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Reward Schools Case Study Project Los Fresnos High School Los Fresnos CISD

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Introduction and Context

A SNAPSHOT OF LOS FRESNOS HIGH SCHOOL

2013-2014 demographics:

- 2,139 students
- Grade span: 9th-12th
- 81% Economically Disadvantaged (i.e., eligible to receive free or reduced price lunch)
- 5% English language learners
- 7% Special Education
- 13% Student mobility rate
- 96% Hispanic
- 3% White

In 2013-2014, the state accountability ratings were:

- Met Standard on all 3 Indices (Student Achievement, Student Progress, and Closing Performance Gaps)
- Distinction Designations in Math, Science, Social Studies, Top 25% Closing Performance Gaps, and Postsecondary Readiness

Walking into Los Fresnos High School, it's clear that something is different: students here are proud of their work and have high expectations for their lives. Located in the rural farmlands of south Texas, Los Fresnos High School defies the odds of a school serving a vast majority of economically disadvantaged students in its sustained academic success. In addition to being selected as a TEA Reward School, the high school has won numerous other awards, including the prestigious College Board Inspiration Award in 2013 in recognition of its work in ensuring high-quality opportunities for all its students in post-secondary and beyond. The school embodies a tradition of excellence that they call "the Los Fresnos Way."

In the announcements each day, students are reminded "Los Fresnos High School, you are number 1!" The entire school has a clear focus on college readiness from the sign on the fence outside to the college banners to the bulletin boards throughout the campus displaying opportunities for further studies across the country. Los Fresnos High School is especially proud of its "GO Center", a computer-lab focused on giving students the opportunity to apply to college and for financial aid. All students here are given opportunities to succeed and all educators have a deep belief in the potential of all students.

Los Fresnos High School demonstrates excellence in all of the Texas Critical Success Factors from a clear focus on academic performance grounded in student data to an inviting, positive college-ready environment and a continual focus on improvement from the district level down to every classroom. By creating an environment focused on listening to teachers' voices, strong support from the district office, and a continuous focus on student data, Los Fresnos High School has created a culture of high expectations where all students are given the opportunity to succeed. The school embodies a deep commitment to the ability and innate potential of all students that creates a strong learning environment and the best possible outcomes for students.

The Texas Education Agency's Critical Success Factors (CSFs) provide the underlying theory of action guiding the Reward Schools case studies. The findings below are presented in terms of the CSFs. Based on principal and teacher leader interviews and focus groups with teachers and staff, the following CSFs were particularly evident and strong at Los Fresnos High School:

- **Critical Success Factor 1 - Academic Performance**
- **Critical Success Factor 3 - Leadership Effectiveness**
- **Critical Success Factor 7 - Teacher Quality**

Critical Success Factor 1 - Academic Performance

All of the case study participants discussed the following school-wide strategies:

- Decision-making by all
- Collaborative refinement and alignment

Decision-making by all. In interviews with district staff, school administration, and educators, there was a clear refrain that “instruction is number one” at Los Fresnos High School. From the district superintendent to the classroom teachers, the focus on instruction means that every decision made in the district is based on what is in the best interest of students. At Los Fresnos High School, decision-making is a collaborative process where school administration and teacher leaders come together to determine what is best for the school based on comprehensive student data. Any proposed changes are first presented to teachers in department meetings where all educators can provide feedback. Through these meetings, the school makes sure that the majority of teachers have buy-in on an idea before a decision is made. Los Fresnos also uses the campus improvement plan as tool used to guide school improvements. The plan is continually monitored and updated based on data about the current needs of the campus and the best ways to address them.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

“School improvement decisions are made by department heads, strand leaders, and administration. I will never make a decision unless I’ve run it by them. It would not be a good idea to not include them – everyone needs to have a voice. The principal’s office is typically packed with school leaders when it comes to decision making about the campus.”

– Principal Rodriguez

Collaborative refinement and alignment. Los Fresnos High School also uses a collaborative process to develop and refine the curriculum for each subject and grade level. Every summer, groups of teachers from across the district work to develop pacing guides and a calendar with TEKS for each day based on student performance from the prior year. The district content strategists work with teachers in the process of developing the curriculum. The revised curriculum is then presented to teachers as a whole in August. Each department within the school also has weekly meetings during the school year where the curriculum is reviewed and any needed adjustments can be made. The common pacing guides across the district ensure that the same information is being presented to all students, which makes it easier to identify specific areas where students need additional support as indicated by benchmark results throughout the year.

In addition to horizontal curriculum alignment, the Los Fresnos School District also has vertical team meetings at least once a year to unpack the specific components of learning that are

expected at each grade level. The superintendent promotes a focus on what needs to be taught from Kindergarten to 12th grade to ensure that students master the TEKS at each grade level and that learning can progress from year to year. By ensuring that teachers are teaching the necessary skills for each year, the district can ensure that students are able to master their grade level content and be prepared for ongoing success.

Critical Success Factor 3 - Leadership Effectiveness

The strategies the staff discussed as being indicators of effective leadership were:

- Leaders focused on the whole student
- Distributed and learning-focused leaders

Leaders focused on the whole student. At Los Fresnos, every decision is based on what is in the best interest of students. “The principal knows who all the students are at Los Fresnos and how they are progressing, not only on the tests but also in class. The key is to know the kids and where they are coming from,” observed the District Executive Director of Academics. The superintendent makes sure this expectation is clear and is very supportive of principals knowing that they are making decisions based on the best interest of students. The Los Fresnos High School leadership not only looks at the emotional needs of students, but also maintains a clear focus on what students need to meet expectations and have future life opportunities. The principal is passionate that all students and holds high expectations for their lives as is evidenced by the college-going culture in the school.

BEST PRACTICE

The superintendent also supports principals sharing ideas at the weekly principals’ meeting, and principals are encouraged to do observations of each other across campuses to ensure that best practices are implemented across the district.

Support from the district. A relentless focus on individual students is clear from the top down, as the superintendent will follow up on individual students with school leadership. Each principal in the Los Fresnos School District is expected to do classroom observations and give feedback to teachers. The superintendent reviews all notes from the classroom walk-throughs to ensure that principals are providing instructionally-focused feedback to teachers. Teachers observed using effective instructional techniques have the opportunity to share with other faculty at sessions on best

teaching practices (BTPs). The Los Fresnos High School administration is also diligent about knowing what is going on with students both in their scores and in classes. The principal effectively delegates among the school administration to share the load of leadership and make sure that no student goes unnoticed. The leadership at Los Fresnos is a vital component to the school’s sustained success.

Critical Success Factor 7 – Teacher Quality

When asked how the campus supports its teachers and helps them improve their practice, the principal, teachers, and staff described the following strategies:

- Data-driven professional development
- On-going capacity building and strategic placement

Data-driven professional development. The Los Fresnos culture is focused on everyone reaching his or her greatest potential. Staff development is a non-negotiable, and all educators are continually working to improve. In Los Fresnos, professional development opportunities are driven by the results of the data and from a yearly survey of teachers to assess the needs of the district. The district offers targeted, differentiated interventions for teachers based on student performance, and the school and district closely monitor teacher outcomes. School administrators and district staff also attend staff development to make sure that the techniques from trainings are being used in the classroom with teachers and that they are effective in improving student outcomes.

On-going capacity building and strategic placement - Los Fresnos primarily relies on internal resources for professional development since the teachers know the students and how to meet their needs best. As the District’s Executive Director of Academics observed,

Our professional development is balanced between contracting out and looking within – our teachers know our students and know how to meet their needs best. We don’t want to do PD just because it’s required, we base our PD on student data so that we know what to provide.

To improve classroom instruction, teachers may begin by co-teaching with a master teacher. The school also focuses on best teaching practices (BTPs) and allows teachers to share effective techniques with others at the district or campus level.

Every month the high school gets a list of scheduled district professional development opportunities. If teachers are interested in a session, they are almost always allowed to go and the school provides coverage. When teachers attend training, they are expected to share what they learned with their department. District strategists also provide professional development offerings for particular content based on need in the district. The Educational Service Center in Region 1 provides support and resources to the district and monitors the schools’ data. Teachers may also attend specialized training throughout the state or country, such as AP and dual-credit training. If the district sees a specific need for teacher development, they may bring in a consultant for targeted training such as a recent presenter on techniques for English

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

“At Los Fresnos, we work together as a family to help each other and help the kids be prepared. We’ve seen a lot of ongoing success. It is amazing, and we’re proud to be part of it.”

– Los Fresnos teacher

learners (ELs) At Los Fresnos, the key to successful professional development is seeing student outcomes improve on the next assessment.

Los Fresnos High School also bases class assignment and course load based on teacher performance, not necessarily seniority. The school carefully selects teachers of special education and ELs to make sure these students have the best possible support. The faculty at Los Fresnos considers each other a family, and all staff work

together to improve and make sure all students have the resources to succeed. Teacher retention is high, and the staff is driven to excel and improve because they are committed to the vision of the school in providing great outcomes for kids.

Summary

Los Fresnos High School stands as an exemplar of how commitment to working collaboratively, grounding instruction in data, and holding high expectations of students can create extraordinary results. The school has excelled in maintaining high levels of student achievement and in creating a college-ready culture that is engrained in the attitudes of all the students and staff. The Los Fresnos School District serves as a key source of support and is committed to making decisions based on the input of principals and teachers who know the students' needs best. The school is constantly trying to improve and using data as a guide to ensure that all students succeed.

At Los Fresnos, kids feel wanted and noticed, and the students excel under the high expectations placed on them. Teachers truly care for students, enjoy working at Los Fresnos High School, and are committed to working together to go above and beyond for the students. The school has grown from taking below average students to average, to getting the average students to be AP. The passion has grown from one or two teachers to a campuswide focus on moving all kids up, where rigor and high standards are the expectation. The focus on the campus is teaching with purpose and passion.

Los Fresnos High School is committed to sustaining these exemplary practices by ensuring that all staff have a voice and take ownership of the school to continue the tradition of excellence. The school has clear processes and a dedication to addressing areas of on-going challenges, such as meeting the needs of English learners. With a clear commitment to the academic and life outcomes of all students, the "Los Fresnos Way" stands as an exemplar of school success.