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Reward Schools Case Study Project
Middle Campus
Uplift Education-Summit International

May 2015

**SNAPSHOT OF
SUMMIT INTERNATIONAL
PREP MIDDLE SCHOOL**

2013-2014 demographics:

- 414 students
- Grade span – 6th – 8th
- 68.6% of the students were Economically Disadvantaged (i.e., eligible to receive free or reduced price lunch)
- 17.4% English language learners
- 3.4% Special Education
- 8.4% student mobility rate
- 50% Hispanic
- 28.7% African American
- 10% White
- 6% Asian
- 3.8% Other ethnicity

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 Reading, Math, Science, Social Studies, Top 25% Student Progress, Top 25% Closing Performance Gap and Postsecondary Readiness

Introduction and Context

Uplift Education is a free public charter school network serving almost 12,000 students on 14 campuses in the Dallas-Fort Worth region. One of the network schools, Summit International Preparatory Middle School (SIMS), was selected as a Reward School by the Texas Education Agency.

SIMS is housed on an 18-acre campus in a residential area of Arlington, Texas and is comprised of grades six through eight with an enrollment of 450 students. The 2013-14 Texas Academic Performance Report (TAPR) reports that SIMS met the 2014 Accountability Rating standard with distinction designations in academic achievement in Reading/English Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies, and in the Top 25% in Student Progress and Closing Performance Gaps in Postsecondary Readiness. They are also an International Baccalaureate (IB) school and teach IB curriculum.

The Texas Education Agency's Critical Success Factors (CSFs) are 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 SIMS:

- **Critical Success Factor 2 - Use of Quality Data**
- **Critical Success Factor 5 - Family & Community Engagement**
- **Critical Success Factor 6 - Improve school climate**

Critical Success Factor 2 - Use of Quality Data

The principal, teachers, and staff were asked to describe how they collect, analyze, and use data to drive instruction. They highlighted the following strategies:

- Strong tools and transparency
- A data-driven culture

Strong tools and transparency. The Uplift Network utilizes the *i-Shine* data dashboard and breaks down the data to the individual student in order to provide targeted supports and

address disparities between subpopulations. SIMS reviews the dashboards daily and conducts an in depth analysis with the Uplift Directors in person twice per month. The process is intended to ensure that they remain goal driven and aligned to the strategic plan. Teachers are expected to understand the data and discuss it openly with parents who have their own access to the dashboards and can review their student's results daily.

Students track their own data in order to understand how they are performing in relation to their expectations. SIMS faculty and staff have observed that allowing and expecting students to analyze their individual data leads to buy in from the students and an embrace of targeted interventions when they are required.

A data-driven culture. The data tools and transparency that undergird SIMS' success are brought to light by rituals and expectations that create a data driven culture. Some of these rituals include:

- Data dashboards that are readily available and can be accessed with new data daily. Each conversation is reinforced with references to the data and used at all levels of the staff, parents, and students.
- Teachers refer to assessment results via individual reports that they view collectively for each student and review results with parents.
- Teachers are thoughtful and consistent about sharing data with students.
- Teachers maintain data trackers and regularly invite parents into a conversation in order to avoid surprises and in setting scholar interventions.
- Parents know when the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) night occurs and participate three times per year to learn how to read the reports and how the scores translate into meaning by grade level.
- Report Card night includes parents with the data every month. Directors share about data on the STAAR, the MAP, and formative assessments. They explain assessments with data to parents about how all of this information fits together for their student.

While SIMS' data-driven culture helps the organization stay focused on the needs of their students, it is human connection and collaboration that gives their school its palpable strength.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

"Data drives everything we do... In the spring we start getting the STAAR and MAP assessment results back. We start planning what the academic goals are for the next year. We always raise our goals each year to push and do a little bit more than we think we can do, and we are pleasantly surprised that our students rise to the occasion."

– Priscilla Pharms, Managing Director

Critical Success Factor 5 - Family and Community Engagement

SIMS staff and administration highlighted the following strategies they were using to improve family and community engagement:

- Parent leadership
- Multiple pathways to staying informed and involved

Parent leadership. Parent involvement and open communication is strong at SIMS because the Very Involved Parents (VIP) group leads many of the events. They hold monthly learning community meetings around various topics based on parent ideas and needs. They host a regular, formal process to ensure that parents are aligned with the directors through quarterly “Donuts with Directors” meetings. The VIPs also organize events to celebrate teachers, holding quarterly celebrations and community events. This also aids in creating awareness and recruitment for the learning community meetings held every three weeks in which teachers are encouraged to participate. Teachers also meet with the VIP once per month.

Multiple pathways to staying informed and involved. SIMS staff host frequent events for parents and families that are heavily focused on academic performance, but are also social to encourage engagement. SIMS understands that the involvement of the parents is a critical success factor and best practice. To this end, SIMS administrators facilitate annual Title I meetings to review their strategic priorities and share all of the information on the SIMS website. Town Hall meetings are also used to communicate the school’s direction and strategies for getting there.

BEST PRACTICE

SIMS holds a Parent University, offering classes in English as a second language, understanding classroom jargon, skills for partnering with educators and students, and safe online and on social media activity.

Parents frequently communicate with teachers via email and teachers must respond within 24 hours. If there is an issue, parents must go up through the hierarchy beginning with teachers, which allows more opportunity to support the needs of the students closest to where they exist.

Additional web-based and traditional communication is employed to maintain engagement and update information. The grade-level chairperson and grade-level teachers send regular newsletters to ensure everyone is operating with the same information. Also, each student’s data (MAP assessment and school report cards) are sent to the parent in case they haven’t been accessing the dashboard. This is intended to ensure that the parents are up to date and know what the issues are before conferences with the teachers. In order to unpack the data, the director holds information sessions for parents explaining test results and what they mean. This high level of parent involvement is key to their current and future success as well as their healthy school culture.

Critical Success Factor 6 - School Climate

The SIMS team highlighted the following strategies that the school uses to sustain its positive school climate:

- Consistency in action and deed
- Intimate structures

Consistency in action and deed. Open and frequent communication is key at SIMS and is used consistently from when a student enters orientation throughout the rest of his or her academic career. From the lobby of the school, which is outfitted to emphasize the goal of 100% college acceptance, through the hallways of its immaculate and well-maintained campus, there is signage encouraging and emphasizing the high academic expectations at SIMS. The students wear fashionable uniforms and act as hosts for visitors to the campus.

If a student has a failing grade, there is an immediate consultation with parents to discuss an action plan with each of the student's teachers. If there is a student discipline or management issue, there is an expectation and process designed to ensure that it is handled expediently. SIMS deploys a team of four to seven teachers for parent conferences with a struggling student, creating a real "esprit de corps" -- a sense of unity and responsibility among the teachers to help their troubled student. SIMS teachers "sweat the small stuff" and handle problems when they occur.

Intimate structures. At SIMS, "pods", homogeneous groups of students based on their needs, are formed to compete with each other for performance. Students within the pods have the same goals. The pods have college names, operate as teams, and the students within the pods have a lot of pride, both individually and for their pod. Because student success is measured on growth, there is no stigma to being in one group or the other.

Students in each of the pods are expected to achieve mastery in all subject areas by the end of the year. They do so by engaging in collaborative learning and problem solving, such as creating a public service announcement, building computers, or creating impact. SIMS places a premium on small group instruction, which fosters relationships and teamwork among students, teachers, and parents. They use a "Hero" system, a tiered system of merits or demerits, to manage any issues with positive discipline. The SIMS model is designed to make certain that 80% of the focus is on high performers. They have a low suspension rate and want to keep the students in the classroom where they belong. At SIMS, students know the expectations and students, teachers, and parents are all invested in making sure the expectations are met.

Summary

The lasting impression of SIMS is that of a well-run school with full investment of leaders, teachers, parents and students, all focused on the students' success. The campus is impressive and the pride of the students is evident in their demeanor. The staff is strong and independent and carries that same drive and dedication to the students' graduation. The teachers are articulate, fluent in technology, and use proven teaching strategies. They demonstrate genuine concern and interest in the students' achievements. The school's "no excuses" environment has fostered the success of the many first generation students, who are not seen as "Title I" kids from disadvantaged neighborhoods, but rather students, who are on their way to emulating the 2014 graduating class, which earned a 100% acceptance to four-year universities.