

2015–2016 Reward Schools Case Study Report Lancaster Elementary School

Lancaster Independent School District, Region 10

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Acknowledgments

This report is part of a series of publications produced in 2016–17 about seven Reward School campuses that participated in a case study project. This report was developed with collaboration from the Texas Comprehensive Center (TXCC) at American Institutes for Research, Texas Education Agency (TEA), and the Texas Center for District and School Support (TCDSS) at the Education Service Center (ESC) at Region 13. The following staff collaborated on this project: Mark Baxter (TEA), Deborah Brennan (TCDSS), Grace Fleming (TXCC), Lisa Gonzales (TEA), Allison Ivey (TCDSS), Angelica Herrera (TXCC), Cody Huie (TCDSS), Barry Link (TCDSS), CoCo Massengale (TXCC), Anne Post (ESC Region 16), and Trent Sharp (TXCC). For additional information about the case study project, please contact Lisa Gonzales at Lisa.Gonzales@tea.texas.gov.

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Overview of the Reward Schools Case Studies Project

The state of Texas is home to more than 5 million primary and secondary public school students. From districts in major urban centers such as Houston and Dallas to those in rural areas far from cities, Texas Education Agency (TEA) serves schools and students of all backgrounds. Similar to schools across the country, many Texas schools face difficult circumstances, including poverty and high rates of student mobility. Schools that receive Title I funding are especially likely to face these and other challenges. The objective of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) is for the U.S. Department of Education to help address the greater educational challenges facing high-poverty communities by targeting additional resources to school districts and schools with high concentrations of poverty (ESEA of 1965). Decades of research have shown that poverty has a strong and negative impact on student academic performance (Arnold & Doctoroff, 2003; Herbers et al., 2012).

Despite significant obstacles, 6 percent of Title I public schools in Texas have gone beyond meeting state standards to earning the distinction of Reward School status. Reward Schools share many similarities with low-performing schools in terms of student socioeconomic status and other demographic characteristics. However, Reward Schools have implemented practices that have allowed the schools to overcome these challenges and become high-performing learning institutions. TEA and the Texas Comprehensive Center (TXCC) developed an initiative in 2014–15 to implement a best practices case study project with the goal of recognizing the extraordinary accomplishments of Reward Schools and providing an opportunity for them to share their success stories with the state and other local educational agencies.

When the project began in 2014–15, eleven schools participated as case study sites (TEA, 2015). In 2015–16, seven new schools were selected to participate in the project. The purpose of this report is to present the findings from one of the seven newly participating schools. In addition to staff from TEA and TXCC, staff from the Texas Center for District and School Support (TCDSS) at Region 13 Education Service Center (ESC) joined the project and assisted with the fieldwork at the case study schools. TCDSS representatives also interviewed or videotaped school staff and students from three of the participating Reward School case study sites.¹

This report presents the findings from Lancaster Elementary School in Region 10. The report details the systems and structures Lancaster Elementary employs to increase learning time, leadership effectiveness, and teacher quality as well the ways Lancaster Independent School District (ISD) supports the school in its efforts. For more details about the 2015–16 Reward Schools Case Studies Project, including the methodology the team used to conduct the case studies, aggregate findings from the analysis of data from the seven participating schools, with all seven Texas Accountability Intervention System critical success factors (CSFs) represented, please refer to the *2015–16 Reward Schools Statewide Report*.² The Statewide Report also includes the findings from the analysis of the aggregated student interview and school climate walkthrough data, which are not presented here because of the small sample size and potential breach of student confidentiality.

¹ Clips from the videos are available at <http://www.taisresources.net>. They are under the heading “Critical Success Factors” and are titled “Teacher Quality,” “Academic Performance,” “School Climate,” and “Quality Data to Drive Instruction.”

² The *2015–16 Reward Schools Statewide Report* is available at [\[insert URL here\]](#)

Snapshot of the Lancaster Elementary School

2014–15 demographics:

- 585 students
- Grade span: PK–5th grade
- 89% economically disadvantaged (i.e., students eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunch)
- 3% English language learners
- 2% special education
- 25% student mobility rate
- 79% African American
- 17% Hispanic
- 4% other ethnicity

In 2014–15, the state accountability ratings for the school were:

- Met standard
- Distinction designations in academic achievement in reading/English language arts, academic achievement in science, postsecondary readiness, and Top 25 percent in closing performance gaps

Overview of Lancaster Elementary School

Lancaster Elementary School is located in central Lancaster, Texas, in the southwest portion of Dallas County. The elementary school is part of the Lancaster ISD, supported by ESC Region 10. For the past several years, Lancaster Elementary has met state accountability standards (i.e., earned the designation “met standard”) and earned distinction designations in core subjects and other school improvement areas. For example, in 2013–14, the school met five out of six distinctions, including academic achievement in both reading and mathematics, as well as recognition for being in the top 25 percent of Texas schools for both student progress and closing performance gaps. The snapshot on this page shows the school’s 2014–15 distinctions, along with detailed demographic data.

The research team visited Lancaster in mid-February 2016, spending two days at the school conducting one-on-one interviews with the principal, district support staff, and nine students. In addition, select teaching staff from Grades 2 through 5 participated in hour-long focus groups in which they shared stories and best practices from their school. The research team also conducted a walkthrough of the premises, which focused on the positive learning environment created at Lancaster Elementary.

This report presents the results from the qualitative analyses of the principal and district staff interviews as well as the teacher focus groups. The three CSFs highlighted in this case study (Leadership Effectiveness, Increased Learning Time, and Teacher Quality) guided the data analysis, and this report presents the findings in terms of these three CSFs. To maintain the participants’ privacy and confidentiality, participants are not named.

Critical Success Factor 3: Leadership Effectiveness

Research has shown that, of the school-level factors linked to student achievement, the impact of school leadership is second only to classroom instruction (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Existing literature on principal leadership effectiveness emphasizes the importance of uniting instructional staff and the greater school community around a common vision that supports stakeholders’ understanding of the school’s purpose to generate coherence for schoolwide programming (Lambert, 2002). In addition, sharing leadership responsibilities with staff is one way principals can build trust, buy-in, and commitment to community at their schools and create a culture that sustains best practices even in the face of administrative changes (Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). Effective principal communication with staff can create a collaborative environment

for instructional learning, support a healthy school climate, and ultimately bolster student achievement (Cosner, 2011). During the site visit, participants in interviews and focus groups discussed leadership effectiveness in the following ways:

- Uniting under a common vision,
- Sharing leadership responsibilities, and
- Communicating with staff.

This section includes data from the interviews and focus groups shared with the research team while on-site that illustrate ways leadership effectiveness is demonstrated at Lancaster Elementary.

Common Vision

At Lancaster Elementary, the school’s mission can be seen in the hallways and on classroom walls: *“We will be exemplary!”* The school day begins with the principal, over the intercom, encouraging students to do their best and be the best. This rhetoric was echoed in the focus groups and interviews the research team conducted on-site. When one teacher focus group was asked to articulate the single goal the school was working toward, teachers responded simultaneously *“Being the best!”* One teacher called the attitude of achievement at Lancaster *“contagious”* and reported telling students before each exam, *“You are going to be the best.”* Interviewees described this attitude as a top-down process: The principal believes in her instructors, the teachers believe in their students, and the students believe in themselves.

Shared Responsibilities

At Lancaster, the principal relies on frequent collaboration with her leadership team to share the major responsibilities associated with schoolwide instructional decision making. The leadership team is made up of the principal, the assistant principal, and subject area experts in mathematics, reading, and science. The team meets weekly to examine student data, make staffing decisions, and generally debrief on the week’s events. At least one member of the leadership team is present at every vertical and horizontal alignment meeting that takes place, even if the principal cannot attend.

Although the small leadership team assists the principal in major decision making and in guiding instructional improvement, all teachers have the ability to pursue leadership at the school level. Teachers sign up for a minimum of two committees—everything from grant writing to technology—at the beginning of the school year. One interviewee described how these committees parlay into leadership opportunities: *“We have a STEM [science, technology, engineering, and mathematics] advisory committee. We have a special events*

Best Practice: Common Vision

“Across the board, the expectations being set so high, I feel like the kids have high expectations for themselves, teachers have high expectations, master teachers have high expectations, and so does administration. I just feel like across the board, everybody has this standard set high and that we’re all willing to meet it. That’s why I feel like we’re successful.”

–Teacher

committee. Within that, we have to have chairs for those committees.” Only classroom teachers are eligible to chair schoolwide committees; members of the leadership team cannot serve as committee chairs or be nominated for teacher recognition awards. These restrictions are in place, according to one interviewee, *“because we really need to let the teachers shine.”* The culture of achievement and the ample opportunities to grow as a leader have yielded highly successful teachers. Many instructors at Lancaster are master teachers, and several are certified for school administration. One interviewee pointed to the low teacher turnover rate at the school, saying that when teachers do leave, it is to pursue leadership positions elsewhere. The number of Lancaster teachers who are qualified for leadership positions is a testament to the culture the current leadership has created through mentorship and opportunities to assume positions of authority at the school level.

Communication With Staff

At Lancaster Elementary, frequent opportunities for instructional staff to meet and collaborate with school leadership allow for a spirit of open communication throughout the school. The principal delivers a “state of the campus” address twice a year with all staff present, but all-staff meetings are relatively infrequent. Instead, teachers participate in weekly “cluster” meetings, which serve as professional development, collaboration opportunities, and small group time with members of the leadership. This frequent interaction has fostered a spirit of open communication. As one teacher summarized, the administration has *“an open door policy. Anybody on the leadership team you feel like you need to talk to you, you can talk to them.”* Another interviewee echoed this sentiment: *“We know everybody’s role, but we all feel like we have input.”* Since all members of the leadership team are master teachers, cluster meetings are opportunities for instructional staff to learn from pedagogical experts. The interviews also revealed that teachers trust school leadership to understand their work: *“We have a true instructional leader. I’ve worked with principals who I’ve gone to and said, ‘Hey, I’m having a problem with place values; can you come and show me?’ It’s like ‘Um, what I’m going to do is I’m going to get someone to come in.’ If I was to go to [the principal], she will come right in. I think she’s a true teacher’s teacher. She understands how we feel.”*

The data collected during the site visit continually reinforced that the administration at Lancaster Elementary employs an effective leadership model. Interview and focus group participants were quick to attribute the school’s success to the dedication of its administration, with one interviewee calling the principal *“a seasoned leader. She was a master teacher and supported the previous principal*

Best Practice: Communication

“It’s very rare that you’ll find a campus that everybody connects. It’s not like [the principal] has to walk on eggshells and say, ‘This needs to be corrected.’ I believe with our personalities, most people mesh pretty well. [The principal] is able to just communicate.”

–Teacher

here. She's been working with the staff, working with the former principal that was here. She knows where she is, she knows the staff, she knows the parents, she knows that." Beyond qualifications and the confidence the principal inspires in instructional staff, the principal also makes a concerted effort to create opportunities for teachers to take the initiative and develop as leaders. The principal has established an open culture in which staff can share successes, challenges, and concerns through multiple channels, perhaps best exemplified through weekly cluster meetings. Finally, data collected from the site visit reinforce the findings that the principal, teaching staff, and students are united under a common vision: to be the best.

Critical Success Factor 4: Increase Learning Time

Current research concludes that uninterrupted blocks of learning time are critical for student academic success; schools should avoid “fragmented instructional time” so they can optimize student learning (Canady & Rettig, 2008). As shown in the literature, increasing academic learning time for students is correlated with increased student achievement and is a critical component of a healthy school (Gettinger & Seibert, 2002). Research has shown that afterschool and extended-day learning programs—especially those that provide students with opportunities to learn or practice new skills experientially—have a positive impact on academic achievement for low-performing students (Little, Wimer, & Weiss, 2008). The interviews and focus groups detailed two ways Lancaster Elementary has increased learning time:

- Developing a modified schedule and
- Providing learning opportunities beyond the school day.

This section includes data from the interviews and focus groups shared with the research team while its members were on-site that illustrate the ways Lancaster Elementary has increased learning time for its students.

Modified Schedule

The Lancaster leadership has built a daily schedule that minimizes disruption of core content: *“The students leave; they go to specials³ for 50 minutes. As soon as they're picked up from specials, they go straight through the lunch line, or vice versa...They'll do a bathroom break before or a bathroom break after. They're not coming out for a*

³ “Specials” refer to school subjects beyond core assessment content (such as mathematics, reading, and science), and may include art, music, physical education, foreign language, and computer technology.

Best Practice: Modified Schedule

“We try not to do any interruption in core content, like reading and math. We look at where those are placed in the day... For the upper grade levels, we try to do all of their [reading and mathematics] teaching prior to 12:00 or 1:00—prior to their lunch time.”

—Principal

bathroom break. They're not coming out for specials. You can lose so much time just in those transitions alone." The current Lancaster schedule was developed after building staff noticed student data were lagging in core content when the students were receiving instruction after lunch. Staff concluded that their students needed core instruction while they were most alert: *"[If] we can just get through those core contents, especially reading, especially [in] the lower grades, that's so critical."* Interviewees reported that modifying the schedule has led to gains in student achievement across the core subject areas of mathematics, reading, and science.

Learning Opportunities Beyond the School Day

At Lancaster Elementary, all teachers participate in an afterschool tutoring program in which an upper-grade teacher is paired with a lower-grade teacher—"accountability partners"—to meet the needs of students at all levels in tutoring interventions. In addition to yearlong afterschool tutoring, Saturday school supplements intervention for students in the lower performance tiers, as determined by their outcome data. Interviewed staff also mentioned state-mandated summer programs for older students: *"We have a summer bridge program ... for those kids who don't do well on STAAR [State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness]"*—as well as an early start program to acclimate prekindergarten students and prepare them for regular schooling.

The data collected during the site visit reveal several methods Lancaster ISD and Lancaster Elementary employ to provide their student populations with increased learning time. Most notably, the school relies on student data to modify the daily schedule in a way that optimizes student learning. The school also provides additional instruction through tiered interventions: Students have access to afterschool tutoring, Saturday school, and summer programs. These efforts afford students numerous opportunities to increase their exposure to direct instruction, contributing to the overall high student achievement at Lancaster Elementary.

Critical Success Factor 7: Teacher Quality

Classroom instruction is the school-level factor with the greatest impact on student achievement (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Recent literature on the topic of teacher quality asserts that the most successful schools attract effective teachers, and the leadership thoughtfully assigns new teachers to appropriate students and classes (Loeb, Kalogrides, & Bêteille, 2012). According to the research, the most effective professional development opportunities for teachers focus on content knowledge and incorporate active learning strategies (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001). Analysis of site-visit data indicates that Lancaster Elementary establishes and maintains teacher quality through two primary practices:

- Hiring and onboarding for new staff and
- Professional development.

This section includes data from the interviews and focus groups shared with the research team that demonstrates the ways Lancaster Elementary has worked to hire and develop quality instructors.

Hiring and Onboarding for New Staff

The interviews with Lancaster Elementary staff provide an outline of the school's selective hiring practices as well as its immersive onboarding process. When the school has a teaching vacancy, the leadership actively recruits qualified instructors, *"I reach out to universities, especially the University of North Texas. They have a great teachers' program. I call them.... I'm recruiting. I want to see those university-trained teachers first."* Although finding well-qualified teachers is a priority, the school leadership emphasized the ultimate importance of finding instructors who already embody the culture at Lancaster Elementary: *"I'm looking for passion, not passiveness."* Interviewed respondents acknowledge that they have a student body population that faces many challenges, and when they go to fill a new position, they look for someone who is *"not going to be too timid or too shy to step into [the] role."* Successful candidates are adept classroom managers with a passion for instruction.

After new teachers are hired at Lancaster Elementary, they take part in an extensive onboarding process, which includes their assignment to a more experienced accountability partner, a process in which the school pairs *"a lower grade-level teacher who is very well-versed in training and teaching students how to read with the upper grade-level reading teachers, so they do tutoring together. It also builds capacity in that teacher."* New hires are given several weeks to acclimate to the school culture and develop relationships with their colleagues because the administration feels that *"without the relationship piece there, anything you do, it's just not going to be productive. We spend a lot of time developing the relationships, coaching teachers, letting them go out of their classrooms to sit in the other teachers' classrooms, just to see what is it that we do."* Several new teachers participating in the February focus groups spoke to the collaborative nature of the school's onboarding process. One said, *"I think when we came in, [the current teaching staff] welcomed us.... Anything we needed, they supported us. That's not even just them. We've gotten support from anyone. Everybody is very, very willing to help, and I think that makes the environment way better."* In taking the time to thoroughly onboard new hires, Lancaster Elementary has found a process that both preserves and strengthens teacher quality.

Coaching and Modeling

At Lancaster Elementary, master teachers model instructional strategies for instructional staff—a system all interviewed stakeholders reported as engaging and effective. The relationship

Best Practice: Onboarding

"We spend a lot of time developing the relationships, coaching teachers, letting them go out of their classrooms to sit in the other teachers' classrooms, just to see what is it that we do."

—Principal

Best Practice: Modeling

"I remember the first part of the school [year] and I was struggling with implementing the way they wanted to do stations. [One of the master teachers] came in for two days and she sat down with me and she actually modeled. She said, 'We're going to do this.' She sat in there with me and then watched me for a day to make sure I felt comfortable."

—Teacher

between master teachers and regular instructional staff (some of whom are master teachers themselves) is one of trust, built by frequent opportunities for collaboration during cluster meetings. As one interviewee said, the staff experiences “a lot of modeling. That’s what cluster is for.” Modeling goes beyond group instruction; instructional staff also receive one-on-one support from their master teachers. One teacher’s comment exemplified the general attitude toward this trust-based modeling strategy: “Our master teacher, she’s always walking. So if you’ve ever up teaching something you can always say, ‘Hey, help me with this,’ and she’s automatically in there. She’s really hands on. That’s how we get a lot of our coaching. She plans with us. Tells us exactly what’s expected for the week as we make our plans and so forth. If you’re ever confused about it, it’s just a matter of saying, ‘Hey, I need you to come in real quick and show this.’ She’s always available to be there and help us and support us with whatever we’re struggling with.” Interviewed staff attributed the quality of Lancaster Elementary’s teaching staff to this attitude of collaboration embodied by the modeling system in place at the school.

The data collected during the site visit indicate a schoolwide commitment to cultivating and developing teachers of quality. This process starts at the administrative level in a highly selective hiring process that emphasizes a culture fit—first and foremost. The leadership takes extreme care to onboard new staff, allowing ample time for new hires to acclimate to Lancaster Elementary’s unique culture. Beyond their first year, instructors continue to have access to both group and one-on-one coaching from master teachers, who model and observe lessons. As a result, as one interviewee stated, Lancaster “students are succeeding. When you look at the demographics, when you look at [the students] on paper, they’re not supposed to be doing what they’re doing. Just all of the hard work that the teachers are pouring into this; we’re seeing the fruits of that labor. That’s what I’m most proud of.” Staff at Lancaster Elementary are dedicated to cultivating innovative and effective teaching practices, making Teacher Quality one of the most potent CSFs contributing to the school’s success.

District Support

In addition to the interviews and focus groups conducted with building staff and students, the research team interviewed a Lancaster ISD staff member to learn about the relationship between Lancaster Elementary and the district. Lancaster ISD is made up of seven elementary schools, two middle schools, and one high school. In both 2014 and 2015, all the schools in the district met state accountability standards. Data from the February site visits indicate that Lancaster ISD provides a variety of supports directly to Lancaster Elementary. Although the offered supports are many and varied, interview data suggest the district has been particularly helpful in supporting the school’s success in the following areas:

- Family and community engagement and
- Teacher quality

This section includes data from the interviews and focus groups during the research team’s on-site visit. The data are intended to illustrate the ways Lancaster ISD supports Lancaster Elementary’s efforts to engage students’ families and the surrounding community, as well as to support the professional development of quality teachers.

District Support for Family and Community Engagement

One of the most significant ways Lancaster ISD supports Lancaster Elementary and other schools in the district is through engaging families and community members. Lancaster ISD is focused on cultivating partnerships with members of the community to support the schools in a variety of ways: *“We’re making sure that the people in Lancaster and in surrounding areas can see how they can help us instead of going in and asking, ‘Could you give us money?’ That’s not always what we need.”* For example, the district has established a relationship with a local society of Black engineers so that students can learn from and see other “people like them” in STEM positions. Lancaster ISD also hosts culturally relevant districtwide events to engage students and their families. At the time of the February site visit, the district had just concluded the Hispanic History Heritage Bowl and was gearing up for the Black History Bowl. These districtwide competitions celebrate student learning and provide free programming for families.

District Support for Teacher Quality

Study participants frequently described the various supports Lancaster ISD offers to teachers to improve instruction and pursue professional development opportunities. Staff at Lancaster Elementary described the accessibility of district staff with whom they frequently interact. Teachers reach out to district staff for resources, and one teacher said, *“You have partners [in the district]... You see everybody. There’s always the notes on e-mail. I haven’t seen anybody that won’t call you back.”* District staff also conduct frequent walkthroughs to inform districtwide professional development. Lancaster staff reported that they are often encouraged to share best practices with their peers on other campuses at districtwide training and events.

Summary

According to interview and focus group participants, Lancaster ISD provides the resources and supports the school needs to be successful. In addition to the district’s dedication to developing strong community partnerships and engaging families, the principal and teachers participate in districtwide professional development and have opportunities to share the best practices and successes across the district. This support from the district, along with strong, effective leadership; increased learning time for the student body; and a commitment to hiring and retaining teachers of exceptional quality, all contribute to the extraordinary achievements of Lancaster Elementary School. The dedicated building staff and larger community have cultivated a unique culture of achievement and collaboration, earning Lancaster Elementary the recognition of a Reward School.

Best Practice: District Support

“We’re making sure that the people in Lancaster and in surrounding areas can see how they can help us.... Making those partnerships ensures that even if we don’t have the dollars behind it, we have the people resource. The people resource will help us.”

–District staff member

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