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**TEXAS COMPREHENSIVE CENTER**

Advancing Research, Improving Education



**Reward Schools Case Study Project**  
**Pittsburg Intermediate**  
**Pittsburg ISD**

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## Introduction and Context

### A SNAPSHOT OF PITTSBURG INTERMEDIATE

#### 2013-2014 demographics:

- 370 students
- Grade span – 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup>
- 78% Economically Disadvantaged (i.e., students eligible to receive free or reduced price lunch)
- 9% English language learners
- 10% Special Education
- 11% Student mobility rate
- 43% White
- 37% Hispanic
- 16% African American
- 4% 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

Pittsburg Intermediate (PI) is located in East Texas, is in Pittsburg ISD, a rural district in Pittsburg, Texas. The school, nestled in a nice and quiet neighborhood, is an older red brick building that embodies cleanliness and pride for a campus well loved. Upon entry, one immediately feels the family friendly atmosphere with the greeting you receive. A trophy cabinet in the entry proudly displays the awards the school has won for meeting state accountability achievements.

PI's administrator, Sarah Richmond, has been in education for over 23 years and has served as principal for 11 years at PI. Todd Newman has been in education for over 20 years and has served as vice principal for 11 years at PI. Their long-standing leadership and commitment to student success has fostered a strong culture of teamwork across the campus. The school's motto, "It takes a team to educate a child," is evident in the way teachers work together and take responsibility for their students' successes. In addition to teamwork, school leaders at PI have a shared philosophy that serves as the catalyst for the work they do. This philosophy can be summarized as setting high expectations, working hard every day, and building strong, long-lasting relationships with all staff at the school, with parents, students, and the community. It is evident that this philosophy set forth by campus leaders is shared by everyone in the PI community – from teachers, to staff, to students, to parents. The steadfast belief in this philosophy across all levels of the school, coupled with the willingness to work as a team, contributes in great part to the PI's success.

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 PI:

- **Critical Success Factor 1: Academic Performance,**
- **Critical Success Factor 4: Increase Learning Time**
- **Critical Success Factor 5: Family and Community Engagement**

#### Critical Success Factor 1 - Academic Performance

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

- Following the campus plan
- Tracking student progress

**Following the campus plan.** At PI, improvement in academic performance is a continual, data-driven process rooted in high expectations. “It is an expectation that we live by every day and one that is guided by our campus plan,” stated Ms. Richmond. The campus improvement plan, while developed at the campus level, supports the district plan and expectations set forth at the district level—a commitment that all students will succeed. The campus plan is enacted through policies that encourage constant improvement and evolution. Ms. Richmond stated, “We consider it a living breathing process that requires constant and continuous attention. It is not a process or plan that we work on once a year and forget about. It helps guide what we do on our campus to help students succeed.”

District and campus leadership work collaboratively to ensure academic performance at PI is continually successful. Integral to this process is the accurate and timely dissemination of information. Pittsburg ISD Superintendent, Judy Pollan, credits Deputy Superintendent Beth Ann Dunavant for her excellence in sharing state-level information with all district staff and campuses. District leaders believe that well-informed teachers are empowered when they have knowledge of all the state requirements and expectations and – armed with that information – are then better equipped to work towards state and district goals.

The high expectations exhibited by district and campus leadership are passed on to students. PI teachers have high expectations for students and help students take an active role in their learning through relationships. “Our children know where they stand at all times. They don’t want to disappoint Ms. Richmond. They don’t want to disappoint Mr. Newman at any time,” stated a teacher.

The campus improvement plan at PI is both ongoing and scheduled, but never complete. While the campus improvement plan is integrated into the school’s daily routine, formal planning sessions are held twice a year. During these meetings, district and school leadership meet with community members, parents, and students to discuss school goals and make plans for campus improvement. According to Ms. Richmond, though, the campus improvement plan is “just a way of life. It is considered a living breathing process and document that is at the forefront every day.”

#### BEST PRACTICE

In both grade levels, and for every core subject, a teacher has a physical data board that highlights student performance, at a glance. These color-coded data boards divide students by ethnicity and grade level and allow for designations such as ESL and SPED. Teachers move a student across the dashboard based on their benchmark assessment performance. The data boards allow a teacher to see a student’s progress at any time and guides both instruction and intervention.

**Tracking student progress.** Teachers use an innovative “data board” system created by Erin Pate, Campus Director of Special Education and Intervention, to track school improvement and student progress (see callout box). Data boards encourage high expectations and accountability for student success. Students never see the data boards—Ms. Pate keeps them in her office—but they do see their own individual progress as a result of the tool.

Interventionists and teachers work together to help students progress along these data boards. One of the ways they accomplish this is through their intervention program. PI’s approach to intervention is indicative of the high expectations they have for students. Teachers express that intervention is not viewed as a punishment for students at PI, but rather as a reward and privilege. According to teachers, students want to participate in intervention and view it as an

opportunity to learn more and prepare for advanced classes in high school. Campus staff view intervention as a key component of the schools' success and they strive to get as many children in intervention as possible.

#### **Critical Success Factor 4 – Increase Learning Time**

The strategies the staff discussed to increase learning time within the campus were:

- Sharing strategies
- Providing individualized support
- Enrichment activities

**Sharing strategies.** Teachers work collaboratively and reinforce strategies across grade levels. To this end, teachers have access to lesson plans and strategies in the district's shared folder. Teachers are able to use this shared folder to find things that worked for past teachers or to share their own best practices. At PI, teachers believe in having a diverse group of curricula to get the job done and work to share across grade levels to improve student outcomes.

Teachers also convene in grade-level meetings several times a month. These planning meetings include the two grade-level teacher leads, an interventionist, and Ms. Richmond. The staff at PI is flexible to changes and works to provide needs-based improvements to curriculum and planning. If something is not working for their classroom, teachers have the support and confidence to make adjustments as needed.

**Providing individualized support.** As previously stated, interventions determine the direction of a student's increased learning time at PI. Interventionists work closely with classroom teachers to ensure they are reinforcing the concepts being taught in the classroom. All interventionists are experienced classroom teachers. School staff believes strongly in interventionists because of the importance they place on individual time with a teacher. These small intervention groups allow PI to extend classroom learning and provide individualized support. Teachers monitor student's progress using data from the data boards to determine when students would benefit from working with an interventionist. The data results determine the type of intervention and support that will be provided. Students are seen at various times throughout the day.

**Enrichment activities.** Ms. Richmond and staff also believe that integrating non-traditional learning through enrichment activities foster student's learning abilities. Many of the activities focus on health, history, and self-improvement and provide opportunities for students to shine. Out-of-town field trips are provided for educational purposes and offer students a chance to see other areas of the state. PI provides field trips to places such as the Holocaust and Ross Perot Museums in Dallas, and implements programs such as Hoops for Hearts, FitnessGram in PE, annual blood screening lab, an annual Work Hard Play Hard Day to celebrate students successes, and a luau allowing students to learn about the food, clothing and dance of the Hawaiian culture.

## Critical Success Factor 5 - Family and Community Engagement

Staff mentioned the following strategies they were using to improve family and community engagement:

- Share expectations
- Meeting outside the campus
- Inviting parents for academic discussions

**Shared expectations.** At PI, the school’s shared philosophy extends outside of the classroom and into the community. The importance of high expectations and relationships are just as critical outside the school as they are inside. Through informal and formal mechanisms, PI communicates with parents on a regular basis and in a variety of ways.

### IN THEIR OWN WORDS

“I think one of the great things this campus does is build relationships with each other. Parents trust this campus. They trust the leadership at this campus and the teachers.”

– Superintendent Pollan

**Meeting outside the campus.** Because the town of Pittsburg is a small community, parent involvement is very much a part of everyday life. Teachers sometimes will have a “conference” in the grocery store or will meet with 10-15 parents during a local baseball game. Teachers view these interactions favorably because they allow parents to get to know them and build relationships outside the classroom. Ms. Richmond believes parents feel free to talk to campus staff and that parents know she and her team are not “unreachable.”

**Inviting parents for academic discussions.** In addition to building these relationships, school leaders also create dedicated times for parents to come into the school to be involved in their students’ academic success. PI has a “Meet the Teacher” day before school begins for the year. In addition, PI has two days throughout the year for report card pickup. On these days, students get out of school early and teachers and administrators stay until 6:00 p.m. so parents can pick up report cards and talk with teachers. School leaders report a 90 percent parent turnout during these events. Finally, PI also hosts a community tailgate party, which serves as a fun way for parents and families to come out and get involved with the school. PI also utilizes technology to reach parents. The school uses “Texas Connect,” a program that allows parents to go online, look at grades, and see what work their child has submitted. Grades are put in weekly so parents are not surprised when report cards are released.

## Summary

Overall, exceptional leadership and support that begins with the superintendent, includes the principal and assistant principal, and embodies a shared commitment to student success characterize Pittsburg Intermediate School. PI teachers and administrators refuse to be complacent in their work and there is an expectation of continual improvement to not only meet standards, but to exceed them. They have a shared love for the wellbeing and success of the students, community and each other. Teachers and administrators interviewed continually stressed their shared philosophy of hard work, expectations, and relationships as key components of the schools culture. They all work exceptionally well together and see the school as a family and a way of life. It is evident that at all levels, the school’s belief in this

philosophy serves as a driving force behind their work. The teachers and administrators take pride in PI and the collegial and familial atmosphere shared by all contribute to the school's success. Finally, campus staff recognize that achieving student success has been a challenge, but maintaining it will be an even bigger challenge.

Ms. Richmond is extremely proud of the campus, her team, which she considers her extended family, the success of the students, the support she receives from the district and the state recognition they have received for meeting and exceeding standards.