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Reward Schools Case Study Project
Ortiz Elementary
Brownsville ISD

May 2015

A SNAPSHOT OF ORTIZ ELEMENTARY

2013-2014 demographics:

- 649 students
- Grade span – Early education – 5th
- 96% Economically Disadvantaged (i.e., students eligible to receive free or reduced price lunch)
- 37% English language learners
- 11% Special Education
- 17% Student mobility rate
- 98% Hispanic
- 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, Top 25% Student Progress, Top 25% Closing Performance Gaps, and Postsecondary Readiness

Introduction and Context

Walking the halls at Ortiz Elementary is a bright and positive experience. Each teacher has built a college-themed bulletin board, which is only one element of the constant reinforcement of the expectation that Ortiz students will attend a postsecondary institution. The halls are decorated with student work, a Writing Wall of Fame, reminders of the district goals, and community recognition of the school's achievements. Parents flood the entrance at arrival and dismissal allowing for informal reinforcement of strong relationships between family and educators. At class time, calm and firm teachers engaged students and structured discussion among their peers.

The staff is committed to academic rigor above all else. They focus so strongly on student mastery and quality instruction that it prevents the occurrence of unfavorable issues that staff in other schools may experience. The staff uses engaging lessons and a clear focus on college to ensure student engagement, and effective classroom management, school safety, attendance, and discipline systems.

The interview feedback sessions revealed consistency among the teachers, administration, and district support for the goals of Ortiz. Everyone buys in to the mission of Ortiz and knows exactly how to achieve it by using tried and true combinations of instructional strategies across every classroom and every grade. They employ resources available to them with a high level of reflection and care. School-wide expectations are the norm, not the exception. A student at Ortiz could walk into any classroom and know what the teacher expects.

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 Ortiz Elementary:

- **Critical Success Factor 1 - Academic Performance**
- **Critical Success Factor 2 – Use of Quality Data**
- **Critical Success Factor 6 - School Climate**

Critical Success Factor 1 - Academic Performance

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

- Vertical and horizontal planning
- Consistent instructional strategies

Vertical and horizontal planning. Ortiz

Elementary gets an early start on academic success and approaches all instruction vertically. The lower grades (PreK, Kindergarten, 1st, and 2nd grade) are just as focused on standards as the upper tested grades (3rd, 4th, and 5th grade). Testing celebrations at Ortiz deliberately include the lower grades, demonstrating that the success of a 3rd grade student is due in large part to the urgency of his previous teachers. Lower grade teachers regularly examine upper grade standards in weekly faculty meetings, adjusting their instruction to support areas where current upper grade students are struggling. In addition to vertical planning, teachers at Ortiz collaborate constantly with their grade team. They meet before each six weeks to plan a scope and sequence and receive turn-key training from a colleague that recently attended district training on the upcoming standards. Each week they review their plan and data from informal student assessment and benchmarks. Together with the Dean of Instruction, the teachers share what is working in their classrooms and ask for advice (or a model lesson) from colleagues who demonstrate success on a particular strategy or standard. Through this robust collaboration, the teachers have instilled a culture of grade-level accountability: all teachers are responsible for the success of all students.

BEST PRACTICE

When the school noticed that the 5th grade students were behind on science vocabulary, it became a school-wide challenge: all teachers, including the elective teachers, incorporated a science word of the day and enriched their word walls. Staff announced the word during morning announcements and encourages teachers to reinforce its meaning during class time.

Consistent instructional strategies. It is logistically easier to collaborate because all instructional expectations are school wide. Ortiz staff use the Texas Literacy Initiative (TLI), Cognitive Learning anchor lessons, Response to Intervention, and academic stems in every classroom. Each classroom's must-haves include Accelerated Reader charts, fluency packets, and posted reminders of anchor lessons. This year's focus on fluency, novel studies, writing, and science vocabulary (see callout box above) applies to the whole school and every classroom. It is a testament to both the clear expectations across classrooms and the grade-level accountability. Recently, when a teacher was out for an extended period, her colleagues volunteered to split up her students rather than leaving them with a substitute. The students were incorporated easily into a classroom and curriculum that very closely mirrored their own.

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:

- Weekly data meetings
- Monitoring instructional strategies
- Leadership reviews data

Weekly data meetings. Teachers at Ortiz Elementary analyze data every week. Before school starts, teachers create a Plan of Action with each student’s data. They plan targeted instruction, form tier groups for Response to Intervention, and look for trends on the results of the major tests applicable to that grade. This continues throughout the year. Every (weekly) grade-level meeting includes some sort of data review. Teachers said, “Grade level meetings are used to look up and reinforce action plans.” Vertical teams meet weekly to review standards and instructional methods. One teacher said of the culture of vertical planning, “Each grade level thinks, ‘how can I help?’ When my PreK students reach 5th grade, they are going to have to know energy. My students may not be tested in science this year, or next, but eventually they will and that learning starts now.”

BEST PRACTICE

The principal emphasized that grade-level data review is an opportunity to “identify teachers that did awesome on a student expectation, and then we ask what she is doing that can help everyone else.”

In addition to state and district assessments, reading tests like TPRI/Tejas-LEE, CPALS, Stanford, and fluency measures, supplement regular classroom assessments and real student work. This data is authentic and in real-time. The principal sets a clear expectation that teachers know where their students are in relation to mastery of grade-level learning objectives at all times.

Monitoring instructional strategies. Teachers at Ortiz do more than analyze data. At Ortiz, they put data to work. First, they identify an intervention that will address the deficiencies the data revealed. Then, they reflect on how successful the strategy has been to reach a student. The culture of reflection and accountability at Ortiz Elementary means that rather than pin identified weaknesses on a student, the data reveals to his or her teacher that the strategy needs to change. Teachers are using data to think about and reflect on their own practices.

Leadership reviews data. Ortiz leadership reinforces the data culture by playing an active role in data review. The specialist from TLI reviews each student’s fluency progress every week. She makes notes for teachers and incorporates solutions for school-wide issues in the next round of materials she prepares. She is included as a member of the principal’s academic leadership team. The dean of instruction is present at all grade-level meetings, guiding the conversation about the most recent data. The principal personally reviews student progress on benchmarks and fluency measures submitted by the teachers and returns them with notes. This practice helps teachers know that collecting data matters, and that their leaders will monitor and support the intervention planned for each student.

The district also supports well-rounded data and frequent reflection. Meetings between the school leadership and the district coordinator go beyond the state assessment and other typical data that impacts accountability. With the district, they examine data on attendance, teacher retention, and how well programmatic interventions are implemented at the campus. The district provides help with annual campus improvement planning, targeted improvement planning, and fluid check-ins after key benchmarks.

Critical Success Factor 6 - School Climate

Many of the participants discussed the following strategies the school used to sustain a positive climate:

- Positive energy and productivity
- Intervening early

Positive energy and productivity. All staff members agreed that perhaps because of the emphasis on academics, and the teachers' engaging lessons, there are few behavior problems. Again, all school-wide incentives are based on academics, and the principal uses student meetings to focus on their educational plan. Student work is displayed inside the classroom and places of pride in the halls. The college-going expectation also helps students constantly draw connections between the work they are doing now and their future success.

In addition to academic rigor, Ortiz staff looks at the whole child. When forming action plans, leadership staff and the teachers identify student strengths – maybe running, or dance – and use those to help the student build confidence. These activities also help students want to come to school.

In addition to having positive activities during the school day, the counselor and teachers focus on students' social and emotional health. The counselor addresses issues of bullying and character development. The principal is strict on academics, but calm when students need to get rid of pent up energy. She does not apply arbitrary punishment for conversations in the cafeteria or excitement in the bus line. In this system, students feel that consequences are reasonable and fair.

Intervening early. When there is a problem with a student, a teacher immediately meets with leadership and the counselor to form a Behavior Intervention Plan. They do not wait for a student to be tested or labeled, instead treating the issue as they would any academic challenge. The counselor supports teachers by meeting with these students daily. A 5th grade student recently wrote a UIL writing essay on how the counselor changed his life, helping him become a better person.

Ortiz students also follow the good example set by their teachers. The staff is collegial, open to sharing, and treat every problem as a team problem. Students regularly see the neighboring teacher helping out their own. The principal outlines and praises the part that the elective teachers, custodial staff, and the security guard play in the success of the school. This contributes to a calm and collegial environment.

Summary

Many of the critical success factors identified for TEA Reward Schools are apparent in the school's approach to each of their goals. Beyond all else, there is a strong sense of personal and organizational accountability at Ortiz Elementary. School staff is accountable to district and state staff – and most importantly to each other. Grade level teams take joint ownership over the quality of education for each student in their grade. The lower grades feel the same urgency for student mastery as the tested grades, setting them up to succeed. Teachers and staff work together to offset the effort required to meet the standard set by everyone at Ortiz – that all students succeed.

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