

# CLOSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

LESSONS FROM SUCCESSFUL SCHOOLS



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION  
OFFICE OF VOCATIONAL AND ADULT EDUCATION

2005

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**PREPARED FOR:**

U.S. Department of Education  
Office of Vocational and Adult Education

**BY:**

Shelley H. Billig  
*RMC Research Corporation*

Ivonne I. Jaime  
Andrew Abrams  
Matthew Fitzpatrick  
Ellen Kendrick  
*U.S. Department of Education  
Office of Vocational and Adult Education*

2005

This report was produced under U.S. Department of Education Contract No. ED-99-CO-0160 with MPR Associates, Inc., by RMC Research Corporation. Ivonne Jaime served as the contracting officer's technical representative. The findings highlighted in the report are those of the authors and while four are employees of the Office of Vocational and Adult Education, this report does not necessarily represent the positions or policies of the Department of Education. No official endorsement by the U.S. Department of any product, commodity, service, or enterprise mentioned in this publication is intended or should be inferred.

**U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION**

Margaret Spellings

*Secretary*

September 2005

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This report is available on the Department's Web site at: [www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/OVAE](http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/OVAE).

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# Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank Hans Meeder, former Deputy Assistant Secretary and Braden Goetz, Director of the Policy, Research and Evaluation Unit at OVAE for their assistance and guidance throughout the project. Without their support, we would not have been able to conduct the focus groups that allowed us to gain insights into how comprehensive high schools are narrowing or closing the achievement gap.

In addition, we would like to extend our gratitude to Mary Ann Strassner for her assistance with editing and to Diane Draper for her graphic design.

# Closing the Achievement Gap: Lessons from Successful Schools

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The declaration that “*all children can learn*” has characterized American education over the past decade. Yet, the issue took on increasing importance with the passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act in 2001 that requires all states and districts to report on their progress in closing the achievement gap between minority students and their white peers. NCLB calls for the development of accountability systems that hold schools responsible for improved student performance based on the outcomes of specific population, along with increasing overall levels of achievement. Achievement data are used to identify schools needing improvement and to inform decisions ranging from adjusting lesson plans at the local level to targeting resources at the state level. In this new era of accountability, the performance of all students is counted and schools must help every student to succeed. While many schools are struggling to address this challenge, others have made progress in closing the gap between groups. This report recounts how four high schools were able to narrow or completely close the achievement gap and sustain their success over time.

The four high schools described here are all large comprehensive public high schools that serve large percentages of minority students. They were selected based on their four-year record of narrowing or closing the achievement gap in reading and/or mathematics. The schools were:

- **Del Valle High School in El Paso, Texas**, a school that completely closed its achievement gap between Hispanic and white students in mathematics;
- **El Camino High School in Oceanside, California**, a school that narrowed its achievement gap in mathematics by 24 percentage points and in reading by 14 percentage points for Hispanic students;

- **Florin High School in Sacramento, California**, a school that narrowed its achievement gap in reading by 10 percentage points for African-American students and by 14 percentage points for Hispanic students; and
- **North Central High School in Indianapolis, Indiana**, a school that narrowed its achievement gap in English/language arts by 10 percentage points and in mathematics by 15 percentage points for African-American students.

To understand how they were able to narrow or close the gap, the U. S. Department of Education (ED) held a series of focus groups with administrators and teachers in December 2004. The groups explored teaching and learning strategies in the content areas, culture and school climate issues, leadership for change, and the change process itself. Common themes included the following:

## **SCHOOL CULTURE**

**High expectations for student achievement.** Schools exemplify high expectations by eliminating remedial classes and offering more demanding courses such as honors, Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) classes. Schools also encourage minority students to enroll in demanding classes through targeted outreach by counselors and teachers and/or open enrollment. Expectations are high for teachers as well and teachers are given decision-making authority to implement changes directed toward increasing student achievement.

**Learning supports to help students meet expectations.** Educators at each of the schools put into place tutoring, study skills programs, and other supports to help students become proficient in reading and math. Teachers also provide personalized attention to students on an on-going basis to support the higher expectations. Teachers themselves receive support in the form of professional development on effective teaching strategies for reading and math.

**Emphasis on accountability and assessment to determine when additional help is needed.**

Accountability is emphasized in each of the successful schools. Teachers and administrators analyze data from state and school level tests to guide changes in curriculum and instruction. Classroom assessments are often used to see which teaching strategies work best with specific populations of students. Many of these educators feel that student achievement is a joint responsibility of teachers and students.

**Collaborative and optimistic attitude.** Adults in the schools are passionate and enthusiastic about their schools and the schools' accomplishments. They accept no excuses and consistently tackle tough challenges, saying that if they work together, they can succeed. Teachers in these schools collaborate often and share ideas for how to improve. They work with parents and community members in establishing a culture of success at the school.

**CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION**

**Curriculum alignment and standards-based instruction.** All of the educators stress the importance of teaching the state and district content standards that reflect expectations for knowledge and skills in the content areas. Staff from the schools aligned their curriculum with state and local standards and to state and district assessments.

**Changes in class schedules to allow more time for instruction.** Administrators recognize that more time is needed to teach such critical core subjects as Algebra I. Class schedules are typically changed in order for teachers to have longer blocks of time that allow for instructor-led as well as applied instructional strategies. Administrators recognize the need to change classroom practices to allow students the opportunity to practice skills.

**Engaging teaching techniques.** Teachers recognize that students learn better when they find their classes more interesting and personally relevant. Teachers in these schools use individualized instruction, hands-on teaching techniques, and strategies that specifically teach

students how to take notes, organize their thinking, and solve problems. In addition, technology is used as a tool to engage learners.

## **LEADERSHIP FOR CHANGE**

**Change is difficult, but necessary.** Administrators and teachers said the process of change was very hard, but change was necessary in order to improve the achievement levels of Hispanic and African-American students. These educators were and are motivated to ensure that all students succeed.

**Leadership and resources.** Sometimes the teachers lead, while at other times the administrators lead the change. Regardless of who directs the process, sufficient resources are needed to provide funding and time for professional development, materials acquisition, and student support services.

**Federal and state policies serve as catalysts.** The move toward standards and accountability at the national, state, and local levels clearly serves as a motivator for change. However, the specific ways in which change occurred were based on local decisions.

The report that follows provides details of the focus group study and the common themes that emerged. Brief profiles outlining these themes and the key strategies used by the schools relating to school culture, curriculum and instruction, and leadership are also presented.

## INTRODUCTION

On December 1, 2004, the Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE) at the U.S. Department of Education (ED) sponsored the Closing the Achievement Gap Focus Group meeting. The purpose of the meeting was to explore how large comprehensive high schools were able to narrow the achievement gap while maintaining high student retention and graduation rates.

Teams from four schools were selected to participate based on an analysis of four years of disaggregated school-level mathematics and reading state assessment data.<sup>1</sup> These schools demonstrated success, over a period of years, in narrowing the achievement gap between African-American and/or Hispanic students relative to their white peers. For California and Texas, the four year span examined was from 1999 through 2002, for Indiana it was 2000 through 2003. In addition, the most recent data on the schools was reviewed to ensure that schools were still addressing the academic needs of minority students. The schools included in these focus groups were:

- **Del Valle High School in El Paso, Texas.** This high school, with a 97% Hispanic student population, was selected because of its ability to close the achievement gap in mathematics. Hispanic students at Del Valle passed the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) in 2002 at the same rate as white students at the state level.
- **El Camino High School in Oceanside, California.** With a population of almost 3,000 students, this high school was selected because of its ability to narrow the achievement gap for Hispanic students in mathematics and reading. The school achieved a 24 percentage point reduction in the math achievement gap and a 14 percentage point decrease in reading.

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<sup>1</sup> For the three states represented at the meeting, state assessments were administered in the 10th grade. California gap scores were based on Stanford Achievement Test, Ninth Edition (SAT9) mathematics and reading data, Texas scores on Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) reading and mathematics data, and in Indiana scores were calculated based on Indiana Statewide Testing for Education Progress (ISTEP) English/language arts and mathematics data.

- **Florin High School in Sacramento, California.** This large high school, with a predominantly minority population of 2,300 students, was selected because of its ability to narrow the achievement gap in reading for African-American students by 10 percentage points and by 14 percentage points for Hispanic students.
- **North Central High School in Indianapolis, Indiana.** The third largest high school in the state of Indiana was selected for its ability to narrow the achievement gap for African-American students by 10 percentage points in English/language arts and 15 percentage points in math.

Data collected during the meeting consisted of two rounds of 90-minute focus groups and one 60-minute whole group session. These conversations helped researchers gather important information about each school's characteristics, the school change process, school culture and climate, and the role of curriculum and instructional practices in promoting minority student achievement. In order to capture information from those most directly involved, each school selected a team comprised of the principal; mathematics department chair; English/language arts department chair; and either the district superintendent, the assistant principal in charge of curriculum, or teachers with subject matter expertise to participate in the focus groups.

## **METHODOLOGY**

A two-step selection process was used to identify the schools that would eventually participate in the Closing the Achievement Gap Focus Group meeting. The initial screening to identify sites came from an analysis of publicly available school-level data collected from states meeting the following criteria:

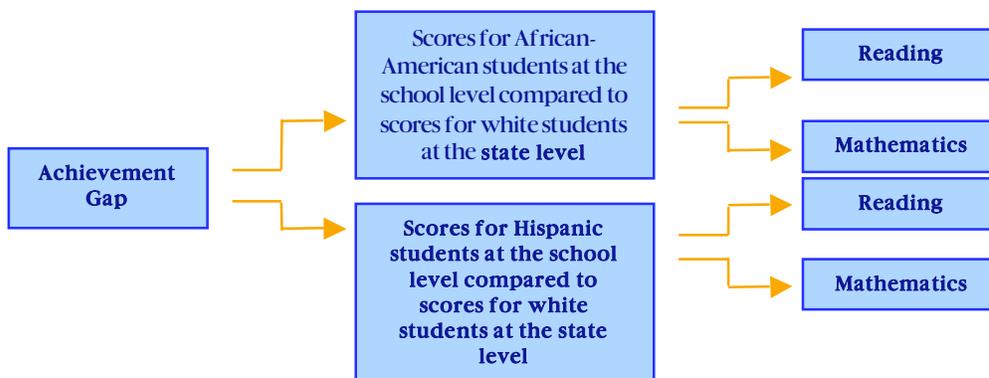
- Standards-based or norm-referenced high school level assessment in mathematics or English/language arts/reading;
- Data available for at least 4 years;
- State assessments had not changed for those years; and
- Data available disaggregated by race/ethnicity at the school level for each year.

During the winter of 2003 data were collected from the 10 states and the District of Columbia that met the criteria. The data gathered from all locations are available from the National Longitudinal School Level State Assessment Score Database (NLSLSASD), at [www.schooldata.org](http://www.schooldata.org). The NLSLSASD is an effort funded by ED to collect data from state testing programs across the country.

## SCHOOL SELECTION

Once these data were collected, state-specific lists of schools were developed to identify schools with consistently narrowed achievement gaps between white and minority students.<sup>2</sup> The study design allowed for the identification of schools in all or just one of the four gap measures established for the study and depicted below.<sup>3</sup>

## EXHIBIT 1: FOUR GAP MEASURES



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<sup>2</sup> The gap is the difference between the achievement of African-American or Hispanic students in the school compared to the achievement of white students in the state as a whole. Calculating the gap using the state-level percent passing rate does not exclude schools with large minority populations. For example, a school with a 100% Hispanic population does not have an internal white comparison group.

<sup>3</sup> MPR Associates, Inc., in Berkeley, California, conducted the initial analysis that resulted in the state-level lists.

With these state lists as starting points, the following criteria were applied to identify the most promising candidates for participation in the focus group meeting:

- Completely closed the gap or achieved a gap decrease of at least 10 percentage points in two of the following gap measures:
  - African-American students' reading test scores;
  - African-American students' mathematics test scores;
  - Hispanic students' reading test scores; and/or
  - Hispanic students' mathematics test scores.
- Enrolled at least 750 students;
- Had a minority enrollment of at least 30 percent of the school's total enrollment; and
- Had promoting power of at least 60 percent.<sup>4</sup>

Using the criteria, a total of 21 schools were identified. The four schools that were selected and that agreed to participate in the meeting had very strong holding power and continued to show, based on an examination of their most recent data, an ongoing commitment to decreasing the achievement gap within their school. Data from the four selected schools are presented on the next page.

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<sup>4</sup> Promoting power is a term first used in the 2004 report, *Locating The Dropout Crisis* by Robert Balfanz and Nettie Legters from Johns Hopkins University. The ratio compares the number of freshmen at a high school to the number of seniors four years later. The same methodology for calculating promoting power used in the Balfanz and Legters study was used to identify schools for the *Closing the Achievement Gap Focus Group* meeting.

## EXHIBIT 2: HIGH SCHOOLS SELECTED TO ATTEND MEETING

High School	School District	Current Principal	Gap Decrease Mathematics	Gap Decrease Reading	Enrollment <sup>5</sup>	Percent Minority <sup>6</sup>	Promoting Power
Del Valle <sup>7</sup>	Ysleta Independent School District, <i>TX</i>	Paul Pearson	<b>Closed</b> gap for Hispanic students		1,796	97%	85%
Florin	Elk Grove, <i>CA</i>	Philip Moore		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 10% point decrease for African American students</li> <li>● 14% point decrease for Hispanic students</li> </ul>	2,301	38%	85%
North Central	MSD Washington Township, <i>IN</i>	C E Quandt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 15% point decrease for African-American students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 10% point decrease for African-American students</li> </ul>	3,115	37%	89%
El Camino	Oceanside Unified, <i>CA</i>	Dan Daris	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 24% point decrease for Hispanic students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 14% point decrease for Hispanic students</li> </ul>	2,935	46%	95%

<sup>5</sup> School characteristic data—enrollment and percent minority—are for the 2001-2002 school year, which is the most recent data available from the Common Core of Data (CCD). The CCD is a data collection program of the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics, <http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/>.

<sup>6</sup> Percent minority reflects the number of African-American and Hispanic students as a percentage of total school enrollment.

<sup>7</sup> Del Valle is a school with only one minority subgroup. If a school only had one minority subgroup, either African Americans or Hispanics, it was identified as a school that narrowed or closed the gap for this subgroup and did not have to meet the “two gap measure criteria.”

## COMMONALITIES AMONG SUCCESSFUL PROGRAMS

While each of the schools that participated in the Closing the Achievement Gap Focus Group meeting had unique features, a set of important common practices emerged. These practices were identified during focus groups sessions. Sharing these practices may be instructive for other educators that are coming together to tackle the disparities that exist in our nation's educational system. The key strategies identified are grouped around the core themes of school culture, curriculum and instruction, leadership for change, and lessons learned.

### SCHOOL CULTURE

Each of the schools developed a culture that supported their success. The school cultures featured high expectations for student achievement; learning supports, such as after school programs and tutoring, to help students meet expectations; an emphasis on

*A high performing school needs highly dedicated and motivated teachers who are perpetually hopeful about student performance.*

accountability and assessment to determine where additional help was needed; and a collaborative and optimistic attitude among faculty and staff. Specific strategies for accomplishing these changes included the following:

#### *High expectations for student achievement*

In all the schools, educators believe that students can and will succeed. Expectations that reflected this belief were articulated in multiple forms. Most of the schools eliminated remedial courses and now offer a variety of advanced courses including honors, Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) classes. They strongly encourage Hispanic and African-American students to enroll in these courses. One school, in particular, conducts outreach that includes working closely with parents and counselors of eighth grade students to identify the specific sequence of high school courses that students should take in order to enroll in advanced

courses. Two schools have open admission to AP courses and another school has a redesigned curriculum that emphasizes college preparation.

High expectations were also in place for the adults in the building. In several of the sites, administrators served as facilitators or coaches that empowered staff to make changes. Administrators took on a supporting role ensuring that teachers had the fiscal and/or human resources needed for their efforts to raise student achievement. At most sites, administrators helped to develop strategies for success and removed any barriers that stood in the way of teachers being able to implement their plans.

### *Learning supports to help students meet expectations*

To help ensure that high expectations would be met, educators at these sites have strong student

*The classroom teacher is the key. From there, all good things flow. Teachers who are committed, who continue to grow professionally and to adapt and adjust . . . From there, you get your good well-knit, tight curriculum that is aligned to standards, and from there you get good instructional practices.*

support systems in the form of tutoring and other skill building programs. Three of the four sites provide a program that specifically teaches study skills. Educators from all of the sites provide personalized attention to the students to nurture their success.

Teachers receive supports for student learning in the form of professional development. Teachers receive professional development in a variety of ways, ranging from selecting workshops from a menu of options offered by the district through required attendance at workshops that took place in the school, facilitated by department chairs. Most of the professional development focused squarely on instruction.

### *Emphasis on accountability and assessment to determine when additional help is needed*

Educators from the successful schools strongly emphasize accountability for students and adults in the building. Teachers pay attention to both state- and classroom-level test scores and adjust their instruction to address areas of student weakness or to refer students to tutoring or other

support as needed. Many of the schools assess students' knowledge and skills often, either using standardized tests or teacher-created assessments. Several of the educators from these schools feel strongly that students and adults are jointly responsible and accountable for student learning.

### *Collaborative and optimistic attitude*

Teachers themselves were enthusiastic supporters of their departments and schools, and

*It wasn't about closing any gap. It was doing the best we could for our kids.*

principal set the tone of high expectations for staff as well as students. Teachers spoke of many meetings and dialogues over lunch and planning

periods to discuss how to improve achievement both in general and for specific students.

Parents and community members were also involved in sharing the responsibility of establishing a culture of success, often donating time and funds, working with the students at home, or providing time and effort to get the students to Saturday and summer programs.

In several of the schools, teachers were empowered to create changes in curriculum and instruction, with administrators providing the supports, such as professional development, needed by staff to bring about the changes. Leaders believed that this combination provided more incentive to change and a more positive culture for change. Most schools

*I really believe you've got to empower the teachers to collaborate to work together, to engage and be part of it [the change process]. But then, as an administrator, you've got to be actively a part of it too, and you have to support them. When they came to me and said this is what we need, I got it for them.*

started with a small core of committed or motivated staff, but over time involved all of the teachers in the department.

## **CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION**

Educators from successful schools made changes in both curriculum and instruction. In order to implement the changes coming from either their state's standards movement or based on classroom observations, teachers became more standards-oriented. They aligned the curriculum

with the state's and district's expectations of what students should know and be able to do and with state and district assessments. Administrators changed school schedules into longer blocks of time to facilitate instruction in critical content areas. Finally, teachers make instruction engaging for students, increasing its relevance and rigor. Specific strategies for accomplishing these changes included the following:

### ***Curriculum alignment and standards-based instruction***

Educators from each of the schools emphasize the importance of standards in shaping the curriculum. In each case, teachers and/or administrators engaged in curriculum alignment efforts to make sure that instruction in reading and math directly covers the expectations for what students should know and be able to do as expressed in state and district standards. They

*The data drives all of your decisions. You don't make decisions unless you have a reason to and the data shows you the reason to.*

also aligned their curriculum to what is being measured by the state and district tests. Staff from two of the schools use the alignment process, along with an examination of student test scores and classroom observations, to decide the most important standards to address. In addition, staffs from all of the schools examine the performance of subpopulations of students to determine which topics in reading and math need to be either reviewed or taught differently.

### ***Changes in class schedules to allow more time for reading and math instruction***

Administrators from these schools often adopt different class schedules to offer more time for instruction, especially in math. Some provide block schedules that give teachers 90 minutes of uninterrupted time others have double-blocks where the first class period is used to teach a lesson and the second is used to ensure that students have an opportunity to practice what they learn.

### *Engaging teaching techniques*

Many of the teachers from the successful schools use highly engaging teaching techniques that their students find more relevant and meaningful and that promote success. These techniques include hands-on activities, and individualized instruction that meet the needs of different types of learners. Teachers say that some instructional approaches are especially helpful to students. For example, teachers specifically recommend demonstrating ways in which problems can be solved so students develop better ways to analyze information. Teachers often show students how to organize and assemble information, and how to take and organize lecture notes. They give students time to practice answering test questions using the same answer sheets that are used for the state assessments. They provide time for students to discuss books and math problems with each other to help them to understand difficult concepts. Teachers also spend more time teaching vocabulary and use technology more often.

### **LEADERSHIP FOR CHANGE**

Narrowing the achievement gap was not easy for any of these schools and was often prompted by a review of test scores and/or observed general low levels of student performance. The change process required many hours of examining multiple types of data, from assessments to personal observations, to determine what needed to change. Once specific concerns were identified, further work was needed to pinpoint those strategies that needed to be implemented, how they were to be implemented and by whom. While the pathway to change varied among the schools, some commonalities were found in the way that changes were led.

### *Change viewed as difficult, but necessary*

Leaders and those responsible for implementing school improvement did not think the change process was easy or quick. Many discuss the long hours and hard

*It really was a groundswell of innovation and intervention and expectations from the classroom teachers, particularly in English.*

processes it took to make changes in the school. But while change is viewed as difficult, all of the educators feel strongly that it is necessary. The need for change in many of these schools was prompted by a review of disaggregated test scores, which led to the discovery of an alarming gap between groups. At one site, clear evidence that students were disengaged served as the catalyst for change.

### *Leadership and resources*

In these successful schools, change was led sometimes by teachers and other times by administrators. Educators feel that it does not matter who leads the change but that the change needs to involve at least a core of people at the school. No matter who led the initiative, respondents felt that administrators had to allocate sufficient resources for change to occur and be sustained. Resources, in the form of funds and time, are used for professional development, materials acquisition, and student support services.

### *Federal and state policies as catalysts*

Changes in federal and state policies, specifically those that called for standards-based instruction and assessment are clearly seen by these educators as the primary motivators for change at the schools. However, the specific ways in which change occurred were local. Details are presented below.

- **At El Camino High School**, a strong core of teachers led the charge to increase achievement scores and help struggling English language learners. Core groups of English and mathematics

*You can go out and look at these schools, but you can't transplant what they've done somewhere else and expect it to grow. It has to be grown from within.*

teachers were assisted by leaders within the social studies department that undertook the mission of coaching students to

help them improve study and notetaking skills and classroom behavior, in order to enroll in AP classes. The district supported the school by sheltering it from having to implement

educational interventions not directly aligned to the school's core mission. A strategic plan now guides all activities and is monitored by the community, staff, and students.

- **North Central High School** attributed its success to stable, responsive leadership. With the enactment of state standards, stronger graduation requirements, and the need to raise the percentage of students in advanced courses, the principal and staff began to examine student achievement and were appalled at their collective lack of

*You have to have an administrator who keeps saying . . . we'll do it, we'll make it happen and who never says no.*

success. In the late 1990s, only 40 percent of their nonwhite students were passing the state test. The principal challenged the staff to do better and asked department chairs to coordinate efforts to improve achievement. Teams of educators examined the research on achievement of minority students, visited schools that had high academic achievement, and engaged in extensive curriculum alignment efforts. Faculty incorporated instruction focused on meeting standards into their daily practice. The district provided support in the form of funding and substitute teachers to support time for vertical teaming. Teams formulated plans for improvement and found that having a written plan inspired more commitment and facilitated change.

- **Florin High School** also had a leadership model wherein multiple teacher teams and departments shared responsibility for change with the administrators. Each department was given latitude in its approach to change. The impetus for change came from teachers noticing that students were not reading well and did not enjoy the reading process. Using a site-based management approach, teachers decided to build a culture for success, taking the lead in determining solutions and allocating professional development hours and budgets. They examined student work and identified what they needed to do to improve student achievement. They set goals for reading that included numbers of pages to be read. Each grade-level team had a portfolio that included information on student performance on all of

the learning objectives, and they discussed student assessments on a regular basis. The district facilitated change by helping with monitoring, but otherwise served more as a resource for removing impediments rather than as leader for change.

*It was the leadership capacity within the school that drove the school to get better.*

- **Del Valle's** former principal created a sense of urgency and challenged teachers to promote achievement for all students. This sense of

urgency prompted teachers to work together to generate common curriculum aligned to standards, common lesson plans, and common tests. The principal checked in often and provided help as needed in the form of university resources and professional development. The district allowed the school to develop its plan and budget, while conveying high expectations and providing assistance when asked.

*It has to start in the classroom because it always starts with classroom instruction.*

In general, school staff said that state and federal goals, guidelines, and regulations simply formed the backdrop for their efforts. The emphasis on standards and accountability placed a spotlight on the need to change and served to motivate them. In some sense, these same emphases frustrated them because they could not accomplish all that they wanted in the context of rising expectations and budget cuts. However, most said that rigorous requirements coupled with both financial and human support enabled both them and their students to make positive changes. The tangible evidence of success and sense of community engendered by the improvements buoyed them and helped them to sustain their efforts.

## CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

The road to success was not without difficulties, and many of the schools continue to address the ever-changing challenges that arise due to changes in policies, funding, and student demographics. One of the current issues being faced by the schools is working with students with poor literacy

skills with few or no staff certified to teach reading. In addition, all of the groups wished they had more time and funds for in-depth professional development. Some noted that there were insufficient supports or programmatic options available for academically gifted students. Some wished for more funding to provide additional support services to struggling students.

During the whole group debrief, participants were asked to reflect on what advice they would provide school administrators and teachers in the beginning phase of addressing achievement gap issues. Several common themes emerged including:

- Expectations must be high and consistent for all students with a variety of support services in place to help students reach those expectations;
- Schools must use data to identify deficiencies and to drive instructional decisions;
- Talent, creativity, and resources are present in schools and must be channeled in constructive ways to address the academic and social needs of minority students. These resources include highly dedicated and motivated teachers along with supportive leadership;
- Working collaboratively in developing and aligning the curriculum is paramount to student success; and
- Leadership for change can come directly from the departments charged with narrowing the gap as long as they are given the appropriate resources, professional development, and administrative support.

Focus group participants strongly urge educators to develop a vision, rally a core set of teachers willing to lead the change, and, in the words of one participant, “just get going and don’t be afraid.” While the journey is difficult, the yield is worth the effort. As can be seen in the quotes provided, educators in the focus groups were passionate about their progress and believe that, with teamwork and effort, all schools can narrow or close the achievement gap.

## SITE PROFILES

The following section includes short profiles for each of the sites that participated in the focus group meeting. The school profiles illuminate the change process at each site, including the practices or strategies that served as the basis for the reforms and the roles of educators and administrators in implementing these changes. The profiles closely reflect the way that the participants addressed questions, so what appears as a culture issue in one school profile may be portrayed as a curriculum and instruction issue in another profile. This is due in part to the connections between the strategies examined under each of the three themes explored in the report – school culture, curriculum and instruction, and leadership for change. A good example of the links between themes is the introduction or expansion of advanced courses by schools. The specific reasons for why the strategy was implemented varied by site; some saw it as a strategy to improve the culture of the school and others as a strategy to increase the rigor of the curriculum. Regardless of the initial reason cited, in order for schools to address the academic disparities that exist between minority and non-minority students a variety of complementary strategies that support the change process were implemented.

The site profiles are written in the present tense, yet readers should note that the information presented reflects program practices at the time the focus groups were conducted in December 2004. To ensure that the profiles captured correctly the change process, school-level teams from each site reviewed the profiles in the spring of 2005.

## **DEL VALLE HIGH SCHOOL, EL PASO, TEXAS**

Del Valle High School, with 1,800 students of predominantly Hispanic heritage was selected to participate in the Closing the Achievement Gap Focus Group meeting because of students' mathematics performance on state assessments. Between 1999 and 2002, Del Valle completely closed the achievement gap in mathematics for Hispanic students, who comprise 97 percent of the student population at the school. Data from the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) for school year 2001-2002 showed no difference between the Hispanic percent passing rate at the school and non-minority students at the state level. A Title I<sup>8</sup> designated school because of the high percentage of students eligible for free and reduced lunch, the school has a very strong record for retaining students with a 94 percent attendance rate, a 0.7 percent annual dropout rate, and a graduation rate of 88 percent.<sup>9</sup>

### ***School Culture***

The principal attributes Del Valle's success in closing the achievement gap to the school's philosophy of meeting the academic needs of all students. The changes at Del Valle began in 1996 with a group of dedicated teachers who wanted to "do right" by their students. These teachers believed that students could achieve at high levels, and saw working together on curricular alignment as a strategy to improve their teaching practice and, at the same time, improve student performance. This core teacher group, many of whom were on staff when the school opened in 1987, was able to build a culture where students are valued and supported. Staff at Del Valle felt "This was our time to create a culture for our school. I think that's basically what has carried the people who have stayed [regardless] of the problems that have

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<sup>8</sup> Title I of the *No Child Left Behind* Act provides financial assistance through state educational agencies (SEAs) to local educational agencies (LEAs) and public schools with high numbers or percentages of poor children.

<sup>9</sup> Information based on data provided by the Texas Education Agency in its Academic Excellence Indicator System for the 2001-2002 school year.

come. You never lose sight that you wanted the school to succeed, because you know you could and you knew the kids could.” This shift was particularly notable given the constant change in administration. As one staff member stated, “We’ve never had a principal that’s graduated a freshman class.”

The turnover in leadership resulted in many schedule changes over the last 12 years. In 1999, the school used multiple schedules including four-by-four blocks. Now the school uses an alternate-day A/B block schedule<sup>10</sup> except for Algebra I, which is 90 minutes all year long. This change was implemented based on input received from staff, especially the mathematics department chair. The change allows ongoing reinforcement of concepts, and permits staff to work on common lesson plans, administer common classroom tests, and have common conversations that facilitated the alignment process. In many ways, these conversations also support the development of a cohesive school culture that values success for both students and teachers by providing staff with the opportunity to shape how curricular reforms are implemented at the classroom and school levels.

Another factor that spurred the discussions of curricular issues was the development of the state’s accountability system. According to staff, “Testing actually brought a lot of people together to start talking about what works, and what doesn’t work.” This process has taken time, conversations, and professional development to incorporate state standards into the curriculum and to develop classroom assessments that measure progress towards these standards. According to one educator, “I think that, that [during] the last 10 years there has been a lot of dialogue about how to teach students and what actually is working or not.”

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<sup>10</sup> In an alternate-day or A/B block schedule, classes meet in blocks of time every other day for the entire school year.

The statewide program also changed, moving from a first generation system that only assessed growth in mathematics and reading to a more comprehensive testing program. Starting in 2003, assessments were given in the four main content areas: mathematics, English/language arts, social studies, and science. This shift also broadened the conversations from just some to all faculty members in the school.

The process used by the mathematics department to align curriculum and instruction to state standards and assessments is now guiding the reforms in other content areas. The accountability system prompted staff unity around the core mission of the school, so that all staff members, regardless of their content area, work together. One educator noted, “(Now) everybody is in the same boat as we are [English department] . . . and they’ve seen the difficulty and they’ve seen the need for strong reading skills and everyone’s just sort of joining in as a team.”

In addition to the more structured conversations around curricular alignment, the culture of the school supports the informal sharing of ideas. According to one staff member, “If somebody discovers something new or just experienced a great lesson, there is the urge to run across and tell someone and share it.” The more experienced math teachers have opened their classrooms to beginning teachers, explaining, “We want them to see some really good lessons and so these teachers are watching other teachers to learn about instructional as well as classroom management techniques.” Over the years, the conversations helped to clarify the goals of the school and increased the sense of ownership the staff has for the success of its students.

### *Curriculum and Instruction*

The high school graduation requirements at Del Valle include 4 years of mathematics, social studies, science, and English. With state policies that set Algebra I and geometry as requirements for graduation, these guidelines put pressure on the math department to develop a set of intervention strategies to achieve these goals. The interventions include higher standards, no remediation classes, block schedules, and instruction based on student performance. To support an approach that uses targeted instruction to address students’ deficiencies, the school maintains

individual student achievement profiles and utilizes support teachers for mathematics, reading, and writing.

Del Valle considers Algebra I a foundations course. All freshmen who enter the high school without Algebra I coursework are placed in a double block (90 minutes) of Algebra I. No textbooks are used. Curriculum development is a continuous process where the state standards serve as the foundation for the course and benchmark assessments drive the development of the next lesson. This intensive intervention is done with extensive supports for both the teachers and the students. The department chair serves as a support teacher for the Algebra I classes, acting as a mathematics resource, modeling lessons, creating lessons, and developing the classroom tests that benchmark progress. According to staff “[We]’ve been successful . . . not because we have Algebra I all year, because other schools have tried it, it’s because we work together as a team.”

To support ongoing curriculum development; the school master schedule was developed to ensure that all mathematics and English teachers have common planning times. Having a dedicated time to meet also facilitates department-wide professional development days, “It’s not one grade level doing this, it’s the whole department that has this staff development, and [we] work through the issues so everybody is on the same page.”

In addition to its innovative curriculum development and instructional approaches, Del Valle offers a wide range of student support services, including after-school and Saturday tutoring. In the mathematics department, the department chair encourages “teachers to put packets together for kids that are behind, and they come in for Saturday tutoring. That’s pretty successful for kids that want to catch up or want to pass.”

### *Leadership for Change*

The changes began with a group of dedicated teachers in 1996 and were further stimulated with the introduction of the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) in 1997. According to

staff, many things hindered progress including a lack of understanding of the accountability system and the constant changes in leadership. To address this and other issues, Del Valle formed leadership teams, established collaboration with the local university to support professional development, and created a campus action plan.

As groups began working on addressing the challenges faced by the school, the mathematics department met to identify what was causing low student performance. They found that the two biggest factors were that classroom assessments were not aligned to the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), and students had varying degrees of knowledge as they entered geometry and Algebra II. To address these problems, Del Valle decided teachers to improve instruction through alignment of curriculum using state standards (TEKS) and aligning department tests to what is being taught.

Teachers received support in implementing the needed changes, including professional development at both the school and district levels. The school district collaborated with a local university to provide focused professional development in the early stages of TEKS implementation. The collaborative partnership with the university developed at the same time the district implemented site-based management because they believed that in order to change instruction you have to “empower teachers to be leaders of the school.”

Staff credits much of the success the school has experienced to the flexibility allowed within a site-based structure as well as the sense of control and sense of ownership that it instills in staff. “You have the flexibility within your budget to implement those strategies that meet the needs of your students, and you never have to justify it.” Site-based decision-making provided the school with the opportunity to develop a program that addresses the needs of the students attending Del Valle High School. One educator explained, “Just because one school has been successful with some things does not mean its going to be successful somewhere else, you have to look at your kids.”

Due to the success of the mathematics department in promoting minority student achievement, Del Valle began implementing similar strategies across the English/language arts, science, and social studies departments. Based on the mathematics strategies, the English program adopted several proactive strategies. All freshmen that enter Del Valle with reading/writing deficiencies, take English 9 and Reading 9 courses. The English/language arts courses are aligned to state standards, with one course reinforcing writing (English 9) and the other comprehension and analysis (Reading 9). Common planning periods for all English and reading 9th-grade instructors were implemented.

English/language arts instructors in the 10th, 11th, and 12th grades also have common planning periods. The result is that the reform strategies that began with the mathematics team and were used to guide change in the English department are now also taking hold in the science and social studies departments.

Because of the heavy emphasis on the four content areas, the principal is employing a distributive leadership style. "I am trying to let department heads have more control over their divisions . . . and develop how we're going to move forward from where we are now." The principal feels strongly that "it was the leadership capacity within the school that drove the desire to get better, "and it will be teacher leadership that continues to drive the reforms needed in the content areas and throughout the school." Through the use of a book study group, he is ensuring that the entire faculty has an opportunity to discuss school priorities since "every last person in the school needs to be involved for us to be successful."

Reform is a continuous process and Del Valle has identified strategies to support its ongoing success in closing the achievement gap. Plans include continuing the alignment of state curriculum (TEKS) to what is tested (TAKS), modifying department tests to ensure alignment to curriculum and students' deficiencies, and actively visiting student placement.

## **EL CAMINO HIGH SCHOOL, OCEANSIDE, CALIFORNIA**

El Camino High School is a comprehensive high school in a mixed socioeconomic area of Oceanside, California. Forty percent of the school's nearly 3,000 students are white, 33 percent are Hispanic, 13 percent African-American, and 12 percent Asian. Between 1999 and 2002, El Camino significantly narrowed the achievement gap between Hispanic students and nonminority students by 24 percentage points in mathematics and 14 percentage points in reading.

The school maintained its graduation rate as Hispanic students' achievement was increasing. According to state calculations, the official graduation rate in 2002 was 97 percent. In addition the Common Core of Data maintained by the U.S. Department of Education shows that the school maintains fairly constant enrollment across grade levels with 96 percent of students enrolled in the 9th grade in 1999 still in the school for their senior year. The number of students receiving free or reduced price lunch held nearly constant as well, dropping by only 3 percent between 1999 and 2002.

The demographic profile for El Camino's students has also been stable through the past 5 years. An estimated 15 to 20 percent of students at the school are from military families affiliated with the nearby Marine base. Parents in the typical military family are described as "enlisted, not officers . . . not college educated."

Stability is also a feature of leadership at the school. The current superintendent has been on the job since 1999, and El Camino's mathematics and English departments are still chaired by the same teachers as in 1999. There have been some changes in the principal's office over the years, but leadership has generally come from inside the district.

The school is organized as a traditional high school. The organization of the school is largely based on academic departments, and it is out of the academic departments that leadership for change emerged during the school change process.

### *School Culture*

El Camino staff speaks of a time when the school seemed to reflect the low expectations that often were found in a school with a demographic profile similar to El Camino's. "Prior to 1990," one educator explained, "most of our students graduated high school with remedial . . . courses . . . [The teachers] felt these students [could] not do it." Disciplinary problems with students were not uncommon. Now, a very different culture may be found at the school. The school eliminated all remedial courses, "raising that bar" by increasing the academic rigor of every class offered in the school. The staff passionately describes how expectations were raised for all students, creating a "success culture among kids" and affirming, "We believe that all students can do it." The school adopted a policy of zero-tolerance toward violence, which fostered a safe environment.

To engender a sense of community and positive spirit across different subjects, students participate in "warm up" activities that begin at or before the beginning bell each period. These activities include provision of practical information to help students; for example, to learn to use planners, take notes, and acquire study skills. In addition, teachers received training on classroom discipline and all new teachers undergo professional development on the El Camino disciplinary practices so that students in all of classrooms receive the same messages regarding rules and expectations. Because "every teacher told the students the same thing...it got every student on that campus knowing how to get organized." Staff describes the atmosphere as "more professional" and "more serious."

### *Curriculum and Instruction*

The largest change at El Camino High School has been the elimination of all remedial classes. All academic courses now meet California's A to G requirements for admission into either the University of California (UC) or California State University (CSU) systems. The result of these policy changes is a notably cohesive and demanding program for all students. "We don't track," according to one educator. "We don't have different levels of Algebra I. Algebra I is Algebra I is Algebra I. . . . the Hispanic students, the African-American students, they have everybody

equal within that class.” El Camino also expanded its Advanced Placement (AP) offerings, and last year over 600 of the students participated in AP courses. Over 1,200 students took AP exams. This is nearly four times the number of students enrolled in AP courses in the early 1990s. Students of all ability levels were encouraged to enroll in AP courses, and the staff speaks emphatically about the importance of getting students to participate in AP, saying, “When you go into our AP classes . . . you don’t see a sea of white faces. You see Hispanic faces, black faces, you see Pacific island faces, and you see white faces.”

The increase in rigor heavily impacted the English department at El Camino. Before, “the English teachers perceived themselves as being literature teachers and every kid was supposed to read a core novel at a grade level.” At that time, the staff focused on material with which they were most comfortable, without the direction needed to create a coherent, rigorous departmental program of study for students. Now, remedial courses have been eliminated, and the remaining courses have been redesigned, aligned with state content standards, and modified to meet the rigorous college-preparatory A to G requirements.

The mathematics department incorporated similar reforms, eliminating all mathematics courses below Algebra I. Within the context of more rigorous expectations based on higher standards, the mathematics department now embraces a program they referred to as “reform math,” which relies heavily on using a variety of instructional techniques and manipulatives. “We realized kids learn differently . . .” they explained, “and we looked for a way that had different strategies built in.”

With assistance from the state of California and the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights, the district developed a master plan for serving English language learners. The plan sets forth a very structured system to classify students according to their English language attainment and outlines a specific program to integrate these students into regular English language classes and help them succeed. These English immersion classrooms have nearly the same content as other classrooms. “In other words, whether you have a lot of EL learners in the class or not, the curriculum is exactly at the same place whether it’s algebra or geometry,” according to the teachers.

El Camino provides a variety of support services to help struggling students meet the school's high expectations. School leaders point to Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) as a support program that is a particularly important part of their success. The AVID program provides a range of services, including tutoring and senior seminar, for academically average students. AVID students, identified as having more potential than their grades might indicate, are enrolled in more advanced classes than in the past, including AP. Tutors are brought in from neighboring universities, and AVID students receive counseling and encouragement to continue on to postsecondary education.

All students at El Camino can receive tutoring in academic subjects after school and during lunch, usually from the same person teaching their classes. The counselors at the school are also exploring how to develop interventions for seniors who are at risk of failing the state high school exit exams.

### *Leadership for Change*

The changes El Camino experienced over the past decade were led by a group of teachers committed to raising expectations and eliminating remedial courses. This group was “a core of very highly-qualified, motivated staff who have kept the flame alive making sure that every student has access to the highest levels of instruction.” Because the leadership for change came from within the faculty, changing principals did not impede progress. “It would not have made an enormous difference,” recalled one leader who was there throughout the change process, “because the staff built the program, and the program was succeeding in spite of some administrative faux pas.”

This core group of teachers, which spanned multiple academic departments, was aided significantly by leaders within the social studies department. In the early 1990s, the social studies department undertook a “mission” to coach students on improving study and note-taking skills, classroom behavior, raising expectations, and enrolling in more advanced classes. The social studies department began the drive to expand AP course offerings, and the implementation of the classroom discipline program.

Throughout the change process, the district played a facilitating role, monitoring El Camino's progress, celebrating its successes, including publishing in the local paper the names of every El Camino student who passed state exams. The district sheltered the school from participation in reform efforts being implemented in neighboring schools, and, with community help, providing funds for El Camino students to take AP courses and tests. The district maintains a strategic plan that is updated and administered by members of the community, staff, and students.

The reforms at El Camino predated many state and federal efforts to raise academic standards. When California began testing students, and requiring districts and schools to align curriculum to standards, El Camino had already laid a foundation for implementing improvement. Staff teams in Grades 6-12 formed horizontally and vertically to align curriculum with state standards and eliminate duplication and remedial courses. El Camino English department staff credited the state standards with motivating teachers to "switch more to a skills-based approach."

El Camino's curriculum alignment teams refine their work each year. Benchmark exams at each grade level are used to track student achievement and drive curricular reform among the horizontal teams. At the outset of each year, teachers at El Camino examine academic achievement data for both the students they taught the year before and the students they will teach in the coming year. This process enables them to understand the instructional approaches that appear to be working best and both customize and improve lesson plans for the coming year.

El Camino's leadership team lauds the state and federal standards-based educational approach since it helps them "look at the assessment of the kids, and make decisions with the data, [paying attention to] what the data and what the results show you, so when you make education and instructional decisions . . . they are now based on assessments and data . . . . You're improving, you're changing or adjusting instruction." At El Camino, it is teachers who initially focused on student outcome data, and it is the same core group of teachers that continue to engage in improvement, implementing high expectations for all students and closing the achievement gap.

## **FLORIN HIGH SCHOOL, SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA**

Florin High School is a comprehensive high school located near Sacramento, California. With a diverse student body of approximately 2,300 students of African American (22%), Hispanic (19%), and Asian (34%) descent, this school was able to narrow the achievement gap between nonminority students and African-American and Hispanic students in reading and language arts. Between 1999 and 2002, the gap narrowed by 11 percentage points for African-Americans and by 14 percentage points for Hispanic students, even while the percentage of students eligible to receive free/reduced price meals remained fairly constant at 50%. The gap in mathematics achievement scores also narrowed between African-American and white students by 7 percentage points from 1999 to 2002. Over this period of time, the school's graduation rate remained constant at about 84%. Over time, the percentage of students whose first language was not English grew considerably, adding to the challenge of raising achievement scores and closing the achievement gap. Florin's teachers were undaunted by the challenge, though, and described their efforts that led to success.

### ***School Culture***

The culture of Florin High School nurtures the feeling of being a community of learners. Educators have a "can-do" attitude, valuing approaches to instruction that are culturally relevant and "accountability-driven." School representatives attribute the success of the English department to a climate where "kids appreciate and see value (in) reading materials that reflect who they are."

Teachers model the same enthusiasm for learning that they try to stimulate in students. English/language arts teachers reported that they read the same books as the students thereby creating a mutual appreciation in which students were "giving us recommendations, [while] we're giving them recommendations." Teachers in other departments ask what students are reading because of the level of enthusiasm displayed by students across classrooms. The school fostered success by holding a schoolwide contest for the greatest number of books read. The winners of

this contest were announced over the intercom, and students stood up and cheered—a prime example of a community in which the value of reading was shared.

Florin High School educators have high expectations for success, both for students and by teachers. Students were required to read 1,000 pages of literature per semester each year of high school. This requirement was linked to student grades, thereby demonstrating its importance. To ensure that students were being challenged, they were encouraged to read books of increasing difficulty. One teacher kept what was called an “A” list—a list of books of increasing difficulty to which the teacher referred the students, as they become better readers.

Educators at the school also allowed open admission to the school’s honor courses, disseminating information about the program to virtually all students and admitting all interested students to one or more courses regardless of previous grades in the subject as long as the students received academic counseling. To enroll, students only had to present a packet of his/her best work and obtain parent permission.

Florin developed a system to support the culture of high expectations, especially for those students enrolled in honors courses. According to one educator, ‘We let them know that . . . you may have some holes in your skills, so when we get to that point in the honors class, you’re going to have to seek tutoring in the library or come to [the teacher] and we’re willing to help you.’ Teachers also support students through dialogue about books, such as “book talk” in which teachers try to motivate students into reading books by talking about their most interesting plot elements before students select books from the library.

Another form of support is the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program, which is designed to support students, especially those enrolled in advanced classes, by teaching study skills including note taking and organization. AVID teachers review the notebooks for each class, check grades, monitor student progress, and provide after-school tutoring. AVID offers tutoring groups twice a week and mentoring opportunities for students enrolled in the program.

### *Curriculum and Instruction*

The entire curriculum at Florin is based on standards and is continuously revised in light of student performance and external demands. While the state prescribes 25 to 30 standards for each core subject, it only tests about 10 of them on the state testing (STAR) system. The school therefore interprets these 10 as the most important standards and spends professional development days sequencing the curriculum around these “power standards.” The standards also give focus to instruction, both for honors courses and “intervention courses” for students who do not pass all parts of the California High School Exit Exam (CHSEE).

In order to monitor the degree to which instruction is aligned with these standards, teachers in different disciplines administer classroom assessments; that is, formative assessments that “drive instruction and performance in a classroom.” These assessments are collected on a daily, quarterly, mid-semester, and semester basis and are analyzed for broad areas of student weakness. If English assessments are especially weak in basic grammar skills, grammar becomes something the school emphasizes. Florin also created a double-block intervention to help students master algebra. In addition, the high school engages in vertical alignment with the middle schools by assessing students entering 9th grade to provide the proper interventions.

To help students achieve in English language arts, the curriculum has been revised to include the extensive use of trade books to supplement the textbooks. As one educator pointed out, “There are not books in their homes so we have to be the resource for those books. And there is not, for the most part, even if they have the books, the time or the place for them to sit and read for half an hour, so again, we have to provide that at the site if we want that to happen.”

The trade books are selected to appeal to students who are at different reading levels. Focus is also placed on identifying books that represent multiple genres and are culturally relevant. As one English/language arts teacher said, “Part of what really drove [our text selection] was our desire to be able to put into their hands, literature indicative of who they were . . . and accessible.” Care is taken to help students select books of high interest just above their reading

ability level in order to provide a challenge.

The librarian plays a critical role in guiding students to select reading materials, both helping the students when they go to the library and presenting information about books to them in their classrooms. The librarian conducts “Book Talks” by specifically suggesting which books will appeal to students. After the presentation, students are encouraged to come into the library and check out the books that are of interest to them. Ninth- and tenth-grade teachers also maintain classroom libraries of high-interest books so that books are easy to access. Instructional practices in reading also reflect the culture of higher expectations. For example, rather than a simple book report or fill-in-the-blank type assessment, English teachers practice the “book interview” assessment. The teacher opens the book randomly and reads passages, asking students to talk about what is happening in that section of the book. This lets the teacher know that the student actually read the book and provides an opportunity to debrief on everything that students read. The school also provides time for “sustained silent reading” where one day a week in their English class, students are allowed to read a book of their choice for one class period.

Care is taken to make the mathematics curriculum standards-based and to provide students with adequate support to succeed on the mathematics portions of the state exit exam. The mathematics team reported doing “spiral testing” in all the mathematics classes so that each student would see the same concept or state standards at least five times before the class moved on to a new topic. For support, the school operated “math camps” and seminars on Saturdays as well as “cluster classes,” in which students who had not passed all parts of the test were clustered together in one class and provided with extensive and intensive support. This strategy was successful in attracting students: of the 400 students who needed to pass the exit exam, 289 attended the Saturday seminar.

The double-block Algebra I class for students who did not pass algebra in middle school also supported student success. During the first hour, the teacher identifies areas of challenge for

students and teaches the skills necessary to keep up with the rest of the Algebra I students at the school. During the second hour, the teacher helps the students do their “homework” in class. In this way, students learn good study and work habits along with learning important content.

Extensive after-school tutoring is also available weekly in mathematics and other subject areas. The tutoring sessions are primarily staffed by mathematics teachers who use both structured classroom approaches and one-on-one assistance. Students can come into the library and have free homework time when they are not receiving one-on-one services. For every 12 hours they participate in tutoring, students receive one unit of elective credit. To maintain the integrity of the process, there are safeguards: students must sign in and out of the tutoring sessions and they have to report to the program on time. Transportation home is also provided.

The school makes extensive use of technology to support learning including the computer lab located in the library and used during after-school tutoring. This availability has helped bridge the divide between home and school access to technology. Through the school’s Web site, students can access online databases that allow them to complete research from home. In addition, many of the online resources are available in a range of readability levels.

### *Leadership for Change*

Many of the changes at Florin High School have been generated by an ongoing evaluation of student work and data rather than a sudden shift in expectations. The changes in the reading curriculum, for example, occurred when teachers noticed, “Our kids were looking at reading as a chore. We wanted to create a culture of reading at our school. That was our goal.”

Leadership is clearly distributed between the principal and teachers, with multiple teacher teams and departments being more frequently cited as the leaders of various changes in the school. An example is the English department, which is “very concerned about performance data.” Another example is the collaboration between the English department and the librarian to create the schoolwide literature program.

The degree of autonomy the library and English department had to create its reading program is, in part, a reflection of site-based management at work. The school opened its doors with a site-based, decision-making model, and the teachers “always felt empowered to make those kinds of decisions for students. We’ve [teachers] always felt that ability has rested with us . . . and that responsibility has rested with us.” For example, the teachers always felt empowered to select the specific books that they believed students would want to read. By sending lists of the titles directly to parents at the beginning of the year, the school avoided the lengthy district approval process and has direct connections with parents to form a partnership for student success.

The team described its teacher leadership as having a “can-do” mentality. “At no time do we sit around and say, well we just can’t do it because the community doesn’t support us, or we have these terrible state budgets. We determine that at this site, we’re going to find the solution. Whatever we have to do, we’re going to find the solution . . . We can’t control what’s happening out in the community. We can’t control what’s at the state. We can control our site, and we do everything within our power to find solutions at the site that are going to enable our students to succeed.”

Other teams that work closely together are the “intervention” (state exit-exam remediation) team, the language arts steering committee, and the state-standards writing team.

While there is some district involvement in leadership, the respondents described the multiple ways in which the district served to facilitate their progress by empowering the site to make decisions and by not being obstructionist. The district provides support by monitoring teacher performance in Grades K-12, supporting site-based professional development on topics selected by the school, allocating resources, and recognizing and replicating the school’s activities in other parts of the district. The district also gives the school research and evaluation services to make data more understandable to teachers and facilitates vertical alignment between the middle and high school through the English language arts steering committee. The state was acknowledged

for its role in using teachers to create state content standards and for enacting a policy to reduce class size for 9th-grade English and Algebra I classes.

The typical way in which curriculum change occurs at Florin is through a team analysis of student work and a response to try to improve the instruction that produced that work. One educator said, “Examination of student work is key. In my opinion, I think the classroom assessments are the thing that drives instruction and performance in a classroom.”

The school collects and analyzes other data to help improve instruction. For example, one statistic kept by the school is the total number of pages students read over a 9-week period. These data were cross-referenced to the circulation numbers for the library, where a spike in circulation was documented and interpreted as indicative of the success of the program. One teacher reported, “We look at what do we think are the real needs of our students. We have that discussion. The sites then take what their findings are to that steering committee and then the steering committee together will determine the district power standards.”

Teachers also engaged in ongoing examination of test scores. As one teacher said, “We were meeting at the beginning of this year as a team . . . here’s our binder of intervention materials, here are the things we need to be doing, let’s look at what our scores are going to be. They just (had) their second chance to take the CHSEE in November, so we just barely finished that. And we need to meet together again and say what worked, what didn’t work, how do we want to do this for our next round. And I think we are much more highly organized than any other site right now in the district.”

Working as a community to resolve curricular challenges combined with undiminished expectations characterizes the staff at Florin High School and explains how it has narrowed the reading achievement gap.

## **NORTH CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL, INDIANAPOLIS, INDIANA**

North Central High School is the third largest comprehensive high school in the state of Indiana with enrollment of approximately 3,300 students. With a diverse student body comprised of white (56 percent), African-American (35 percent), and Hispanic (6 percent) students, North Central High School was selected to participate in the U.S. Department of Education's Closing the Achievement Gap meeting for being able to narrow the achievement gap in both reading and mathematics for African-American students. Between 1999 and 2002, the gap between African-American and nonminority students in reading narrowed by 10 percentage points and in mathematics narrowed by 15 percentage points. This achievement was coupled with a graduation rate of 98 percent, illustrating North Central's ongoing commitment to the promotion of high academic standards and excellence for all students.

### ***School Culture***

Community is a theme central to the school's mission and it guides the development of curriculum, implementation of instructional approaches, and promotion of high expectations. At North Central High School, a strong community orientation and respect are evident both within and outside the classroom environment. A longtime faculty member described the culture at North Central as "very student-centered . . . it's a celebration of students . . . where students are encouraged to explore their interests and to become active participants in their education." The faculty's active engagement of students in the classroom has created a school culture where learning, exploration, and ongoing collaboration are valued.

Parents and community members play a central role in North Central's success, helping the school offer programs and services that support a culture of high expectations for all students. For example, parent volunteers serve on the school and foundation boards, work directly with students in the classroom on special projects or as tutors in the Learning Center, and devote significant amounts of time and energy to hosting fundraising events throughout the school year.

Central to the school's success is the conviction that every student deserves the opportunity to take rigorous college preparatory courses, and the belief that, with adequate support and encouragement, every student can succeed. The stability of the school's leadership and faculty over the past two decades has allowed for establishment of expectations for learning that demands a lot from students—expectations that promote success in postsecondary education and beyond. Faculty members devote considerable time and energy to developing and implementing rigorous curriculum that aligns with the knowledge and skills required of students at the college level.

The climate of support and respect at North Central promotes both learning and collaboration among students and faculty. To meet high academic demands, students often rely on faculty and administrators for supplemental support. In addition, instruction has shifted from lecture to discussion format with an emphasis on cooperative learning and group work. Faculty members often meet in teams to develop and align curricular and instructional practices and to discuss specific areas of student needs.

In 2000, North Central's faculty developed the Cohort Program to establish a culture of high expectations for their school's increasing minority student population. Through the Cohort Program, prospective 8th-grade minority students and their parents meet with a member of the North Central faculty prior to freshman year course registration and are encouraged to enroll in at least one honors course during their freshman year. As part of the program, 29 Cohort students are provided with numerous support structures including one-on-one tutoring, advising sessions, and a range of online curriculum resources. Nurtured by a climate of high expectations, Cohort students move from enrolling in one honors course initially to enrolling in multiple honors and/or advanced placement courses as sophomores, juniors, and seniors.

Students are also encouraged to enroll in Advanced Placement (AP) courses and the International Baccalaureate (IB) program. Both programs emphasize comprehension, analysis, and integration of subject material. With a focus on quality, consistency, and rigor, faculty spoke of the

importance of developing strong connections with students and of creating personalized learning environments. As such, support structures are available to students, including the Learning Center, the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program, and a comprehensive guidance program. The Learning Center is staffed by four teachers and more than 12 instructional aides to provide academic support for students on an individual basis. AVID is available to students enrolled in advanced coursework to teach them study skills and organizational strategies. AVID teachers monitor students' academic progress and provide tutoring. Student accomplishments are celebrated throughout the school by recognizing "student of the month" and awarding academic varsity jackets.

### *Curriculum and Instruction*

North Central is organized around a traditional departmental structure with leadership emanating from the central administration and department chairs. Each department chair and his/her team assume responsibility for curriculum development, alignment with state and district standards, instructional planning, evaluation of performance data, and implementation of professional development activities.

The curriculum at North Central is tied directly to state and district standards. Indiana's Core 40 courses provide the basic curricular framework to ensure students meet state proficiency levels as tested by Indiana Statewide Testing for Educational Progress (ISTEP) and End-of-Course assessments. Faculty participants agree that the process of alignment brings focus to classroom instruction and attention to areas of academic need. One educator explained, "We literally took everything that we were doing and we linked it to state standards to see where our gaps would be and how we could more efficiently fill those gaps."

North Central's success in promoting academic achievement of African-American students in reading and mathematics is not limited to specific programs but instead emphasizes depth of understanding. The curriculum is based on clear standards and includes high-level, college-oriented content. However, the curriculum is also flexible and undergoes continuous revision

based on performance data and student needs.

North Central's English language arts curriculum is characterized by a focus on literacy, writing, critical thinking, and analytical skills. The curriculum blends traditional textbook content with supplemental materials that are content-specific and culturally relevant. Faculty use seven state standards, combined with data from criterion-referenced tests (CRTs) to guide the development of curriculum and determine instructional priorities. English faculty conducts extensive evaluation of student performance and engages in curriculum mapping and alignment with state standards and departmental courses.

Teachers also underscored the importance of the "writing across the curriculum" initiative. Following its introduction as a major tenet of North Central's curriculum, faculty were given professional development and provided with resource materials on how to develop essay questions that elicit thoughtful and well-articulated responses from students. Another important feature of the initiative is articulation with the middle schools, a process that requires high school teachers to identify the skills and knowledge required of all incoming freshman and to communicate this information to teachers at the local middle schools.

North Central's mathematics curriculum emphasizes problem solving and real-world application of mathematics concepts. Extensive course offerings help to meet the diverse needs and academic abilities of the student population. Courses range from the traditional algebra through calculus sequence to more advanced coursework that includes second-year calculus, statistics, discrete mathematics, and computer science. Each course employs traditional curriculum supplemented with a variety of instructional and assessment strategies, such as manipulatives and hands-on activities, to engage and challenge students. Instruction often occurs in small group sessions supplemented with technology.

Access to technology plays a significant role in student achievement. North Central has 14 well-equipped computer labs interspersed throughout the campus and accessible to all students.

Computer technicians and tutors are available in the Learning Center and in several of the computer labs to assist students both during and after school hours. The integration of technology into the classroom environment has helped to engage students in the learning process, providing a powerful supplement to traditional instruction.

The principal believes that “professional development is one of the key building blocks to raising student achievement.” The administration advocates for providing teachers with time to develop expertise in their content areas, essentially to become researchers of their own courses. The majority of professional development has been tied directly to establishing more effective instructional strategies. Trainings occur three times per year on back-to-back half-days, so that instruction time is not compromised. Individual faculty members may apply for stipends to support professional education and training, partnership development, and data collection activities. Professional development stipends have been made possible through financial support from several private foundations including the Lumina Foundation, Eli Lilly Pharmaceuticals, and the Washington Township School Foundation.

### *Leadership for Change*

The impetus for closing the gap between African-American and other students came in the late 1990s. One participant remarked, “We were shocked that only 40 percent of our minority students were passing the state test . . . We were better than that as instructors . . . we were better than that as a school, as a community.” North Central’s staff began to reevaluate instructional practices, adjust course offerings, and implement supplemental support programs to align with a culture of high expectations for all students. As the principal noted, “We have high expectations for our kids. Why aren’t we holding kids to these high expectations? We’ve always been a school of strong community support, strong expectations, strong achievement.”

In fall 2000, North Central initiated several key changes, including a more rigorous curriculum aligned to state standards, increased graduation requirements, and advanced placement courses in all core subject areas. Leadership for change was a team effort initiated by the principal and

coordinated through departmental faculty. As part of the change process, department chairs worked directly with faculty teams to evaluate all course offerings, which included mapping and alignment of all course content with district and state standards and discussion of instructional strategies.

The change process at North Central has been gradual and has required consistent monitoring of data to ensure progress. Teaching teams have worked to ensure that all assessment instruments align with curricular components and instructional strategies. The resulting adjustments to curriculum, instruction, and support structures have produced notable changes in Advanced Placement (AP) enrollment, grades, and test performance of minority students over the past 5 years. Since 1999, the percentage of minority students enrolled in AP classes has increased from 9 to 15 percent, and the number of students taking AP examinations has risen from 300 to more than 1,000. The school foundation has subsidized standardized test fees for any student with demonstrated financial need.

Stable, responsive leadership at the school and at the district level has been a critical component in North Central's success in narrowing the achievement gap. The North Central team, comprised of administrators and faculty, examines current research on achievement issues related to minority students. From this research framework, the team identifies schools with similar demographics that maintained high academic achievement among their minority students and conducts site visits to these locations. The team returns to North Central with a common objective: to raise expectations and achievement of minority students.

The principal tasked department chairs and faculty with responsibility for developing curriculum and programs that promote success for all students. The process focused on the question of what needed to be done to move students to the next level. The principal noted, "Everyone [students, faculty, and staff] should know the standard to which they are being held and consistently reminded of the standard because that is good teaching and effective administrating." As part of the change process, faculty incorporates these standards into their curricular content

and instructional practices. Consequently, the focus on accountability has prompted greater reliance on disaggregated data to help establish standards, guide decision-making, and gauge progress.

Many of the changes at North Central were mandated by the state and/or district and therefore created the impetus for change. The district provides sufficient budget and resources to enhance existing programs and to implement new initiatives with a focus on raising expectations and achievement for minority students. For example, the district supported the vertical teaming between middle and high school faculty to align English/language arts and mathematics curricula. The district also provides North Central flexibility in determining the topics and schedule of professional development based on the school's specific areas of need.

Throughout the past five years, North Central experienced many faces of change. The 1999 performance data provided the stark realization that North Central High School was falling short in meeting the needs of a large percentage of its minority students. Through consistent effort and ongoing evaluation to maintain progress, North Central strengthened its faculty teams, conducted ongoing evaluation of student performance data, enhanced professional development, and expanded supplemental support services. These activities led to significant progress in raising academic achievement and extracurricular participation of minority students.