Doing What Works
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Waterford High School

121 South Reinway Ave.
Waterford, CA 95386
Principal: Don Davis

- High School (9-12)
- 40% Hispanic
- 46% Free or Reduced-Price Lunch
- 9% Special Education
- 13% English Language Learners

In 2001, the year the school first opened, Waterford High School was the lowest-performing school in Stanislaus County, California, referred to as "the bottom of the barrel" by a local newspaper. Today, educators from around the state visit Waterford High School to learn how to implement similar practices in their own schools. The school has achieved this dramatic growth through a number of strategies that seek to make changes in the way teachers collaborate to improve instructional practices in the classroom.

Waterford High School is located in Waterford, California, a small town with a population of about 9,000 residents. Prior to the turnaround process, the school received the lowest possible statewide rank in comparison to all other schools in the state and schools with similar characteristics. Ever since, the school has demonstrated the fastest academic growth in the state, showing an increase in the California Academic Performance Index (API) base score from 475 in 2002-03 to 761 in 2006-07.[1] The school met AYP starting in the 2003-04 school year.

Early on in its improvement process, consultants from the Regional System of District and School Support worked with the school to collect and analyze data about use of instructional time. They realized that, on average, teachers spent only about 65% of class time on activities directly related to instruction and student learning. The principal was concerned, as instructional time was considered the most precious resource. Following reorganization of the master schedule and implementation of new instructional norms, the average time-on-task went up to an average 85% of class time across content areas.

Two years after the school opened, Principal Davis realized that while several aspects of the school life he invested in, including organization, facility, community aspects, curriculum, and personnel, were going well, quality of classroom instruction needed to be dramatically improved. Instruction, initially considered the protected turf of teachers—who were considered to be experts in their content areas—needed to be rethought in order to increase student prformance. As a first step, Principal Davis announced that the school needed to work together to focus the school's mission on learning. For that purpose, data were collected through a school staff retreat meeting and from focus groups with parents, community members, and outside organizations.

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[1] The Academic Performance Index (API) summarizes a school's performance on California standardized tests and high school exit exams. It is on a scale of 200 to 1,000.

The mission statement that emerged was for the school "to become wholly focused on student learning, teacher-directed instruction, and professional collaboration, so that Waterford High School serves as a demonstration site for other educational professionals."

The next step in the turnaround effort focused on professional development. Following the guidance of the district office, professional development focused on Explicit Direct Instruction (EDI). The school paid to bring trainers into the site. The principal also received training. To better adapt EDI for high school grade levels and to all content areas, the principal established a process for creating and implementing the school's instructional norms. Principal Davis provided guiding questions about instruction in the classroom to the staff during staff meetings. Then, he synthesized teachers' responses into an instructional norm and sought feedback on it. Using this approach, teachers felt they contributed to creating the school's instructional norms. Monitoring for teachers' implementation of instructional norms was incorporated into formal observations for performance evaluation purposes as well as informal observations for coaching purposes.

The first agreed-upon instructional norm was that there ought to be a stated learning objective for every lesson. Every student was expected to articulate the objective of the day's lesson. The principal and the teachers entered classrooms and asked students to identify the objective of the lesson, collected data, and then shared their findings with teachers. For example, they would say, "Today, 50% of your students knew the objective of the lesson. Let's aim for 60% next time." The desired goal was to reach 100%.

The second implemented instructional norm was teaching first and then checking for understanding. A key approach for checking for understanding was calling on non-volunteers. During classroom lessons, instead of asking students to raise their hands to answer questions, teachers drew Popsicle sticks with student names on them to choose students to respond. Using this approach, each student had to be prepared to answer questions at any point of the lesson. If a student did not know the answer, teachers provided additional instruction and came back to these students to check again on their understanding.

The third instructional norm implemented as part of the turnaround process focused on student production. Teachers were guided to include grade-level student work in all their lesson plans. Types of student work included worksheets or work using whiteboards, classroom assessment, and submitting lab work. Student worked had to be aligned with the objective of the lesson.

The fourth instructional norm focused on alignment. Teachers working with students at the same grade level coordinated the lesson plans to make sure they all teach the same sequence and approximately at the same time. They also consulted with teachers of support classes to make sure that the lesson plans and homework are aligned with what the students have mastered so far.

The school has recently added a fifth instructional norm, concept development. According to this norm, teachers should use a variety of strategies to teach the main idea or underlying principle that students need to understand and retain for the long run. Additional norms planned are fostering meaningful discussions among students and asking higher-order questions to students.

Several additional principles helped build a culture of learning. During planning time, teachers shared their knowledge and ideas and learned from one another. Using a data-driven approach, formative and summative assessments became the key to decision-making. Additionally, using a "broadcasting" principle of the school, whenever the school reached a new record, such as the number of students passing the high school exit exams, the principal announced it, recognizing all those who were involved in the process.

The principal identified approaches targeting remediation and enrichment needs of students in the school. Each tenth grade student was placed in a 30-minute California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) prep homeroom class four days a week. English language arts (ELA) teachers were paired with math teachers. Juniors and seniors who failed one or both portions of the CAHSEE were placed in the CAHSEE remediation homeroom classes according to the portion of the exam that they failed.

Students scoring below proficient in algebra were placed in algebra support classes within the regular school day, following the reasoning that before- or after-school programs may not reach all students who need this additional support. Currently, the school has two algebra support teachers, one of whom provides algebra support in Spanish to English language learners.

Each year the school added opportunities for more capable students to pursue accelerated or advanced placement (AP) courses. Students were offered college prep classes and participated in Senior Exit individual interviews modeled after the process of a job interview. There, students present their accomplishments in four key areas, also called Expected Schoolwide Learning Results (ESLRs): Communicate Effectively, Achieve Academically, Talent Contribution, and Self-Direction (abbreviated CATS to align with the school mascot, the Wildcats). In other words, to ensure that all students graduate with choices and are prepared for a world beyond high school, students prepared throughout their high school years to demonstrate to members of the Waterford community (representatives of local businesses) through a Senior Exit Exam that they can express themselves well, have been working hard towards academic progress, have participated in a community service, and are working towards their academic or career goals.

Waterford High School has accomplished its vision and become a demonstration site to educators in California. To continue its instructional improvement, the school maintains culture of continuous progress. According to this culture, teachers are encouraged to take risks and find new ways to improve instruction. According to the principal, the school is committed to adding curricular, cocurricular, and extracurricular programs to advance student development and continue on its path towards excellence.