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**Reward Schools Case Study Project
Park Place Elementary School
Houston ISD**

May 2015

Introduction and Context

A SNAPSHOT OF PARK PLACE ELEMENTARY

2013-2014 demographics:

- 1,034 students
- Grade span – Pre-Kindergarten-5th
- 92% Economically Disadvantaged (i.e., students eligible to receive free or reduced price lunch),
- 61% English language learners
- 6% Special Education
- 11% Student mobility rate
- 75% Hispanic
- 23% Asian
- 2% African American

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

Houston ISD's Park Place Elementary School is located in Park Place, a region of Houston that is near the William P. Hobby Airport. As of the 2010 census, about 41% of the residents of the Park Place Super Neighborhood had an annual income below \$35,000 compared to 28% citywide. Seven percent of the residents have a bachelor's degree or higher compared to 29% citywide. The Park Place is a well-established and multi-ethnic community, composed of families who live in single-family homes and apartment complexes. Park Place Elementary School (Park Place) serves over 1,000 students in prekindergarten through fifth grade. The current principal, Sylvia Trinh, has been with Park Place for three years. The instructional programs include regular education, special education (inclusion, speech therapy, and life skills), bilingual education, computer assisted instruction, gifted and talented, and Title 1 programs. There is an afterschool program run by the Harris County Department of Education as well as regular tutorials for students with academic challenges. Each classroom has a minimum of four computers for direct instruction and reinforcement of skills.

Upon entering Park Place, one notices the openness of the space immediately. Soaring ceilings and clerestory windows allow sunlight to stream into the building, filling the main entrance and hallways with light. The school library is directly left of the main entrance of the school and the administration hub is directly to the right. The signage—posters, notices and messages—are displayed in Spanish, English, and Vietnamese throughout the interior school entrance as well as the exterior front of the building, enabling parents as well as students to readily access school information. There are no walls or doors that separate people who manage the front office from students and adults who enter the building. It is apparent that care has been taken to create a welcoming environment.

One immediately has the impression that learning is the most important thing that happens here. For example, prominently displayed posters highlight the academic accomplishments of the school, including Distinction Designations in Reading/ELA and Mathematics awarded last year. Student work covers both sides of the walls in each grade level hallway and individual student recognition and awards (grade-level and school-wide) are also on

display. The building itself is designed with student learning in mind. The previous school administrator and leadership team participated in the design and development phases of construction in 2002. The former building is now used for assembly, physical education, and art classes. Students move through the hallways in organized procession and chatter softly, many waving hello to the principal, some asking for a personal hello or quick hug. A glance into a 5th grade math class reveals students leaning forward as an animated teacher moves around the classroom. Time spent observing additional classrooms confirm that busy engagement in teaching and learning is the norm.

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 Park Place Elementary:

- **Critical Success Factor 1: Improve Academic Performance**
- **Critical Success Factor 2: Use of Quality Data to Improve Instruction**
- **Critical Success Factor: School Climate**

Critical Success Factor 1 - Academic Performance

All of the case study participants discussed the following school-wide strategies to support academic performance:

- High-functioning and structured Professional Learning Communities (PLC)
- Providing extended learning time

BEST PRACTICE

Principles and guidelines for PLC meetings at Park Place include:

- Meeting has a clear purpose and measurable outcomes for improving student achievement.
- Structures are in place to support collaboration around student achievement.

High-functioning and structured Professional Learning Communities (PLC).

Park Place has organized PLCs at each grade level. These teacher teams use a formal protocol to discuss academic needs of individual students. The teams meet with the principal during the school day each month for three hours, using a dedicated conference room to review and discuss student data. Typically, these meetings dedicate each hour to a discrete task. The first hour is spent disaggregating student data and asking the question, “how did we do overall?” Next teachers share ideas and practices. This exchange is enabled by the trust that has been established through the PLC process. During the second hour,

the team looks at how specific students are performing academically. Often, teachers call on students’ prior-year instructors to discuss academic transitions. One teacher reported that these dialogues reveal “what worked in the past—what did the student respond well to” and enable the student’s current teacher to “get to the bottom” of a learning barrier or challenging lesson. The last hour is used for planning. For example, if classes will be working on summarization during the next two weeks, the teams use this time to build specific lesson plans

focused on this skill set. Both the principal and teachers stated that this organized, structured planning time is critical to helping students accomplish their academic goals.

Providing extended learning time. A variety of instructional arrangements are employed to increase academic performance at Park Place. For instance, teachers use pullout classrooms located on each grade-level hallway. These classrooms are used to support students needing additional instructional time as indicated by short-cycle assessment results, student work, and other information analyzed by grade-level teams. Each pullout room has a teacher dedicated to providing support for either individual or very small groups of students (up to 3) working together. These rooms are equipped with white boards, books, and other resources to support comprehension. For example, if a student fails a test, or consistently demonstrates a lack of understanding of a key concept, the student may be pulled out of the regular classroom in order to spend more intensive time on that key concept until they have mastered it. As the principal observed, “We do a lot of trial and error—pull in a.m., pull in afternoon- Saturday tutorial, whatever works for kids.” Saturday tutorials are used to support students who will be best served by this type of arrangement, as determined by individual student and family needs.

Critical Success Factor 2 - Use of Quality Data to Improve 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:

- Creating data walls
- Formative assessments

Creating data walls. Park Place, in concert with district leadership, has embedded data use deeply in the culture. Regular data analysis is a practice that is embraced school wide. This mindset has evolved over the past several years since Ms. Trinh became the principal. With the support of her district coach, Matilda Orozco, Ms. Trinh engaged the teaching staff to develop more sophisticated methods and practices focused on incorporating student data use into their teaching and leading practices. The staff created a “Data Wall” that includes daily snapshots of each individual student at the school and organizes students by tiers that are color coded to indicate achievement levels. All teachers monitor both school-level data and that of the individual students to whom they are assigned. The PLC monitors grade level data monthly. Data types include short-cycle assessments, unit pre-post tests, etc. Additionally, grade-level teams discuss student data regularly (once per week) and submit meeting notes to principal. During the PLC monthly meetings, teachers study and discuss the data walls and determine problem areas requiring additional focus.

Formative assessments. Park Place uses ongoing formative assessments in the form of “snapshots” that are taken every three weeks. Snapshots are formative assessments that are about 10-15 questions long and are designed to gauge how well students are mastering certain objectives. Teachers generate these questions. Park Place also uses weekly “quick assessments” every Friday so that they can go back and re-teach if students do not exhibit mastery. These assessments are teacher-created, purchased, or modified forms of open-source questions. Additionally, each teacher uses and maintains a binder that has individual student performance data linked to TEKS. These binders include the cumulative information generated from all types of ongoing assessments used by teachers to track individual student performance. Teachers

decide what data is most meaningful for them and can track fluency, comprehension, Lexile levels, Reading Counts points, and High Frequency Word Evaluation results (for 1st and 2nd grades). According to Ms. Trinh, “I do require that they have snapshots and district assessment data in the binder.”

Park Place also places a great deal of value on the use of teacher performance data. When it comes to providing and sharing data in the form of feedback to teachers about their performance, Ms. Trinh explains “principals must be transparent in the classroom.” The expectation is that all teachers know their hot spots or trouble areas, what their next steps are to remediate the places where they are challenged, and be able to ask for help and feedback from their colleagues.

Critical Success Factor 6 - School Climate

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

- Support inside and outside the campus for students
- Highlight positive behavior

Support inside and outside the campus for students. Park Place establishes goals for social as well as academic performance. They use Project CLASS, a social/interpersonal support system that describes specific steps students can take to “get the teacher’s attention, follow instructions, calm down, use kind words, accept no, and accept feedback.” Further, the school maintains a contract with the Houston Achievement Place who provides a counselor to meet with students in small groups once a week to help with these social skills. Students requiring this support are recommended by a teacher, parent, or school counselor. This program has been in place for many years and was originally put into place by a group of teachers that researched a program that would help Park Place meet its goals. The principal makes morning announcements to encourage use of Project CLASS and teachers post signs in their classrooms to remind students of the opportunity.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

“We highlight students who are doing great behaviorally – we have our Triple R student; Responsible, Respectful and Ready – these are general enough that teachers can cater to specific grade levels and need; they can define them even more. They used this as a gifted and talented expo. Students were identified on bulletin boards at school and get their picture taken; get a treat and parents know to look on bulletin board to see their child’s accomplishments. I recommend to teachers: you may have a student that will never be perfect, but we still need to recognize these students as well – ones that don’t think they could be a Triple R.”

– Principal Trinh

Highlight positive behavior. Teachers use the Triple R standard in their classrooms as the entire school highlights a Social Skill of the week. Moreover, as Ms. Trinh explains, teachers learn how to tailor their interventions to the context of a student’s behavior:

Our philosophy is we have to highlight the positive. When a child is having a meltdown for example, that is not the time to explain what they are doing wrong. This is when they need rescuing. When a person is drowning is not the time to teach them to swim. Once they are in a safer place and calm then we can discuss what they did wrong—what is causing them to disconnect from the lesson. We use word ‘consequence vs. punishment.’ We work on trying to replace negative behavior with a positive one.

Project Class is flexible enough to allow teachers to customize how they incorporate it into their classrooms. Often teachers have specific routines and rituals for setting the tone of their classroom. They are free to design their own approach based on their personality and what works best for them. According to Ms. Trinh, “We honor how our teachers function—how they will manage. They have social rules—they each have a ‘constitution.’ The rules are not the same but they do fall into the Triple R.”

Additionally, the school uses a schoolwide discipline plan developed two years ago by a teacher who, after attending training, tweaked the plan and brought it to the leadership team before the school year started. Under the plan, a teacher must be persistent in engaging parents when student behavior is challenging. For instance, a teacher must make contact with parents at least three times before a student is sent to the office.

Summary

Park Place is about celebrating students and their learning. Dr. Orozco captured the Park Place Elementary school spirit perfectly:

On any given day you can walk into this school and there will be some kind of celebration occurring that is related to student accomplishment and learning. At Park Place, the teachers and leaders recognize that students have difficult issues in their everyday lives (i.e., challenges at home) but there is an expectation that when students walk through the door they matter, teachers care, and students learn.

There is a team approach that cultivates engagement and stimulates achievement. Learning is central to this school across students, teacher, and leader levels. As one teacher put it, “At Park Place Elementary, we feel the culture of both the adults and students. It is a positive culture. I want to be here. People like each other, people work hard, expectations are set. At Park Place the expectations are clear, ‘We are not successful until every student has succeeded, no matter what it takes!’”

Case study conducted by Mary Ann Spracher, M.A., M.Ed.