Reward Schools Case Study Project
North Garland High School
Garland ISD

May 2015

Introduction and Context

North Garland High School is located in Garland, Texas, a suburb north of Dallas. If you walk through the doors of NGHS at just the right time, you will hear a minute of music just before the tardy bell rings. It could be anything from Stevie Wonder to Beyoncé, but the music isn't just innovative and fun -- it's purposeful and a part of the strategy at NGHS that helps students get to class on time.

The walls are decorated with extra-large posters of college acceptance letters. Letters are posted like badges of honor, showing where senior students plan to go after graduation. In one wing of the school, you might think you walked into a mini emergency room as there are several hospital beds that are a small part of NGHS's Clinical Rotation, a component of its Medical Focus program in the Math, Science & Technology (MST) Magnet.

Recently named one of the best high schools in 2014 by U.S. News & World Report, Academic achievement is paramount for every student at NGHS. Without the typical feeder pattern from other schools, students must choose to enroll at NGHS. What they may or may not be aware of when they enroll in the school, is that they are not only choosing to become scholars, but they are also choosing to take an active role in planning and preparing for their futures. At NGHS, success does not happen by accident, it is a systemic attitude of rigor, work ethic, and determination.

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 NGHS:

- **Critical Success Factor 1 - Academic Performance**
- **Critical Success Factor 2 - Quality data to improve instruction**
- **Critical Success Factor 4 - Increase Learning Time**

Critical Success Factor 1 - Academic Performance

All of the case study participants discussed the following school-wide strategies to support academic performance:
- Personalized education plans
- College and career goals
- Response to intervention

A SNAPSHOT OF NORTH GARLAND HIGH SCHOOL

2013-2014 demographics:
- 2,324 students
- Grade span – 9th-12th
- 63% Economically Disadvantaged (i.e., students eligible to receive free or reduced price lunch)
- 7% English language learners
- 7% Special Education
- 9.3% Student mobility rate
- 55% Hispanic
- 17% Asian
- 15% African American
- 2% 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% Closing Performance Gaps, and Postsecondary Readiness

Personalized education plans. NGHS works to ensure the success of each student. AVID strategies are used to help each student develop their own individual learning plan. Incoming freshmen have an individual conference with their counselor and parent or guardian to develop their plans and are further assisted by the counseling department, teachers and administrators. New students, regardless of grade level, also meet with their counselors to develop a plan.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

"Every kid has their own education plan. We provide for all students and ensure every kid gets that opportunity whether they see and believe they have the potential, whether we see the potential or whether we don't know what their potential is. We have an obligation to provide them with structure and show them their worth. We have to show them all the opportunities they have available to them."

– Dr. Gerald Hudson, Garland ISD

The plans include required graduation elements as well as electives and endorsements selected by the students. NGHS uses testing results from all grade levels to assist the students in determining their strengths and areas for academic improvement. This year, testing included Measures of Academic Progress for 9th graders, PSAT for 10th and 11th graders, and SAT for 11th and 12th graders. Seniors will have an individual meeting with their counselor to be sure they have accomplished their goals and are working toward and meeting their goals for post-secondary life.

Plans are revisited annually for 10th and 11th graders. If there is an indication something is amiss, the counselor or MST coordinator will work individually with the student as needed. MST students are monitored closely to determine if interventions or changes are necessary. Assessments are ongoing. Unit assessments end-of-course and semester assessments are reviewed. This data is used to make instructional decisions regarding supports for improving student achievement.

College and career goals. MST students have goals of specific colleges they aspire to attend and scholarships they are seeking. Non-MST student may have broader goals including graduation, community college and the military. Students self-monitor their goals and review them annually with their counselor. Through the AVID and MST programs, very strong relationships are built between the students and the teachers. Both programs offer students a place to belong and a caring adult to monitor their progress. This allows for a fluid and ongoing dialogue about each student's future. It is this best practice of creating and maintaining relationships that is a key to NGHS's success.

Response to intervention. Recently NGHS restructured its Response to Intervention (RtI) program to include a system NGHS's principal implemented in a previous school district. With the 90-minute block, a framework is developed that allows teachers to provide Tier II interventions during their schedule class period while other students extend their learning. With this adjustment, students are not being pulled out of any class and all students will have the opportunity for interventions if warranted. The RtI facilitator puts the processes in place and monitors implementation to ensure they are working. In addition to process control, the RtI facilitator may provide professional development or modeling to support Tier I instruction. At Tier I, the emphasis is on differentiating instruction to catch kids on the initial instruction of the material using best practice models for each specific subject. The facilitator may provide data or assist in gathering data to identify strengths and weaknesses in student scores and/or curriculum structure. The RtI facilitator also assists in student needs identification, curriculum support acquisition, staff training and overall monitoring for Tier II and Tier III interventions.

At Tier II, students may be identified through the data-driven professional learning communities (PLC) process (i.e., teacher recommendation based on data) or through data analysis at the leadership level. The push-in or pull-out programs for the Tier II intervention cycle involve the full staff and feedback from the PLC process. The interventions are provided as targeted instruction for small groups.

Students who are unsuccessful, even with quality Tier I and Tier II approaches, qualify for specialized coursework that provides individual support for a student. This may look very different, depending on the needs of individual students. The frequency of the support will increase. The type of support is more often one-on-one and will be monitored more frequently. Tier III interventions are 150 minutes per week and are often a class itself such as Reading lab.

Scaffolding instruction allows for teachers to break down and interlay instruction so any student can reach the next academic level. Additionally, single block and double block scheduling allows for further customization while meeting the academic needs of students. Classroom lessons are backwards designed with an objective and closing task. The objectives are clearly communicated with the students making them aware of the expectation.

Critical Success Factor 2 - Use of Quality Data to Drive Instruction

We asked the principal, teachers, and staff to describe how they collect, analyze, and use data to drive instruction. They mentioned the following strategies:
- Turning around declining performance
- Finding the root cause

Turning around declining performance. NGHS made a conscious effort to implement new data systems, software, processes, and instruction in order to improve their use of quality data sets. At NGHS, data drives decisions on what is taught, how it's taught, and when it's taught.

The proof of the power of data is found in one example where NGHS administration used data analysis to determine that a particular course's material was not doing what it was intended to do. Based on their analysis, the administration required a rewrite of the curriculum 8 weeks into the semester. The administrators met with the PLC for the department/course and after receiving their input, administrators discovered gaps in the curriculum. After analyzing what additional support the students needed, NGHS secured substitutes for the teachers and they met to write the overlay for the curriculum. Previously, the focus was on reading comprehension with limited writing instruction, and now there is a stronger emphasis on the writing process.

Finding the root cause. This process of data analysis determines where the sources of failure are occurring and whether the deficits are curriculum- or instructionally-based, and affecting one class, or all classes. Do the students have the foundation for the course? Is the course module appropriate or did it not teach the objectives that were required?

Though data is integral to NGHS's success, its structured analysis is relatively new with the new administration and is still a work in progress. The administration is working on writing processes, testing and implementing them.

Critical Success Factor 4 – Increase Learning Time

The strategies the staff discussed to increase learning time within the campus were:
- Acceleration opportunities
- Coordinator to oversee progress

Acceleration opportunities. NGHS takes a proactive approach to credit recovery and there are several options to give students the opportunity to graduate. Students stay after school and take labs, tutorials, and computer-based courses for areas of deficiency. Some students receive tutorials two or three times per week.

In some cases, the increased learning time may not be a recovery, but a preparation. Some students are using these opportunities to take advantage of taking advanced academic courses as well. It opens their schedule for them to take something additional or a work program in a specific career field. Other students are able to learn past material while continuing to move forward in a course. This also helps keep the entire class on track. Each year, approximately 25 to 30 seniors may miss graduation by one score or one class. NGHS offers the option for these students to enroll for a fifth year with a very flexible schedule that allows them to work full time and complete their course(s) needed for graduation.

> **BEST PRACTICE**
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> With the Cycle Recovery Program, if student fails 6-weeks, that student can attend a lab after school and for the following grading cycle to recover that credit without having to repeat the full course. By assessing the students in real time, teachers have the opportunity to get the student back on track as quickly as possible rather than waiting an entire semester.

Coordinator to oversees progress. The RtI coordinator is instrumental in coordinating with students and teachers to ensure the success of these recovery options. It is expected that the RtI coordinator wuld be able to manage a caseload of 500 students at any given time. The coordinator is able to manage this massive load by using data to monitor and proactively intervene with students who could be one or two steps away from falling through the cracks.

Summary

The old saying that attitude reflects leadership was never truer than what one sees at NGHS. The desire to learn, grow, and achieve does not stop with the students at NGHS. It's a way of life for the entire school. Almost as impressive as its dedication to each and every student in the walls of the school, was the dedication to continued learning and achievement. These are things schools want their students to reflect, but the administration reflects the same core values.

NGHS is not content in having one time success. In order to sustain the programs and processes that work they are working to continue to strengthen them. Through processes are sustainable it was refreshing to hear NGHS leadership talk about continued improvements on their strategies. Though data-driven and innovative, some strategies and activities were not as successful as the administration anticipated and they are quick to acknowledge that more study, more analysis, and more development is needed to yield the desired results.

Site visit conducted by Theresa Moreno