.

Put another way by George



Students pass between classes at Elmont.

Holub, an eighth-grade science teacher, “This school almost has a family atmosphere. A new teacher is taken under somebody’s wing.”

The school’s schedule is built around opportunities for teachers to work together. In the seventh and eighth grades, teachers are teamed in traditional middle school fashion (core subject teachers who all share a group of students), and the teams meet every day with a guidance counselor, who is an integral part of the team. Most of the discussion surrounds instruction, but the presence of the guidance counselor means that discussions of individual students can be followed up directly by the counseling department.

The seventh- and eighth-grade teachers “loop” with their students, meaning that the teachers who teach incoming seventh-graders move with them to eighth grade the following year and then drop back to seventh grade the following year. This way the students and teachers

develop strong personal and academic bonds that last through the high school years through hallway and after-school encounters.

In the high school grades,

**“We push our kids to excel in all their classes. If I hear that a student is arriving at gym unprepared, or isn’t doing well in art, I’ll ask him about that.”**

teachers meet by department and work on lessons, pacing, and assessments. They do not necessarily teach the same thing at the same time, but they are all aiming at the same goals.

New York has the well-known Regents Exams as the marker of whether students achieve academic success. The state established a lower score needed to receive a “local” diploma without a Regents endorsement. (For students entering ninth grade in 2001 and after, there will be no local diploma.) In 2003, nine students earned a local diploma at Elmont. No students at Elmont received a local diploma in 2004, and 69 percent of them earned a Regents diploma, which means that they passed at least five Regents exams with a score of 65 or above. (Now, all diplomas will be Regents diplomas, and the number to watch will be “Regents Diplomas with Advanced Designation.”)

Even that doesn’t quite tell the story. On the math exam, 28 percent of the students earned above an 85 in Math A, the math that is required of students. And Elmont has steadily increased the number of students taking Math B, the higher math sequence

that leads to pre-calculus or calculus. Of the 86 students who took Math B in 2004, 94 percent scored above a 65 and a full third of the students scored above an 85.

In English, 96 percent of the students (including 78 percent of the students with disabilities) scored above a 65, and 65 percent scored above an 85. Contrast that with the Humanities and the Arts Magnet (the former Andrew Jackson High School), just down the street a few blocks in Queens, where only about half the freshman class graduates within four years, only 23 percent of the graduates earned a Regents Diploma, and fewer than a dozen kids scored above an 85 in math and English.

The Regents Exams provide a focus around which instruction is organized, but

teachers at Elmont bristle at the thought that they care only about the Regents scores. “Many classes culminate in Regents exams,” says the chair of the English department, Alicia Calabrese. “But many don’t. We push our kids to excel in all their classes. If I hear that a student is arriving at gym unprepared, or isn’t doing well in art, I’ll ask him about that.”

Teachers can be carefully selected because each opening has an average of 350 applicants. “Teachers have heard about Elmont and want to work here,” says Harper. Department chairs sort through the applications and forward about eight to the appropriate assistant principal, who will ask the applicants to teach sample lessons. Two applicants will then be forwarded to the principal, who interviews the finalists to see if they have an “Elmont heart.”

“I know they have the content knowledge and the skills,” he says, because of the vetting they have already undergone. “I’m looking for



An English class reading *Macbeth*.

intangibles – can they teach with their heart, not their head?” Questions he asks include, for example, what teachers would do if one of their students were struggling, and how the teacher would reach out to the student’s parents.

They are also forewarned about the intense system of observations and the expectation that everyone is expected to improve. Assistant Principal Capozzi says, “Before they ever begin here, we explain this is an ongoing learning experience, and it should never stop.”

By taking such care with hiring, Elmont is sure to begin with a teaching staff committed to working together, improving instruction, and having high expectations for the students.

But that doesn’t mean they are ready for all the challenges of teaching in a large, urban high school. Harper tells of a second-year teacher who came into his office crying, saying she couldn’t stand it any more and was quitting. “I had the department chair cover her class and we talked for an hour,” Harper remembers. “We buddied her up with another teacher, we had the chairperson work with her, we worked on lesson plans with her, we had a number of intensive interventions.”

Today, several years later, Harper says, “She is the most improved teacher I have ever seen. Her [students’] assessment results this year are through the roof.”

That intense kind of commitment produces the kind of social atmosphere where staff members regularly have barbeques and Christmas

parties together. During the winter break toward the end of February 2005, the principal and several staff members with their families – a total of 35 people – traveled together to spend a week at the beach in the Dominican Republic. “People who work together and like each other and have a common goal, get together,” Harper says. The science department started out having a bagel day once a month and now they have an elaborate monthly “fete.”

When some students at the school wanted to do something to help the victims of the Indian Ocean tsunami, Harper worked with them to put on a Saturday morning pancake breakfast to raise money. One man ladeling the batter was unfamiliar to him – “He was the boyfriend of one of our new teachers. That’s the kind of school this is,” Harper said.

Teachers chuckle when Harper says, with tongue slightly in cheek, “We have no discipline problems.” But they agree that discipline problems are not a constant plague, as they are in many nearby schools.

For the most part, students show up for class and they do the work asked of them. Not only that, but many of them are in the school building long after classes end, as part of clubs, sports, or getting help from teachers. “We keep our kids very active,” says

Harper. As an example, any student who wants to play basketball makes the team – the athletic department simply hires more coaches to accommodate the numbers. “We don’t cut anyone,” the head of the athletic department says. Assistant Principal Mary Hannon says, “The child who is involved in music or sports is more successful. It is part and parcel of a full education.” Other teachers refer to the full set of after-school activities as Elmont’s “hidden curriculum,” and part of where Elmont students develop their intense relationships with the school and their strong sense of belonging and sportsmanship. Harper brags that other principals often praise his students for their excellent behavior at sporting events.

Capozzi, who handles many of the school’s discipline problems, says he is on the constant alert for problems.



The AP World History class engages in discussion.

Some of the kids at Elmont, he says, are “tough” kids. But if a student doesn’t respond well to a greeting in the hallway – for example, if he doesn’t smile back, or doesn’t quickly take off a hat when reminded, Capozzi will invite that child into his office where he tries

to see if there is a problem bothering him or her. Often he will find there is a problem at home or elsewhere, and he is able to deploy a counselor or social worker to help. When one student's family was about to become homeless, the school social worker connected the family to county resources to help them stay housed.

This could be viewed as the school discipline version of the "broken window" theory of policing, where very small signs of unhappiness or unrest are taken seriously.

New students who are unused to the atmosphere at Elmont, Capozzi says, sometimes "have to be Elmontized" before their behavior is acceptable. "The goal of discipline is to change the behavior," Capozzi says.

Elmont has its share of suspensions – 257 in 2004. But, Harper says, "I've seen [Mr. Capozzi] suspend a student," Harper says, and "the student thanks him." Harper attributes that to the respect and concern that Capozzi has, even for students he is suspending.

Another example of the way discipline is thought of is the way the school uses the academic ineligibility rule. As at many other schools, if students at Elmont are failing more than two classes or don't maintain a 2.0 grade point average, they are not permitted to participate in sports or other extra-curricular activities or even attend sporting events.

But, Capozzi says, "We have a review board, and more often than not we'll grant a waiver," meaning that students sign an academic contract agreeing to get back on track. Capozzi

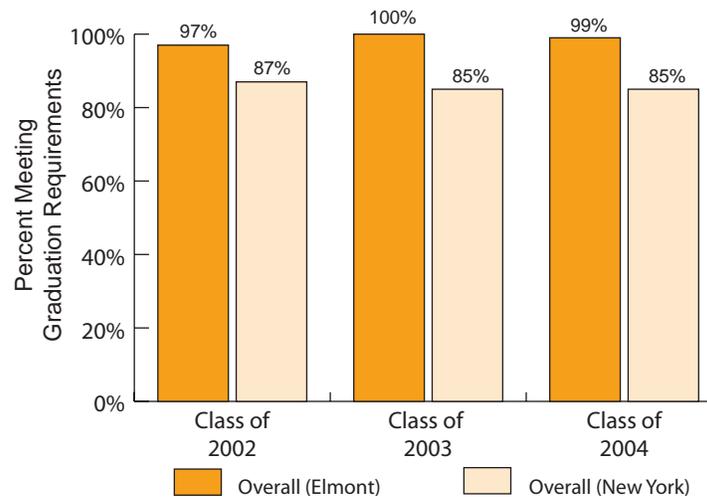
and a counselor as well as teachers are on the review board, and students write a letter explaining what caused their failures. Sometimes it's an illness in the family or some other reason and, Assistant Principal Hannon says, "At times like that, we wouldn't want to take the student away from his teammates and the support they can provide."

In other words, the school uses the academic ineligibility

rule as a way to identify students who may need extra help and as a teaching tool, not as a punishment. As a result, only about 3 percent of the students are ineligible to participate in after-school activities.

This goes along with what Harper says is his philosophy of discipline: "If you treat that child the way you want your child to be treated, you'll always be right."

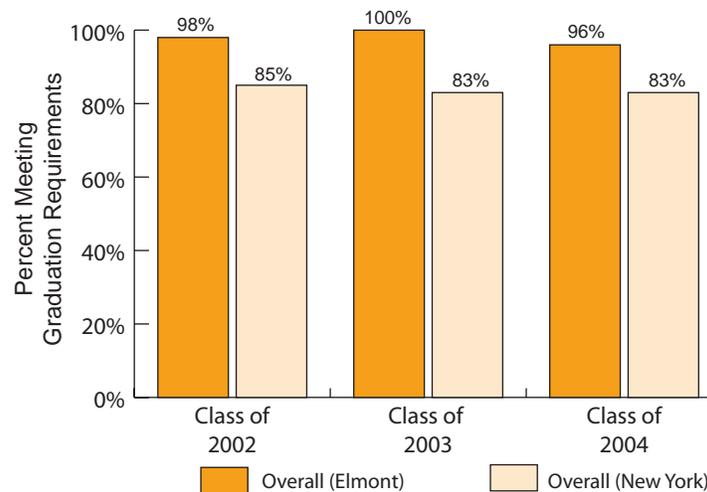
## Regents English Exam



Source: New York State School Report Card, <http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/irts/reportcard/>

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## Regents Math Exam



Source: New York State School Report Card, <http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/irts/reportcard/>

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Harper and Capozzi give another example of how this philosophy has worked. A football player who graduated several years ago and is about to graduate from Lehigh University with a degree in engineering was going to have to give up football while at Elmont because he needed to watch his younger sister during the afternoons. “All we did was let him leave and get his sister, who sat and did her homework in the end zone,” Capozzi says. “After a while, we had a day care in the end zone,” because other players had the same issue, and high school volunteer tutors worked with the younger children on their work.

“You’ve got to do everything to help every single student,” says Capozzi.

“We don’t have discipline issues because [students] are focused on achievement,” says Harper.

Harper, Capozzi, and the others at Elmont know that the

**“When you believe they can do that, they rise to the challenge.”**

stakes are high for today’s high school students. They need a good education, and Elmont is where they need to get it. Thus, expectations are extremely high for students.

“We push our kids to excel,” says the English department chair Cabrese. “When you believe they can do that, they rise to the challenge.”

It is the culture of high expectations that makes a difference, according to the head of the math department, Anthony Murray, who taught for years in the New York City system. “The kids are the same

wherever you go,” he says. “But the expectations are different.”

Those expectations are clear in the classrooms. But it isn’t just about expectations – it is about careful instruction to meet those expectations.

In a 12th-grade Advanced Placement English composition class, for example, Pat O’Leary told her students about a reading passage from Cormac McCarthy’s “The Crossing” that had been used in a previous Advanced Placement exam. “This is a challenging piece,” she told the class. “You’re up to the challenge.” She then gives the students time to read and discuss the piece in small groups, as she travels among the groups gathering comments and insights that she shares with the class, leading the students to deeper understandings of the text.

In an 11th-grade “core” class (Elmont has two levels of classes – core, or Regents, and advanced, which includes the Advanced Placement classes)

– teacher Kevin Sullivan leads students through a reading of *Macbeth*. Sullivan asks different students to read different parts, and he takes on the part of the third witch. It is the scene where the witches first see Macbeth and Macduff, and make their acerbic observations and predictions.

Every few sentences, Sullivan stops to scaffold the learning for students. “Let’s break that down,” he says, or, “I want to paraphrase that,” or “Let’s tap into social studies – what’s treason?”

To the line, “Lesser than

Macbeth and greater,” Sullivan asks, “How can someone be lesser than Macbeth and greater?” One student, slouching and mumbling slightly, says, “He might have a lesser title or position, but might be a better man.”

“That’s brilliant,” Sullivan says.

This particular class had taken the Regents Exam earlier in the year, and 92 percent passed, 52 percent at the “mastery” level – that is, with a score of 85 or above.

To enliven his presentation, Sullivan projected images loaded onto the computer to show students paintings of the three witches by different artists with different ideas of what they were like. The students gasped at the hideous bearded images.

Most classrooms at Elmont are equipped with projectors that permit teachers to show short video clips, documents or artwork, often found by the school librarian, who helps teachers find interesting materials that illustrate lessons.

In a 10th-grade chemistry class, Michelle Seeley teaches a lesson about the behavior of ideal gases by comparing them to “ideal boyfriends,” ensuring that students understand that under some circumstances (low pressure in the case of gases; being in the presence of parents in the case of boyfriends), gases and boyfriends are more likely to behave in an ideal fashion. Although seemingly frivolous, the comparison made for a vivid mnemonic device.

In Michael Indovino’s Advanced Placement World History class (this is the class

that in 2004 achieved College Board distinction mentioned earlier), Indovino links a discussion of the kitchen debate between Richard Nixon and Nikita Khrushchev back to previous lessons about Stalin, the USSR, Castro and the Spanish-American War before reading part of the debate, explaining any word that he thinks might cause problems in understanding.

Walking through the halls and glancing into classrooms reveals lively instruction going on all through the school – students are attentive, teachers are talking, listening, or moving among groups of students to see if anyone needs help.

When asked what makes the difference at Elmont, Harper credits school system unity, including a supportive school board and superintendent. He also credits the teachers and his administrative staff and the students themselves.

“It’s not magic,” he says. “It’s hard work.”

A product of the New York City school system (Andrew Jackson High School, just

blocks away from Elmont) with degrees from Howard University, Adelphi University, the Graduate Center of the City University of New York and St. John’s University, Harper is passionate about the need to make sure all kids get a good education and the need to make changes in the way children are now educated.

**“It’s not magic. It’s hard work.”**

“You can change it, you must change it,” Harper says.

Harper dismisses all talk of the difficulties of getting poor children to meet high standards. “Because a child is poor doesn’t mean he can’t learn. Because a child lives in the projects doesn’t mean he can’t learn. If there are gaps, we as a society must fill those gaps.”

He knows that many teachers around the country have become discouraged and will often blame kids for low performance.

“If you say ‘the kids, the kids,’ you’ll be there forever. We know that kids who are failing are not doing their work. We know they’re not coming for extra help. We know that. That’s a given. But what are we doing instructionally in the classroom, what are we doing to make sure the kids are learning? If you have good teachers doing good, exciting instruction, kids will learn.”

And, he adds, if a teacher doesn’t believe all children can learn, “He should be in a different business. He should work for IBM or another big company. He shouldn’t be a teacher.”

He has little patience for those who argue that schools cannot be expected to make up for the deficits that poverty and discrimination cause.

If we were to agree with that proposition, he says, “As a country we [would be] condemning a whole group of people to not getting an education. We [would be] condemning our Black and Hispanic youth to menial jobs — at best — and to never attaining the American dream.”

# University Park Campus School: The Power to Change Things

By Karin Chenoweth

**W**orcester, Massachusetts, has seen better days. Despite new downtown development undertaken to rejuvenate the city, it still houses more than its share of empty, trash-strewn lots bound by chain link fences, blank storefronts, and people scuttling to leave before dark.

Clark University sits in one of the poorer sections of Worcester, apart from the downtown area and surrounded by densely packed housing, most of which consists of wooden “triple-deckers” — three-floor, three-family houses — and low-rise apartment buildings.

More than a decade ago, Clark University officials realized fewer families would be willing to send their children to the well-regarded university if the neighborhood got any poorer or more dangerous, so it began working with the neighborhood on housing issues, which is part of the reason much of the housing surrounding the campus looks in reasonable repair.

“It was a matter of enlightened self-interest,” says Thomas Del Prete, director of the Jacob Hiatt Center for Urban Education at Clark University.

“Clark realized that its own future was at stake.” Enough work was done to improve the neighborhood that the president of the university moved into an old Victorian

house adjoining the university and, lured by financial incentives, a handful of faculty have followed suit.

Clark officials realized, however, that the quality of schools in a neighborhood affects whether families are willing to live there. “We knew...that if we helped create outstanding public schools for neighbors, people would want to live here and stay here,” says Jack Foley, executive assistant to the president of Clark University, and one of the key people behind Clark University’s engagement with the community.

So Clark did a number of things, including pledging that any student who lived within approximately eight blocks of the university and who could

meet the admissions criteria for the school could attend Clark for free.

Also, its center for urban education formed a partnership with the local high school as a “professional development school,” meaning, among other things, that it offers professional development and mentoring to faculty members, allows faculty members to take university courses for free, and provides student teachers to the school.

And it worked with the Worcester Public School district to start a new school just for neighborhood children.

A steering committee composed of four representatives of Clark University and four from the Worcester schools selected a



The Class of 2006 poses after taking the MCAS as sophomores.

principal (a longtime teacher from Worcester) and set the basic direction. The school began in 1997 with just a seventh grade and grew one grade a year until it outgrew the original space on Clark University campus and moved to an old elementary school one block away. Built in 1885, the building is one of the oldest schools now in use, and its creaky wooden floors, big windows, and sizeable classrooms make it a distinctive place to go to school.

**The school offers excellent instruction in a focused, college-preparatory curriculum taught by teachers who know their fields and are convinced their students can and must learn at high levels and are willing to support them.**

Since its founding, University Park has demonstrated the power of a coherent instructional program taught by knowledgeable, skilled teachers to transform the academic lives of children. The school's students – who typically arrive two or more grade levels behind in reading – all pass the state high school exit exams, most of them at high levels, and they all go to college, most of them to four-year colleges, some of which have difficult entrance standards, such as Clark, Brown, Georgetown and Tufts universities and Trinity and Holy Cross colleges.

This is in direct contrast to most secondary schools. For the most part, middle and high schools are engines of inertia: students who enter at high levels tend to stay at high levels; students who enter at

low levels tend to stay at low levels.

But at University Park, students enter at low levels and are accelerated up to high levels. There is no magic to how this is done. The school offers excellent instruction in a focused, college-preparatory curriculum taught by teachers who know their fields and are convinced their students can and must learn at high levels and are willing to support them. That's all. But it is rare enough to be worthy of study.

Part of the excellent

instruction involves a very tightly focused curriculum. Only a small number of courses are taught, and students are expected to take English, math, science, and history each year. All students take Spanish for three years; no other language is offered. All high school classes are honors or college-level. Usually the college-level classes are Advanced Placement courses, but occasionally a Clark professor will come to the school to teach a course. Students with a strong desire for other courses are permitted to take classes at Clark University for free, and as a result, by graduation, two-thirds of all students have taken at least one college class, either at the school or the university.

Another part of the instruction is a strong teaching staff. It is a mixture of veteran

and new teachers, and most of the new teachers have been trained by Clark University's Center for Urban Education and spent their student teaching at University Park.

Finally, the school's instruction includes strong personal support of students. "The principal knows everyone," is how one student put it. It is a small school, with fewer than 208 students total, 44 or fewer students per grade. That means that all the students know all the teachers and all the teachers know the students and where they live.

In fact, the children who attend University Park must live within an approximately eight-block radius of the school, meaning that, by definition, they must come from a poor neighborhood. As a result, 70 percent of the children qualify for free and reduced-price meals. Some of the children's parents work at Clark University as building-service or food-service workers, but only one student is the child of a graduate student at Clark University, a visiting student from Iran. None is the child of faculty members. About 78 percent of the children speak English as a second language, and many show up knowing little or no English. The most common languages are Spanish and Vietnamese, but Eastern Europeans are also represented, and the school has quite a few Albanian children.

Because there are too few slots to admit all the children from the neighborhood, families fill out an application and are then selected by lottery, but there are no grade requirements for admission,

which means that University Park has a big challenge — a challenge it takes very seriously.

A free, academically-oriented Clark-sponsored summer camp, staffed by teachers and older students, may be the first experience a child has with University Park. Or he or she may have an older brother or sister there. (Because siblings are automatically admitted, half the students in the current seventh grade have siblings in the school.)

Most students enter University Park in the summer before seventh grade, when they attend a three-week pre-school session. “I always teach English, to get a baseline on their reading,” says the principal, June Eressy. Eressy is the second principal at University Park, but she was the school’s first English teacher.

“I do a mini-running record on each student,” Eressy says, referring to a technique reading teachers use to note how fluently and accurately children can read. “I can gauge fluency; I can tell if they decode.” Because so many of the students are English-language learners, she said, “it’s even more complex.”

Those students who need help with the basics, such as decoding, get help after school from an elementary reading teacher. In previous years, University Park had the funding to stay open an extra 90 minutes past the regular school day and was able to incorporate that kind of instruction into its school day. Cuts in district funds returned the school to regular hours. But a federal 21st Century

Community Learning Center grant allows it to provide an after-school homework center and some additional tutoring.

In any case, Eressy says, “the most critical thing is to get kids to practice reading.” The English teachers at University Park do a fair amount of reading to their students, partly to model good reading, partly to build their appreciation and understanding of complicated syntax, and partly to get them hooked on great stories. They may even begin with picture books to jumpstart discussions of personification, metaphor and genres, and then move to somewhat higher-level reading. “I pick highly motivating reading selections on a fifth- or sixth-grade reading level so they can access it, but it’s not insulting,” says Peter Weyler, the middle-school English teacher, who says he assumes most of the kids will come in reading on the third- to fifth-grade level.

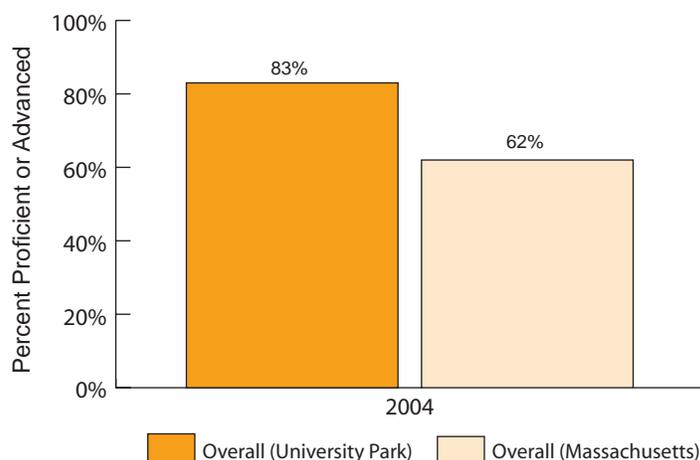
“I’ve had [students] say that the first book they ever read was in my class,” Weyler says.

He also tries to expose them to language and literature in other ways by arranging trips to local poetry slams and by encouraging students to organize their own poetry slams and performance-art pieces.

Students are expected to read a lot and write a lot at University Park. They write extensive analyses of literature that are graded according to rigorous standards and allowed to be rewritten. But they are also expected to do a great deal of what is called “low-stakes writing,” meaning writing that isn’t criticized but merely checked to make sure students are practicing writing and thinking about literature. Such low-stakes writing includes reader journals, first drafts, and poetry. History teachers assign not only textbook reading but also novels and historical fiction tied to the period being studied. Math and science teachers require students to write extensively as well.

But English class is certainly the epicenter of reading and

### Grade 10, Language Arts



Source: Massachusetts Department of Education School Profile, <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/>

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writing instruction. James E. McDermott is the high school English teacher.

A veteran teacher, McDermott was one of the teacher consultants who worked to develop the MCAS, the state test that gauges whether students are performing at state standards.

McDermott is scathing about the current state of urban education. “Wherever you go in urban public education, you will hear excuses — ‘you do not know our kids’ or ‘we haven’t enough money or computers or facilities.’ Here we figure if you allow excuses, you take yourself out of the equation as a possible solution. So we have a no-excuses policy.”

McDermott teaches high school English as if he were teaching in an exclusive college-preparatory school, with an emphasis on creativity and what he calls “intellectual play.” His reading list for the first semester of 10th-grade English, with the theme of “the individual and society,” includes *Antigone*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*,

*Catcher in the Rye*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In a paper he wrote on teaching, McDermott wrote, “We will read the classics from Sophocles to Shakespeare to Faulkner, Conrad, Joyce, Eliot, Tennyson....I am determined to expose my students to the greatest of literary works.”

To introduce a unit on poetry, McDermott began with the Paul Simon song, “I am a Rock.” On the first day of the unit, students were told simply to write an essay analyzing the song. “It was a setup,” McDermott said. “I knew they couldn’t do it.” And, in fact, their first attempts consisted mostly of short, simple paragraphs with little detail and few sophisticated concepts.

So the next day McDermott began scaffolding the task for them, explaining how to look for alliteration and metaphor, how to notice diction, and how to talk and write about all three in the context of an author’s meaning. He showed them how to go back to the text to find support for their statements.

The next attempts by the students were longer, more sophisticated, and had a lot more detail and thought. They took turns reading their efforts in small groups, and students nominated those classmates whose pieces were exceptional to read to the class. Each composition read aloud was followed by a supportive round of applause by fellow students and some kind of critique by McDermott. For example, McDermott pointed out that one student’s opening line (“I am a Rock” is an interesting poem.) was flat, but then explained that it was fine in a first draft as a way to get the writing juices flowing.

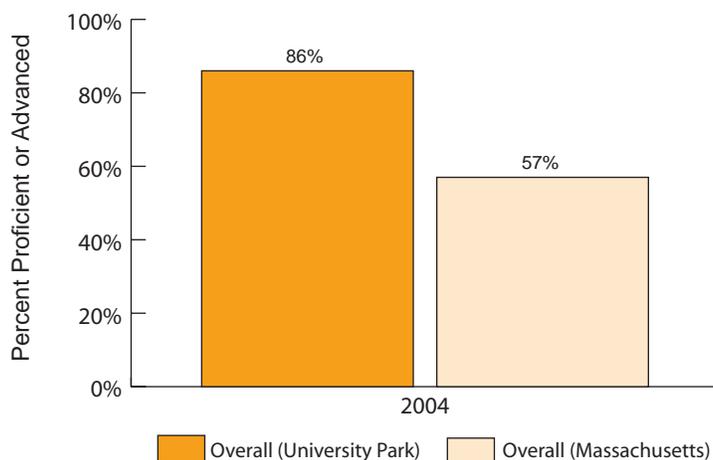
“People are going to screw up,” he said later, “but that’s part of the process.” He wants his students to take risks in their writing. “I don’t want the kids looking for a walk — it’s more fun to swing and miss.”

His 10th-graders are preparing to take the Massachusetts high school exit exam (MCAS) in 2005 for the first time. If they pass, they can graduate from high school; if they fail, they must take it again until they pass or they cannot graduate.

As one of the teachers who helped develop MCAS, McDermott is well aware of the structure of the test and the grading standards. He grades his students’ work by the same standards, and permits students to rewrite a badly written essay until it meets high standards.

In that way, test preparation is built into all the instruction at University Park, but additional instruction in test strategies is offered after school and just before

### Grade 10, Math



Source: Massachusetts Department of Education School Profile, <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/>

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the MCAS is administered. Students are well aware of the MCAS and know how well previous classes have done. "It's kind of a challenge," is the way junior Jacqui Carey describes it. The juniors are proud that their class passed at a higher rate than the previous class.

"It's not a hard test," junior Reed Powell said. But other students around the state have not found it so easy. In Massachusetts as a whole, 11 percent of the 10th-graders failed the English Language Arts portion in 2004; 15 percent failed the math part. In the rest of the Worcester school district 24 percent failed the English part of the exam and 36 percent failed the math section. Also in Worcester, only 37 percent were advanced or proficient in English; 30 percent in math.

Official figures show that 3 percent of University Park's students failed, but that represented a student who no longer attended but still was carried on the school's books. Other than that student, all of University Park's 10th-graders passed. But more impressive was that very few were in the just-passed category, or "needs improvement;" 83 percent scored advanced or proficient in the English Language Arts test and 86 percent in math.

University Park, in other words, is demonstrating that schools have the power to help all kids learn to high levels, even students who enter behind. English teacher McDermott is unsurprised. "We know what works in education. The research is prolific. The question today is not what works or what does not work. Rather it is why is it that we know what constitutes good teaching and effective learning and yet we fail to implement what we know."



A student confers with Mr. McDermott.

The students have another perspective. When asked what contributed to the school's success, junior Katie Brown said, "the passion."

Teachers at University Park have high expectations of the students, and keep on them all the time, she and other students said. When one of his teachers gave him an 88, "That was a wake-up call," says junior Benny Vega. "He said I wasn't pushing myself." The teacher

gave Vega and his friends very challenging math problems to solve. "He'd seen that we would...slide by with a low A or a high B, and he didn't let us," Vega says.

Another junior, Josh Kozaczka, says that the smallness of the school helps. "All the schools I went to I didn't do well. I got into trouble. I read fine and I could always get the grades, but none of the teachers cared – I didn't do well because no one was pushing. My mother was always working." One of the things that turned him around, he said, was that at University Park "Dr. Mac [McDermott] said I was smart and could get good grades. Having someone (who is) that intelligent and that smart say that really meant a lot."

Says junior Stephanie Ryan of the teachers: "They respect you, and letting them down is like letting your parents down." Echoing the same thought, junior Dan Sargent said, "It goes straight to your head and to your heart."

A great deal of attention is paid at University Park to the culture of the school. It is a culture of support and respect, and upperclassmen – that is, juniors and seniors – are explicitly expected to be role models for the younger students.

In fact, math teacher Dan

Restuccia says that when the eighth-graders were having some behavior problems, “We put them in a room with five 12th graders, and the adults left the room.”

The students, says Principal Eressy, “don’t want this to be just another urban school where kids swear and write on the walls.” And, in fact, there is no graffiti, and many students don’t even bother to lock their lockers.

“Early on, a student coined the phrase, ‘It’s cool to be smart,’” says Clark University’s Del Prete. “The culture that fosters that is very strong.”

Students at University Park are expected to do two to three hours of homework a night, and teachers have high expectations for students. “The students have standards for the teachers as well,” junior Katie Brown says.

The fact that University Park is so small gives it enormous strength in building a culture and community. But the smallness also has drawbacks. For one, each department (math, history, and so forth) consists of only three teachers – the middle school teacher and two high school teachers. That means there are few colleagues to collaborate with, plan lessons with, and look at student work with, at least from the perspective of an academic discipline. (Faculty members do look at student work during regular Wednesday meetings while students are in “specials” such as art, music, and physical education.)

The smallness also means

that students have few choices in what classes to take and, if they play football or some other sport, must play at the regular city high school.

“Our greatest strength is our smallness,” is how Ricci Hall, the high school history teacher puts it. “And our greatest weakness is our smallness.” He teaches four separate courses, each requiring its own preparation time, although his situation is unusual (most teachers teach two sections of each class).

Despite that, he says, “Teaching here is like teaching in heaven.” Discipline problems that plague badly run schools are non-existent at

**“Teaching here is like teaching in heaven.”**

University Park, meaning that his time is spent thinking about instruction and how best to get his students learning more, rather than how to deal with recalcitrant students.

That isn’t because the students at University Park are angels. One student was sent to University Park after assaulting a teacher. The school system lost a battle to expel him, but didn’t want him back at his old school. “We took him,” says Eressy. “He hasn’t been a discipline problem here.” Because siblings have automatic admittance, his sister came as well. “She had been in a behavior-management class all her life. I haven’t had a single behavior

problem with her. But she had major gaps in her learning. She told me once that her teachers ‘played the radio and we danced.’ – in her English class, no less.” That girl is known in the school as being an eager learner. “The passion in her eyes for doing something new,” is what most strikes math teacher Restuccia.

Students who were discipline problems in schools where they may have gotten lost in the crowd and not expected to learn become responsible students in University Park’s atmosphere of respect and learning.

“We have the power to change things,” is the way Eressy puts it.

But the key to that power is the belief that it exists. Eressy asks all prospective teachers: “Do you really believe all kids can learn and that they can meet rigorous standards?”

That belief is the core of University Park’s success, and is reflected in a statement made by the founding principal, Donna Rodrigues, at a forum at Harvard’s Graduate School of Education in the winter of 2004. She was addressing the idea that it is foolish to think that schools can close the achievement gaps between poor and non-poor kids.

“Kids go to school to learn,” she said. “Educators need to be prepared to take the gap on.”

# Granger High School: Se Puede (It can be done)



Principal Richard Esparza meets in the library with students he advises.

By Karin Chenoweth

When Richard Esparza, principal of Granger High School, shows visitors around, he likes to show them where his students live. Although some students – the sons and daughters of farmers and ranchers – live in the surrounding hills of the Yakima Valley, a large agricultural area in Washington, most live in the small town of Granger. First, Esparza drives past the modest stucco bungalows that surround the school. “This is where my rich students live,” he says. Then he enters the mobile-home park filled with singlewide trailers parked in fixed spots. “This is where my middle-class students live,” he says. Then he swings around into a park with small trailers pulled behind pick-up trucks. “This is where my poor kids live,” he says. “People wonder how they can live like this, but

it’s better than outside under a tarp.”

About one-third of Granger High School’s 330 or so students are the children of migrant agricultural workers, but most of the permanent families are agricultural workers who have settled in the Yakima Valley to pick and sort apples and other crops. About 82 percent are Latino, 6 percent are American Indian, and the rest White. Almost all the students – 84 percent – are eligible for free or reduced-price meals. As Esparza sees it, most of his students have only two choices – do agricultural work or get an education. “That’s what my father told me,” Esparza says. His father was an agricultural worker from Mexico. “I come from poverty and where the students come from,” he says. When Esparza and his siblings complained about having to work in the fields, their father

told them, “Then go to school.”

Esparza tells his students much the same thing: “This is your one chance – unless you know someone with a yacht club.”

Esparza says that many poor students and students of color can be likened to “academic refugees” and have been told over and over that they are incapable of success. “How many times have they been told, ‘You guys are as dumb as a box of rocks’?”

Esparza grew up in a town quite similar to Granger, only 20 miles away, and he threw himself into high school, both academically and athletically, winning a wrestling scholarship to Central Washington University where he prepared to be a teacher and wrestling coach. He returned to the area with the mission of making sure students at Granger have the same opportunities he had.

To many, that mission might seem unpromising. The day he arrived to interview for the job, six years ago, he was greeted with gang-related graffiti that covered the school sign and the long, low wall that faced the school on the other side of the street. Discipline and attendance were serious problems which spilled over into the town, which had only recently begun its own program to lower the crime rate, one of the highest in the Yakima Valley. A

resident of a town to the east of Granger remembers that years ago police officers would escort visiting teams from the bus to the gym for basketball games.

Student achievement was dismal. Only 20 percent of the school's students met state reading standards in 2001; 4 percent met state math standards; and 10.8 percent met state writing standards. Parents rarely came to the school, even for parent conferences. "I wish I had a picture from then," Esparza says. "None of the students carried backpacks. I would ask them where their homework was and they would say they didn't have any."

Today, just about all the students carry backpacks, even in the last week of school. Attendance at student conferences by parents or guardians has been 100 percent for five years running. Graffiti is rare, and discipline is much less of an issue than five years ago. The atmosphere of the school is pleasant, with teachers and students greeting each other and Esparza roaming the halls encouraging the students to study, read, and plan for the future. Whether because of improvements in the school or the simultaneous improvements in policing in the town, Granger now has one of the lowest crime rates in the Yakima Valley.

Most striking, academic achievement has substantially improved: about 60 percent of students met state reading standards in 2005; 31 percent met state math standards; and 51 percent met state writing standards. Granger did not meet Adequate Yearly Progress in 2004 because its graduation

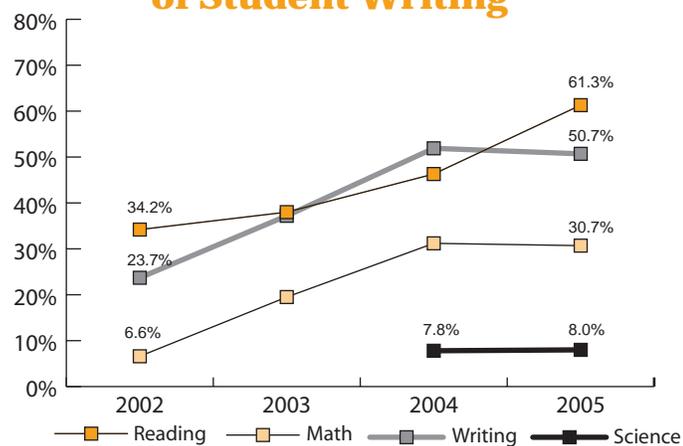
rate was too low – 59 percent. However, that was higher than the state graduation rate for Latino students, which was 49 percent, and its graduation rate improved in 2005 to 77 percent. Its "extended graduation rate" was 86 percent. (Extended graduation rate is calculated by Washington state to reflect students who take longer than four years, reflecting the fact that Washington has quite a few students who arrive in the United States in high school and need additional time to graduate. Washington is widely credited as having among the most accurate graduation data in the country.) Granger did not make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) to meet federal No Child Left Behind requirements in 2005 because of its math scores, but its reading score exceeded AYP targets.

Although Esparza is proud of his school's improvement, he is not satisfied. "To me, making it is 100 percent of our kids making it." He knows it will take a little more time,

however. "I'm an idealist at heart," he says. "But a realist in mind."

The gains Granger has made can be linked to a number of organizational and instructional changes in the school including linking each student with an adult, providing intensive reading instruction, and giving failing students additional opportunities to succeed. But all the changes began with a change in expectations. Esparza expects all students to succeed and he believes that they can, and he expects his faculty to believe the same thing. Many didn't when he first arrived. A survey conducted by the Center for Educational Effectiveness, a non-profit organization in Redmond, Washington, that provides technical support to the Granger school district, at that time showed that only about 50 percent of the faculty believed that Granger students were capable of meeting state standards. In May of 2005, 75 percent responded on a survey that they believe their students

### Grade 10 Washington Assessment of Student Writing\*



Source: Washington Department of Education

\* Comparing 2003 to 2004 scores should be done with caution, because cut scores on the tests were changed. However, the change was small for the 10th-grade tests – a student was considered proficient with one fewer right answer than the previous year. In 2005, the cut score for 10th-grade reading was also changed. If it had not been changed, 57.3 percent of students at Granger would have scored proficient rather than the official figure of 61.3. This still represents a 10-point improvement.

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can meet state reading standards.

Esparza began his principalship with a frontal assault on gang-related graffiti and clothing. All graffiti is removed by building maintenance employees within 24 hours. A Quonset-hut-type shelter behind the school, used for storage, was a prime target for gang graffiti and Esparza says that every day for weeks he would drive to the hut on his way to school, take out the spray paint he kept in his car for just this purpose, and repaint the door, which had been tagged during the night. "I can't have gangs announcing that they control the school," Esparza says. He says that no one has tagged the door for the past two years. At the same time, the town of Granger formed a police department with eight officers and began its own war on graffiti, drafting young offenders sentenced to community service to wash off and paint over graffiti throughout the town. Today, a casual visitor would never even consider graffiti an issue in Granger.

Esparza also banned all gang-related clothing. When a student wore a blue bandana as part of a school presentation, Esparza became visibly upset.

"It's for my presentation," the student answered. She kept it on while she read poetry and journal entries to a group of assembled students as part of her required senior project. "It's how she thinks of herself," Esparza said later about her wearing the bandana – "as a gang member." But immediately after her presentation, she changed out of her bandana and baggy

clothing.

Tackling graffiti and clothing was just the beginning.

Esparza knew he needed to make the school more personal for the students. It is a small school, but students were being lost. Granger had a high dropout rate, for example. In the 2001-02 school year, the first year official numbers are available, Granger had a 9.4 percent annual dropout rate. That first year, he organized 50 teams of adults from the school and community to visit the 400 homes of every student in

### He fills vacancies by finding teachers anywhere he can, including in the grocery store.

the district – including several foster homes. (At that point, Granger High School included the seventh and eighth grades, which is why there were more families then than now. The town of Granger now has a middle school.) Visitors brought voter registration cards, a brochure welcoming the family to the school, and a prepared talk to persuade families to be part of the school. To those teachers who didn't want to do home visits, Esparza says he responded with the same practiced speech he has used many times since in other situations. "You are a great teacher. We have a difference in philosophy. I'd be happy to write you a recommendation."

Sometimes when he gives that talk he loses a teacher. In fact, Granger has only five teachers who were there when Esparza started. Some left through transfers; others retired. He fills vacancies by finding teachers anywhere

he can, including in the grocery store. "There are no applicants," he says. "I'm a recruiter."

Esparza has concentrated on bringing to the school teachers who believe their students can achieve at high levels. Esparza found his lead teacher, Mike Nyberg, while Nyberg was substitute teaching. Nyberg first began teaching history and some math at Granger High School in 1966 as a way to stay out of the military during the Vietnam War. He retired in 1996 in order to raise his

grandson, but after a couple of years he began substitute teaching. Esparza hired him as a reading coach to bring reading instruction into all the content areas, and he is now the instructional leader of the school, helping teachers develop lesson plans, teaching model lessons, mentoring new teachers, and keeping in touch with students through monitoring the lunch room.

Nyberg remembers the old days at Granger when the school had a serious discipline problem and the attitude of the teachers was, "We do the best we can with these kids" with the assumption being that the students were incapable of high-level academic work. He has welcomed the introduction of standards and accountability as a needed "kick in the butt."

For his part, Esparza remembers the first two years of his principalship as "nothing but fighting." He had to battle entrenched low expectations on the part

of the faculty as well as a difficult-to-change organizational structure. Those years would have been easier, he says, “if I had had a framework to follow.” But because few high schools have made the journey from being low-performing to high-performing, he had little he could follow in the research literature. As a result, he more or less made things up as he went along, with a constant emphasis on personalizing the school, giving the students the idea that they are capable, and keeping close track of all achievement data. Of the 330 students who were in his building in May 2005, he knew the incoming reading scores, current reading scores, state assessment scores, and previous semester’s grades of 300, and he was learning the rest.

One key organizational change was to make Granger’s “advisory” periods the core of how students are connected to the school. Many high schools have advisory or homeroom periods, but often little is done in them beyond assigning lockers, handing out report cards, and making announcements. At Granger, every professional staff member meets with a group of between 18 and 20 students four days a week for the last half hour of the day, keeping track of what work the student is doing and whether the student is behind. That advisory teacher is the liaison between the students, the students’ teachers, the administration, and the students’ parents. It is up to the advisory teachers to sign students up for classes as

well as to know if a student is struggling in a particular class. Each semester, advisory teachers meet individually with students and the students’ parents or guardians. “Teachers can’t meet with 150 sets of parents,” Esparza says, referring to the fact that most high school teachers have between 130 and 150 students. “But they can meet with 18.” When one faculty member objected to this plan, saying that he was “not a social worker,” Esparza responded with his standard speech about being happy to write a recommendation.

The first year the advisory plan was instituted, only 20 percent of students brought their parents or guardians to conferences. “The teachers told me that was great because the previous year only 10 percent had come,” Esparza says. “I said, yeah, okay, we can celebrate, but we need them all.” In the last week of the 2004-05 school year, Esparza was worried because two students in the school – students in his own advisory group – had not had conferences. But they snuck in under the deadline, marking the fifth straight year of 100 percent attendance. The conferences themselves are run by the students, who are given several topics to cover, including what they are learning, what classes they still need in order to graduate,

what their grades are, what their reading levels are, what interventions if any are needed, and what their plans are for after high school. To prepare for the conferences, the teachers touch base with the students’ other teachers, because one of the points of the conferences is to make sure everyone – students, parents, teachers – are all on the same page with the same information.

Another example of the ethos of transparency and shared information are the big posters in one hallway listing every student who “owes” the school academic time and how much time is owed. The idea is that any student who has an unexcused absence must make up that time, either before school when an English teacher is paid to be available, after school when a math and writing teacher are available, or on Saturday when several teachers are available to work with the students. If a student is late to class by 15 minutes, that student owes .25 hours of academic time. If a student misses a day and doesn’t bring in a note from a parent or guardian with a good expla-



A student recites poetry as part of her senior project.

nation, that student owes 7.5 hours. Students may not play sports unless they are in the process of making up the time. Students who don't make up their time don't get their report cards. "Come on," Esparza says to one student, urging him to make up the time, "you're going to want to see this report card." Esparza is planning to require the same kind of system for excused absences as well as unexcused absences because the theory is the same: Students must put in the time they lose due to absences. But he hasn't yet gotten there.

Students at Granger had had a long tradition of two "senior skip days" a year. Esparza fought that by holding "senior appreciation days," essentially making a bargain with students – they come to school and he'll provide them with a substitute for a senior skip day. In 2005, he sent the senior class to a Seattle Mariners game, a two-hour bus ride away. For the sophomores, to give them a break after the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) exams, he sent them to the Fun Center, a theme park in nearby Yakima. The freshmen and juniors were sent to a movie in nearby Sunnyside (there is no movie theater in Granger) so that they could have something fun as well.

Granger has gone from having a 2.4 percent unexcused absence rate in the 2002-03 school year (the first year that data is available from the state) to 1.6 percent in the 2004-05 school year.

But Granger's goal is not only to keep students in school more. It is also to make sure they are successful.

In the 2004-05 school year Granger High School instituted a "no failing" rule. Students who fall below a C in their class work are required to get extra help until they bring their grades up, and again the advisory teachers are the key communication link – if a student is referred for extra help, they are the ones who keep parents informed. Students are given the opportunity to retake tests and quizzes until they get a C or better. Sometimes, Esparza says, students will say such things as, "I got no sleep – my dad got taken to jail last night." The answer is, "I'm sorry, study some more and we will give you the opportunity to retake the test."

Esparza's goal, he says, is to "eliminate the bell curve – there's no reason for it." All his students are capable, he says. "They need to be motivated." In one semester, Granger cut the number of failing grades in half, from 278 in the first semester to 138 in the second semester.

That doesn't mean Esparza and the teachers ignore the many problems outside of school facing their students. A Safe Schools/Healthy Students federal grant has provided the school with a social worker, a case manager, and a therapist who can work with students and their families. The case manager, Jerry Castilleja, is the official liaison between the high school, the middle school, and the police department, and they are in constant touch, including during the evenings and weekends when students and their families often run into trouble. He is sometimes called upon to find shelter for students whose parents

are arrested, for example. He also coordinates nursing and medical services for pregnant students and new mothers (Granger has 15 students who are either pregnant or mothers.)

His focus, however, is to get students back on track academically. One example



Jerry Castilleja, Granger's case manager, has lunch in the Granger cafeteria.

he gave was of a middle-school student who came to school only 15 days for an entire semester. Castilleja was in touch with the student's mother and arranged for her to have a parenting coach. In the past her son might have talked her into getting him a scooter, Castilleja says, but now she tells her son that first he must go to school, and then she'll see about the scooter. The student is now in school and passing, though he still struggles with academic work.

Most students arrive at Granger well below grade level, with reading scores to match. A glance at the district superintendent's report on test scores gives an idea of how far behind the students arrive in ninth grade. (The district consists of one elementary school, one middle school, and one high school.) Although about 26 percent of the fourth-graders in the district

meet state reading standards (compared to more than 70 percent in the state,) that number drops to 21 percent of the seventh-graders (compared to more than 60 percent in the state,) with 18 percent what the state calls “well below standard.” This is after Washington state changed the scoring system on the state assessments in 2003 to make it easier for students to meet state standards. Although the changes were minimal at the fourth and 10th grades (students could meet state standards if they answered one fewer question correctly than the previous year in those grades,) they were more dramatic in seventh grade.

Matters are even worse in math, where 72 percent of the seventh-graders are well below standard. All of this means that most Granger High School students have a lot of catching up to do in a short amount of time, because they have less than two years before they take the state tests in 10th grade and only four years before they are supposed to graduate.

Any student who is two or more years below grade level in reading is automatically enrolled in “Second Shot Reading,” a program developed by a Granger teacher who has since moved away, which consists of giving students what are considered “high-motivation” stories and working with them on analyzing and writing about them. Some of the early stories are very short – not more than a paragraph or two – but they usually pose an ethical dilemma or present some other problem that students can discuss. The classes are

very small and staffed with a teacher and a paraprofessional. The idea is for students to practice reading and writing. Many of them stopped reading years before because they had become discouraged about doing something they were not very good at. “Instead of doing it more, they have stayed away from it,” is how Esparza puts it.

To reinforce their reading practice, the library bought \$100,000 worth of books geared to young adults as part of the Accelerated Reader program.

In addition to that extra work on reading, every third-period class, from physical education to English, does one math problem every Monday and Tuesday from previous WASL exams. In the beginning, lead teacher Nyberg would tape a little mini-lesson to be broadcast to the television in each classroom explaining the problem after the students worked on it, but he realized that that “sent the wrong message.” Because the state says that this math is something that every citizen should be able to do, it was disconcerting for students to think that some of their teachers couldn’t do it, he says. So now each teacher does the mini-math lesson after the students work the problem.

Some teachers were initially apprehensive about this, particularly those who

hadn’t dealt with math in many years. “As the math department we would go through the problem with them,” says Tony Barcenas, the chair of the math department. “That made them more comfortable. We got to the point where they didn’t need it.” Esparza and Nyberg attribute the rapid improvement – from 4 percent meeting state math standards in 2001 to 31 percent in 2004 – to the fact that students received that additional math instruction every day. “One student had never taken algebra or geometry, and he still met standards,” Esparza says. “I asked him how he did it, and he said, ‘we do the problems every day.’”

Despite those gains, math scores were flat between 2004 and 2005. “We were disappointed with our math and writing scores,” Nyberg says. To address math, the school has put in place a plan to identify specific weaknesses of individual students and provide them with extra help during advisory periods. If, for example, a student is weak in measurement he or she will be provided with a work packet on measurement and provided



Jesus Sandoval (in the green shirt), is one of the new teachers at Granger.

tutoring during advisory periods by either a senior who is particularly good in measurement or by a specially trained paraprofessional. The most common weaknesses are number sense, geometry sense and measurement. In addition, the math staff has been strengthened with the hiring of a new math teacher, Nyberg says. One area that is of special concern is science. Washington began reporting whether students meet state standards in science in 2004, and only 7.8 percent of Granger's students met standards. That number stayed flat in 2005. Esparza says that with a new chair of the science department, he is looking for improvement in the future.

Although students have not needed to pass the WASL exam in order to graduate (it becomes a requirement for the class of 2008), Esparza says his students have taken the test very seriously. It is an un-timed test, meaning that students can take as long as they want, but most students finish in an hour-and-a-half or two hours. "I had students sitting there for three and four hours," he says about the 2005 test administration.

He attributes that to the pride students are taking in Granger's rising test scores. Granger ever-so-slightly

edged out nearby Zillah High School in the writing scores in 2004, and, he says, "Now kids are really believing." (Zillah enrollment is 63 percent White and only 36 percent of the students qualify for free and reduced-price meals. In 2005, Zillah slightly edged out Granger in writing and continued to exceed it in

**Forty Granger students signed up to take the PSAT in 2005, and SAT and ACT test taking has increased, signs that students are beginning to have higher educational aspirations than they had in the past.**

the other categories.) Forty Granger students signed up to take the PSAT in 2005, and SAT and ACT test taking has increased, signs that students are beginning to have higher educational aspirations than they had in the past.

To encourage that even further, Granger put in place an Advanced Placement U.S. History course which is designed to replicate a college freshman survey

course, and sent five teachers for Advanced Placement training during the summer of 2005. The AP program is still shaky, however. Senior Pedro Navarrette, a student in the AP U.S. History class, thought he was prepared to take the nationally administered test only to find out that he had missed the test date. He had never been told when and how to register, and the school hadn't administered it.

That is a mark of how far Granger still has to go before it provides the kinds of academic opportunities students like Navarrette want and that students in more privileged high schools take for granted.

Esparza is determined to make that happen. It is his mission, he says, to prove that his students are capable of learning to high levels, which is why he has welcomed the accountability represented in the federal No Child Left Behind law, which holds schools responsible for the success of all students. "I love it," he says. "It has to happen if our nation is going to be competitive." The law itself "definitely needs to be tweaked. But hold schools accountable. Don't let schools like mine off the hook."

# Conclusion

**H**ow can other schools begin achieving the kind of success that the three schools profiled here have achieved?

The people in these schools would be the first to say that there is no magic bullet or secret formula. John Capozzi, the new principal of Elmont, talks about the need to “move the rock slowly.” There are no quick fixes.

But there are certainly a few bedrock fundamentals that the schools share that could be used by any educator faced with the job of retooling a high school:

- 1) They start with the data. The administrators in these schools – and many of the teachers as well – can rattle off their school’s data with ease. That is because to them data are not mere numbers collected for accountability purposes but human stories. Data help them identify the child whose reading score shows that without careful help and instruction he will lead a life of dependency and insecurity. Data reveal to them the teacher who is expert in teaching statistics and probability but hasn’t figured out how to teach measurement. Data tell them when a program they have instituted is having the effect they intended or whether it wasn’t worth the time put into it. Data, in other words, is information about people that is used with meticulous care.
- 2) They focus on instruction. The people in these schools know that their students are dependent upon them for good instruction, and they pay attention to what they teach and how. Good instruction is recognized, and weak instruction is identified for improvement. Elmont has made this almost an art form, with a comprehensive system of observations and recommendations for improvement. In addition, they make sure that students who need extra time and extra instruction get it— before school, after school, during lunch, on the weekends.
- 3) They find ways to connect students to adults in the building. At Granger this is done through the use of an advisory system; at University Park, it is done through the intimacy of a very small school in which everyone knows everyone else; at Elmont it is done with the deliberate use of clubs, sports, and after-school activities. The three schools may accomplish this task differently, but they all make sure that students are known by adults who care about them and their progress.
- 4) They organize themselves around the belief that all students can and will learn. They all take seriously what the principal of University Park Campus School says: “We have the power to change things.”

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### **About the Education Trust**

The Education Trust, Inc. was created to promote high academic achievement for all students, at all levels – pre-kindergarten through college. While we know that all schools and colleges could better serve their students, our work focuses on the schools and colleges most often left behind in plans to improve education: those serving African-American, Latino, Native American and low-income students.

The Education Trust works side by side with policymakers, parents, education professionals, community and business leaders – in cities and towns across the country – who are trying to transform their schools and colleges into institutions that genuinely serve all students. We also bring lessons learned in local communities back to Washington to help inform national policy debates.

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