

Defining Success:

WOMEN IN SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

The principalship is where the rubber meets the road.

Here, three female principals share the skills and strategies that spell success for their schools.

Principals are the front-line administrators being asked to do more with less – strengthening teaching and learning, maintaining morale and building a culture of trust, and creating high expectations while managing scarce resources. Given the challenging roles that these school leaders play, giving voice to principals’ needs as well as their successes is important to ACSA.

Last October, ACSA and the American Association of School Administrators held the first-ever Women in School Leadership Forum in San Diego. One highlight of the forum was a panel discussion conducted by three ACSA principals: Minerva Gandara, Kim Hendricks and Teresa López Alonzo. They have agreed here to share in a Q&A format the insights and perceptions they offered at the forum.

1. What new initiatives exist at your school that didn’t exist there before you were principal?

Minerva Gandara: Valadez Middle School Academy is a new school, and we have just

completed our third year. As a staff, we wanted to include initiatives that would keep kids coming to school. We seek out partnerships and resources that we make available to our students and families. We knew we had to create an environment and culture that included the social, emotional, and academic aspect of each student.

The teachers are committed to building relationships with the students and providing a safe environment for them to thrive. We want to focus on what the students and teachers are doing right and have instituted a Positive Behavior Intervention System.

We have created a college-bound culture to accelerate academic achievement for all students through a college preparatory culture and curriculum. We believe in preparing our students to enter the college of his or her choice and to have every opportunity available to them. We provide a “University Pathways Community Event” for our par-

By Minerva Gandara, Kim Hendricks and Teresa López Alonzo

ents, students and families, including our two feeder elementary schools.

We have partnered with CSU Fullerton and have initiated a Financial Literacy Program where parents save money for college and US Bank matches funds. This is a win/win situation for our students. Parents and students attend financial literacy classes as part of this collaboration. We have also instituted the AVID Program.

As part of the CSU Fullerton partnership, we have initiated a collaborative team teaching model for the master teacher and student teacher. Presently, we have six teachers participating. We have also partnered with UC Irvine to put into place health initiatives for our students.

Kim Hendricks: Before I was principal there were three initiatives that did not exist at Bethune Elementary: standards-based instruction, grade-level planning and data analysis.

Standards-based instruction – The district had a pacing guide but it was based on the core materials. We decided as a staff to modify the pacing guide as well as daily lesson plans. Then we looked at the California standards and determine what they were asking students to know and be able to do.

Grade-level plans – Each grade level created weekly lesson plans based on the essential standards. Each teacher (including special education) used the same plan, modifying it if needed to meet the needs of individual students. Each grade level also created “rituals.” The rituals were based on the essential standards, which were a spiral review of essential standards.

Data analysis – Each grade level met to examine student data at least twice a trimester by class and grade level. Each team met with an instructional coach and administrator to discuss data, evaluate strengths and weaknesses, determine essential standards, set goals, determine materials to be used, create lessons, and monitor and assess throughout. Students were also made aware of their strengths and weaknesses. They owned their scores.

Other initiatives included modifying the regular kindergarten schedule to ensure 85-95 percent of all students would leave

kindergarten prepared for first grade. We also created our own lesson design model, based on Madelyn Hunter’s Essential Elements of Instruction. It was called BEE-I, or Bethune’s Effective Elements of Instruction. The idea was all teachers would teach direct lessons daily; mid-way through year three we began to use the National Reading Vo-

The AVID College readiness program in fourth and fifth grades, now in its third year, continues to thrive. We have also instituted spirit wear days, and Wednesdays are dedicated to collegiate apparel. As I conduct my classroom visits, agenda checks and “binder shakes,” I notice that our students are indeed learning the organizational and



ACSA members Teresa López Alonzo, Kim Hendricks and Minerva Gandara are panelists in a session on the principalship at the Women in School Leadership Forum in San Diego.

cabulary (Tampa Reads). Lastly, we targeted English learners and African American students. [Note: Since the panel convened last October, Hendricks has become principal of Sunnymeadows Elementary School in Moreno Valley.]

Teresa López Alonzo: My first year as principal of César E. Chávez Elementary we welcomed our first class of fifth-graders and, thus all of the challenges of a larger school without the administrative structure of a school similar in size. Previously, the school had a kindergarten to fourth-grade configuration with an assistant principal.

Another transition during my principalship was the adoption of focus on science as the vehicle to teach English Language Development. Currently, our schedule includes a schoolwide ELD/science period where students are grouped by proficiency levels for targeted ELD instruction. These efforts have contributed a 60 percent increase in the reclassification rate for our English learners.

note-taking skills necessary for success in middle, high school, college and career. I also notice an increase in the awareness that students have about college.

2. Describe how you use your leadership team.

Minerva Gandara: Open communication is critical for our leadership team. We have many critical conversations to discuss what is best for student learning. Our leadership team is involved in all decisions for our school. We problem-solve, prioritize needs and have a shared commitment that all decisions are for the academic achievement of all students.

Kim Hendricks: My leadership team was used to help determine school-wide decisions, lead grade-level (PLC) meetings, bring concerns to me, and lead school-wide committees.

Teresa López Alonzo: Our leadership team consists of one teacher representative from

each grade level and our teacher on special assignment. I consider this team a Professional Learning Community since we often conduct data analysis together, set goals, and learn about new instructional strategies to share with staff. This team is invaluable in assisting me with our school-wide plan as well as developing our strategic staff development plan.

3. What challenges do you think are unique to your school and how are you dealing with them?

Minerva Gandara: The greatest challenge we face at my school is the poverty level of most of our families. We are in the second highest poverty pocket in Orange County, which brings many other issues that need to be addressed. We have many similar problems to other schools in California, including generational gangs, second language learners, poverty, limited literacy of parents and students. Creating partnerships is the best way to help the students deal with the basics so we can get to the business of academics.

Kim Hendricks: We had a few challenges. We have the district's severe elementary program – the K-5 special education program. Two years ago when the district closed the lowest performing school, we received about 170 students. Almost every student grew – several over 100 points – but we missed our AYP last year by four percentage points. I believe we work really hard to make a difference in our community. We have high expectations and believe that our students should leave elementary school proficient and able to compete in middle school.

Teresa López Alonzo: We are not unlike many schools that find themselves in Program Improvement, despite the positive gains made in student achievement. Keeping the momentum and morale of the school in a positive trajectory can be a challenge, especially with the limited amount of personnel to support the instructional program. Because our school and district are very client-focused, I often find it challenging to fulfill various requests for my time and attention from parents, students and teachers,

while tending to the very important work of classroom visitations and instructional improvement.

I think like many other administrators around the state and country, my job is around the clock. I find myself working late, taking work home, and occasionally opening the school on the weekend just to get work done. The work is challenging, but extremely rewarding!

4. What are you most proud of, and what would you do differently?

Minerva Gandara: I am very proud of our staff because they help each other out. They



lift each other up and support each other to find innovative solutions to whatever they are working on. They function as a family that really cares about the well-being of all members. They are an inclusive staff; teachers, clerical, custodial, classified all working together to create the best learning environment possible for the students.

I am also very proud of our efforts in preparing our students for college, the professional world and beyond through a combination of rigorous academic curriculum, comprehensive life-skills courses, and wide-ranging enrichment opportunities. I am proud that our school offers an all-encompassing education that engages all facets of student development.

Kim Hendricks: I was really proud of the relationships at my school. My staff believes we are in this together – we sail together or we sink together. Student achievement is another source of pride, not just for accountability, but because my students will go on to middle school and we need them to maintain proficiency. We are closing the achievement gap between the significant subgroups. We have received the Title I aca-

ademic achievement award for two years, the California Distinguished School Award, and last year we were nominated for a National Blue Ribbon Award.

Teresa López Alonzo: Our school community gathers in a morning assembly, which has become a ritual at our school. I begin every day by greeting our parents, students and staff. We recite the flag salute and a school pledge I wrote that embodies the values of our namesake, César E. Chávez, the great Latino civil rights leader:

“We, the students and staff of César E. Chávez Elementary School,

*Promise to respect people and property,
To value the learning opportunities presented today,*

To strive for excellence and to do our personal best,

¡Sí, Se Puede! Yes, it can be done!”

After reciting these pledges, I often draw names for a raffle and award students prizes for various things such as wearing spirit wear, doing a great job lining up at the assembly, being good citizens, or mastering grade-level concepts. I also use the morning assembly as an opportunity to speak with the children about what I expect of them each day.

This very public forum is an excellent opportunity for me to be a visible leader, as parents know that they can find me every morning welcoming them and their children to school. We have gotten so efficient with our ritual that students and teachers are dismissed to class within three to five minutes of the start bell. The morning assembly ritual also has many other benefits for students and staff. It is now a tradition that we cannot imagine living without, one that has drawn positive comments from parents and other visitors to our school campus. ■

Minerva Gandara is principal of Valadez Middle School Academy, Placentia-Yorba Linda USD. Kim Hendricks, former principal of Mary McLeod Bethune Elementary, is now principal of Sunnymeadows Elementary School, Moreno Valley USD. Teresa López Alonzo is principal of César E. Chávez Elementary School, Montebello USD.