2015–16 Reward Schools Case Study Report
Vista Del Futuro Elementary School

Burnham Wood Charter School District, Region 19

November 2016

Acknowledgments

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, the 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 the Region 13 Education Service Center (ESC) joined the project and assisted with the fieldwork at the case study schools. TCDSS representatives also interviewed and videotaped school staff and students at three of the participating Reward School case study sites.[1]

This report presents the findings from Vista Del Futuro Elementary School in Region 19. The report details the systems and structures Vista Del Futuro Elementary uses to apply quality data to drive instruction, improve school climate, and improve leadership effectiveness. It also describes the ways Burnham Wood Charter School District supports the school in its efforts. For more details about the 2015–16 Reward Schools Case Studies Project, including aggregate findings of the analysis 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.[3]

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[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 "Use of Quality Data to Drive Instruction."

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

[3] Because of the small sample size of student participants and data gathered using the school walkthrough tool, the results of the analyses of the student interviews and school walkthrough appear in aggregate form in the *2015–16 Reward Schools Statewide Report.* School-level results are not included.

Overview of Vista Del Futuro Elementary School

Vista Del Futuro Elementary School is located on the east side of El Paso, Texas, where Region 19 ESC provides support to the school. Vista Del Futuro is part of the Burnham Wood Charter School District. From 2011 through 2013, Vista Del Futuro was a low-performing school that was rated "academically unacceptable" by TEA. However, since then, the school has improved dramatically. Vista Del Futuro Elementary School regularly achieves state expectations for the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) tests. For the past several years, Vista Del Futuro 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 2014–15 the school met four out of six distinctions, including academic achievement in reading, as well as recognition for being in the top 25 percent of Texas schools for both student progress and closing performance gaps. The school snapshot (left) shows the school's 2014–15 distinctions, along with detailed demographic data.

The research team visited Vista Del Futuro in February 2016 and spent two days at the school interviewing a staff member from the district central office and the principal. The team also conducted two focus groups with teachers from second to fifth grades representing multiple subjects. The focus groups lasted about an hour, and teachers shared stories and best practices from their school. Team members interviewed ten students from second through fifth grade and conducted a school walkthrough.

This report presents the results of the qualitative analyses of the interviews with the district staffer and the principal, as well as the two teacher focus groups. The analysis captured information about the CSFs highlighted in this case study (Use of Quality Data to Drive Instruction, School Climate, and Leadership Effectiveness). To show how the Burnham Wood Charter School District supports Vista Del Futuro Elementary School, findings from an analysis of the district staff interview are presented at the end of the report, as is a summary of the case study of Vista Del Futuro Elementary School. To maintain the participants' privacy and confidentiality, participants are not named.

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

Teachers and school staff using quality data to make instructional decisions can lead to improved student performance (Wayman, 2005; Wayman, Cho, & Johnston, 2007). This CSF emphasizes the effective use of multiple sources of disaggregated student data. The transcripts from the principal and staff interviews and teacher focus groups provide evidence of the CSF occurring in the following areas:

- Data use expectations;
- Classroom and schoolwide data use; and
- Data sources and variety.

This section includes the results of the qualitative data analysis as well as direct quotations from the interviews and focus groups shared with the research team while it was on-site. The data are intended to illustrate the ways Use of Quality Data to Drive Instruction is demonstrated at Vista Del Futuro.

Data Use Expectations

All of the staff interviewed spoke often of the principal's high expectations for teachers to collect, review, analyze, and continuously use student data to inform and modify instructional practices. The principal and teachers described trainings the principal provides to share her expectations for teachers to use data to modify their instruction and to teach the method the school uses to collect, review, and analyze student data. Vista Del Futuro teachers use an Excel file they can access online or print out on paper. The principal requires teachers to complete the Excel spreadsheet and turn it in to her on a weekly basis for all of the students in their class. The spreadsheet includes student performance on benchmark and unit exams. Teachers use the Excel file to track and monitor student performance. Lead teachers also provide regular support and assistance to new teachers in helping them learn to use and interpret the Excel file. The research team found that at Vista Del Futuro, ongoing collection, review, and analysis of student data was an integrated part of the school culture.

Classroom and Schoolwide Data Use

Teachers at Vista Del Futuro Elementary School discussed using student data in their classrooms to identify students who are struggling and those who are performing at an advanced level—

> **Best Practice: Spreadsheets**
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> *"We do collect and review student data for every unit test that we take. We were required to create data sheets for students, and then once we see them we are able to go back to the TEKS [Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills] that we are struggling with."*
>
> –Teacher

and consequently to differentiate instruction. All of the teachers who participated in the focus groups discussed how they review and analyze the student data collected in the Excel spreadsheet to identify and meet students' needs. Based on the data found on the spreadsheet, one teacher said, *"We do pull students out during the day, so that is really easily done; but if it's in class, we can, of course, group students with the higher kids so they feed off of each other. They help each other out a lot."*

The teachers discussed how they review the data to see which items the students answered correctly or incorrectly. Depending on the number of students who answered incorrectly, the teacher either reteaches the item's concept to the entire class by using a different modality; or, if only a few students missed the item, the teacher uses small-group instruction or tutoring. Teachers mentioned how they use the Excel spreadsheet to group students, and, depending on their grouping, the school provides students with targeted interventions. Students who failed a unit exam or are at risk of failing receive tutoring after school and on Saturdays.

In addition to in-class tutoring and targeted student interventions, Vista Del Futuro has a schoolwide reading program for students in first through sixth grade. This is a specialized class that takes place from 8:00 a.m. to 8:45 a.m., Monday through Friday. All first-through sixth-grade classrooms are dedicated to the reading mastery program, and students go to a particular classroom depending on their performance on a reading assessment, including unit exams or reading diagnostic tests, such as the TPRI™ early reading assessments for first and second grade. Depending on their reading performance, students move up or down a level in the reading mastery class and change classrooms for their level. Changes can happen several times during the year.

Data Sources and Variety

Research shows that is not necessarily the amount of data used to make decisions to improve instruction and learning but rather how the information is used (Hamilton, et al., 2009). Ongoing communication of data with others provides the greatest opportunity for data to have a positive impact on student learning outcomes. The principal and teachers at Vista Del Futuro discussed how staff review and interpret a variety of student data on a regular basis, including during the teachers' professional learning communities and grade-level meetings. The principal also reviews the data on a weekly basis. She meets with the lead teachers and, as needed, the teacher teams *"to review and then we go over what exactly are we going to do, how are we going to address the TEKs that are needing address."* The principal also mentioned how the teachers and school staff collect nonacademic data from students, including daily attendance, notes

from parent-teacher conferences, response to intervention forms, and discipline data.

From the interviews, it was evident that the Vista Del Futuro principal and staff are expected to use a variety of student data to drive instruction. Teachers are able to meet this expectation because the school culture and systems facilitate the collection, review, analysis, and interpretation of the data. The school provides tools, such as the Excel file, trainings, and also support from the lead teachers, principal, and the district curriculum specialist to ensure that all teachers use student data to inform instruction and the school meets student needs.

Critical Success Factor 6: School Climate

As shown in the literature, school climate is a critical component of a healthy school (MacNeil, Prater, & Busch, 2009). Focusing on the development of a campus climate as a learning environment is fundamental to improving teacher morale and student achievement (Lassen, Steele, & Sailor, 2006). Indicators of a positive school climate are increased attendance, reduced discipline referrals, and student participation in extracurricular activities (Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011). During the research team's site visit to Vista Del Futuro, the principal, teachers, and staff discussed school climate in two areas:

- Expectations for student behavior and
- Trusting relationships.

This section includes the results of the qualitative data analysis as well as direct quotations from the interviews and focus groups shared with the research team while it was on-site. The data are intended to illustrate the ways a positive school climate is demonstrated at Vista Del Futuro.

Expectations for Student Behavior

Vista Del Futuro Elementary School uses positive behavior strategies with students and a self-reflection planning (SRP) protocol, in which students reflect and discuss negative behavior and their responses to the SRP with their teacher and—depending on the severity of an incident—possibly the principal and their parents. A teacher said of the SRP, *"Students do misbehave or miss an assignment, or they are doing something not appropriate in the classroom.… The way the questions in the SRP have been, it's a reflection upon themselves, so they could go and rectify what they did wrong."* Part of the SRP process involves students discussing their behavior with each other, the principal, or the teacher facilitating the discussion. The principal

Best Practice: Expectations for Student Behavior

"Of course, we are always going to have those children that don't conform; they have a lot of difficulty, but we work with them. Here it's not a matter of, 'Okay you're going to sack [in-school suspension]' because we have no sack. It's working things out, calling the parents in, making sure that they're a part of the solution and not part of the problem. We have parents come in; we discuss it with them and the children."

–Principal

and teachers believe the discussions allow the students to resolve their issues with each other because they are given the space and tool (SRP) to articulate their feelings and attempt to understand other students' perspectives and feelings.

The principal and teachers also discussed using rewards, such as praise, treasure boxes, field trips, and free time, to manage student behavior. The teachers discussed how rewards motivate their students to meet classroom behavioral expectations. For example, one teacher said that free computer time is a good motivator for her third-grade students. Another teacher mentioned *"rewards and just recognizing [good behavior]. All students need is praise. All they need is the 'You know what, that is so good.'"*

Trusting Relationships

The principals and teachers at Vista Del Futuro mentioned many instances of positive, trusting relationships between the staff and students and among the staff. Many participants said they feel the school climate is positive because of these trusting relationships. One teacher described how he makes an effort to develop positive relationships with his students and their parents by making his classroom warm and welcoming and by being accessible to parents by providing them with his e-mail address and phone number. Another teacher said, *"I want to get to know the students individually in the beginning of the year, so it's a lot of open discussion right away. 'How do you show respect, and what do you think respect looks like? And how would you show that to somebody else that was in trouble or need of help?'"* Another teacher explained that all of the teachers know all of the students' names at the school, *"I teach only the fifth and sixth grade, but I could probably tell you all the kindergarten and all the first graders' [names]."*

The trusting relationships at the school extend to those among the staff. The principal described how she purposely fosters trusting relationships by recognizing teachers for their work (e.g., Teacher of the Month), having an open-door policy in which teachers and staff can meet with her at any time to discuss their concerns and by organizing social events for the staff, such as potluck lunches. The principal reported that these structures lead to positive relationships among the staff. The teachers in the focus group agreed with the principal about the trusting relationships they have with each other and the principal. One teacher said, *"I think we are more of a family— more than colleagues to each other, inside and out of school. I think [the principal] has really set that foundation, and she brings us closer together. We have our meetings; not only do we sit per grade level, but we all know each other really well. It's a really a team effort."* The teachers discussed the principal's open-door policy and how they view

her as supportive of their work and needs. One teacher said, *"As we create that comfortable environment for the students, she creates that for the teachers."*

From the interviews with the research team, it was evident that the Vista Del Futuro principal and staff are diligent in developing and maintaining a positive school climate. The structures and procedures in place—including the student SRP, the warm and welcoming environment in the school, trusting relationships between staff and students, and trusting relationships among staff—have created a positive school climate.

Critical Success Factor 3: Leadership Effectiveness

The final CSF the team found strong evidence of is Leadership Effectiveness. Research has shown that, of the school-level factors linked to student achievement, school leadership is second only to classroom instruction in having an impact on student achievement (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). The teachers and district staff interviewed often spoke of their principal as an effective leader. The reasons they provided as to why the principal is an effective leader centered on the following two factors:

- Shared responsibilities and
- Communication.

This section includes the results of the qualitative data analyses as well as direct quotations from the research team's on-site interviews and focus groups. The data are intended to illustrate the ways effective leadership is demonstrated at Vista Del Futuro.

Shared Responsibilities

The principal and staff discussed how tasks and leadership roles are distributed at the school—in particular how they relate to developing resources for certain content areas. The principal described the process by which staff share responsibility: *"We picked the lead teachers to work with me. We reviewed the [curriculum] materials, cut them down to selections, and we had all the teachers at that grade level review them."* A teacher discussed how teachers at every grade level take on the responsibility of developing resources and materials for a particular content area. They then share those resources with the other grade-level teachers. As the teachers discussed, it seems that the shared responsibilities are a part of the accountability teachers feel they have to each other and toward improving their students' learning. One teacher said, *"If one of us doesn't do what we need to do, we affect the other grades. I think everybody affects everybody."*

> **Best Practice: Shared Responsibilities**
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> *"So we [teachers] broke it down between the teachers, a teacher would do reading and a teacher would do science. So that way your focus is on that area. So you're able to explore more in depth and you're able to research more into 'we can do this, we can do that. I can look at Pinterest, and you share that idea.' Then they can do the same for the other [content] areas."*
>
> –Teacher

Another structure at Vista Del Futuro related to sharing leadership responsibilities involves the Campus Improvement Team, which allows staff to lead certain schoolwide activities, including fundraising or tending the school garden. The Campus Improvement Team meets monthly and includes the principal, a teacher, a parent, and a member of the community. One teacher said, *"The campus improvement team focuses on two things: how to better improve the communication between parents and how to better improve the school, especially with fundraisers, bringing back the library again, how we can do that too, or the playground."*

Communication

Another factor linked to Leadership Effectiveness is the frequent and ongoing communication the principal has with the school staff, students, and families. The communication occurs through faculty meetings, horizontal and vertical team meetings, e-mails, newsletters, and informally through conversations. All of the teachers mentioned that the principal always walks in the hallways and checks in with staff and students. The teachers said they feel the principal is not micromanaging them but rather encouraging them to be independent and aware of her support and commitment in helping teachers be effective. One teacher said, *"She really does make it known in the meetings, 'I'm not here to reprimand you…. I'm here to help you with whatever you need.'"* Another teacher discussed how the principal's communication is always clear: *"She will tell you exactly what she needs from you."*

From the team's interviews, it was evident that the Vista Del Futuro principal is an effective school leader. By her ongoing and clear communication using multiple methods (e.g., informal conversations and formal mechanisms such as meetings), she is effective in communicating her expectations and vision for the school as well as in garnering teachers' buy-in and support. The principal also is effective in delegating and sharing responsibilities and duties among the staff and parents. These practices have increased buy-in by having teachers and parents involved in schoolwide decisions.

District Support

The team interviewed the principal and a district curriculum and instruction specialist (currently the superintendent) and learned about the relationship between Vista Del Futuro and its governing body, the Burnham Wood Charter School District. Burnham Wood has two elementary schools and one high school. In 2015–16, the district met state accountability standards.

Best Practice: Communication

"I'm proud of how far we've gone, from the beginning to where we are now. It took a lot of hard work, a lot of dedication and buying into everybody's perspective. That's what I'm most proud of. That the teachers take ownership of how well the school is doing and they don't say, 'Well, we are not going to participate; this isn't our business,' but they make it their business."

–Principal

Best Practice: District Support

"We have a district curriculum, but the principal with data can change any of that. Vista has had a lot of flexibility in its supplemental materials and resources that are used and the way they use them."

–District Curriculum and Instruction Specialist

The team's findings suggest that Burnham Wood Charter School District provides numerous supports to the school directly. The supports range from ones designed to improve student achievement to ones providing teachers with professional development. The strongest evidence for district supports was shown in the following areas:

- Student academic achievement and
- Teacher quality.

Student Academic Achievement

During the on-site interview, the district curriculum and instruction specialist discussed how the district supports improvements to student academic achievement by giving the school flexibility in how it implements the curriculum. She also described districtwide expectations for student performance by discussing how the district's view of student growth and performance on a variety of assessments—not just the STAAR: *"In our schools, we're not looking at the bottom line; the STAAR test is the lowest measure; it's not the highest measure.… It can't be because the cutoff is too low."* She discussed how she has changed teachers' expectations to ensure that students are achieving more than just passing the STAAR exam. She indicated that the district expects students to be on grade level and ready to advance to the next grade.

Teacher Quality

The district curriculum and instruction specialist described how the district supports the schools by providing ongoing, job-embedded professional development to teachers. The district staff member mentioned several times that she models instruction to teachers and provides one-on-one coaching in the classroom. She also reported that the district frequently supports and encourages teachers to participate in professional development provided over the summer by the district, Region 19, and universities in El Paso and across the state.

Summary

Vista Del Futuro Elementary School is located in a small charter district in El Paso, Texas. The district and school staff that the team interviewed showed exceptional dedication to providing the resources and supports the school needs to be successful. By having a district curriculum and instruction specialist on site, the principal and teachers continuously receive targeted, job-embedded support and professional development. This intensive support from the district, along with Vista Del Futuro's strong use of data to drive instruction, a positive school climate, and effective leadership explain why Vista Del Futuro Elementary School deserves the recognition of being a Reward School in the state of Texas.

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