2015–16 Reward Schools Case Study Report
Walcott Elementary School

Walcott Independent School District, Region 16

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 implement practices that allow them 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 staff and students at three of the participating Reward School case study sites.[1]

This report presents the findings from Walcott Elementary School in a rural setting of the Texas panhandle. The report details the systems and structures Walcott School uses to ensure leadership effectiveness and high teacher quality, as well the ways in which Walcott Independent 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 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 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 Walcott Elementary School

The students at Walcott Elementary School, located on the expansive plains of the Texas Panhandle an hour west of Amarillo, have a unique geographical and school environment. One of the Amarillo news channels has a weather station at the school, and the weather reports refer to Walcott as the "little school on the prairie." The zone that feeds into the school has less than a dozen students by the latest census, but the school's reputation for high academic performance leads families in counties all around Walcott to enroll their children in this school. The district makes this possible by maintaining a bus system that picks up all students at their homes every morning and brings them home every afternoon. This arrangement reflects the culture of teamwork, commitment, and creative throughout the Walcott Elementary community.

Walcott received the Reward School designation from TEA in 2014–15. The school has maintained this designation through consistent high performance on state tests. The research team conducted the case study visit in March 2016. The study included interviews with the superintendent and the principal and a focus group with teachers. The team also interviewed eight students from Grades 2 through 5 and collected data using a school climate walkthrough tool.[4] This report presents the results from the team's qualitative analyses of the interviews with the superintendent and principal and from the teacher focus group. The analyses captured information about the two CSFs highlighted in this case study (Leadership Effectiveness and Teacher Quality). 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 provide coherent schoolwide programming (Lambert, 2002). In addition, sharing leadership responsibilities with staff is one way principals can build trust, buy-in, and commitment to the community at their schools

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[4] 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.

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 Walcott site visit, the principal, superintendent, and teachers all spoke particularly about Leadership Effectiveness in terms of the following:

- Shared responsibilities,
- Vision and goals, and
- Autonomy.

Shared Responsibilities

A key factor in the success at Walcott is that every staff member willingly plays multiple roles to make the whole school operate as effectively as possible with limited resources. The principal and superintendent serve in multiple roles on a daily basis, and the teachers are fully included in decision making about the school. Shared leadership is deeply ingrained in the operation of the school at all times. For example, the principal also serves as a classroom teacher, bus driver, and librarian. The superintendent handles the occasional discipline needs in the school and helps students prepare for and travel to University Interscholastic League (UIL) competitions. The teachers double as bus drivers, and the teacher aides step in as substitute teachers when needed. Just as important, teachers take responsibility for resolving issues in the school as soon as they arise and readily make recommendations to the administration on longer-term issues. When asked who at the school is primarily responsible for school improvement, the teachers were quick and direct in stating that everyone is responsible. One teacher went on to specify the inclusion of the superintendent and principal, *"They don't act different than us. They have the title, but we're all …"* At that point, another teacher helped find the right word, *"Peers."* The teachers all agreed with the statement.

Vision and Goals

One indication of effective leadership is a clearly articulated vision and goals for Walcott. The principal stated it directly: *"Our goal is for our kids to be successful, not just on the STAAR [State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness] test, though, I mean in life. I talked to my kids all the time about it: 'You know, your parents are thinking that you might be one of their first children to graduate from college. That's what your parents' goal is. You're their baby and you're going to be the first one to graduate from college."* Another indication of effective leadership is strong communication between the leaders and staff. The participants mentioned both clear goals and good communication repeatedly during the interviews and focus group:

Best Practice: Teacher Recommendations to School Leaders

"It's all of us most of the time. I mean, yes, the final decision has to come from him [the superintendent], but, if we decide that there's a new program that we really like and we think that it would be something that we could use, we look at it together. We evaluate it together and decide that that's a good choice."

–Principal

"'How are you going to do that? What are your goals?' It's not just about the STAAR test, definitely not that." The superintendent voiced the vision, focusing on the teachers who carry it out daily. He said the teachers *"really concentrate on their kids and their classroom. The week before school starts … we have a couple of meetings but not too much because we know they want to get in that classroom and get it ready. The emphasis here is stay in your classroom with those children. That's what they want, and they feel they can do a better job. With the more time they have with the kids, they can do more with them."* Teachers articulated the school's vision when they talked about their students not simply as learners in classrooms but also as whole persons with lives outside of school that matter. Every day, the school experience begins and ends with rides on the buses. Teachers had various ways of describing this experience. One teacher said, *"You get close with kids that ride your bus because you are responsible for getting them to school and home safely. They've got problems too. They might not be in my class, but we're still there to help them and guide them and whatever they need."* Another teacher pointed out that teacher/bus drivers check in with other teachers when they get to school to make sure they know what is going on with the students. If a teacher notices a student not doing well, she will let that student's teacher know: *"Something must have happened at home. In class that day, we're like, you've had a rough day; we can be a little bit more lenient on you today—not, 'What's your problem?' They didn't just come in and you don't know if it happened on the bus, but it's like, okay, this little guy is having problems today, or the same thing, maybe it's their birthday. It's like, oh hey, such and such is having a birthday today or they have a new puppy at home."*

Autonomy

The teachers described the leaders as having an awareness of and showing respect for the titles people hold while treating each other as peers. They all showed a keen awareness of who the school principal is and that the district superintendent is in his office in the school every day, but they all talked to each other as educators with a deep commitment to offering the highest quality education to their students. The staff members interact as peers. The school's leaders know the teachers do great work, so they give them a great deal of latitude to teach the students as they believe is best. Also, when it comes to constantly improving their school, the teachers claim full responsibility alongside their leaders. This sense of responsibility is possible because of a high level of trust throughout the school. The superintendent believes he has the best teachers in the Texas Panhandle, and his confidence in them means his role is, in his words, to *"get out of their way and let them teach."* The principal discusses autonomy as something that begins at the board level and permeates throughout the district. The school board lets the superintendent and principal lead; in turn, these two leaders let the teachers teach. The teachers reiterated that the leadership does

not interfere with their practice. One teacher described the leaders' attitude this way: *"It's just, you do whatever you need to do. I'm not going to tell you what to do. Most schools, their principals, because we've been there, haven't we, tell you what you're going to do every subject. [Here,] they maybe suggest it, or … it's just, you're doing great, keep it up."* One teacher described the relationship with the administration saying, *"They've never held anything from us [that was] for the good of the students."* The view that all professional staff in the building are peers allows teachers to have both autonomy in their classrooms and to genuinely share responsibility for student learning and school operations.

Critical Success Factor 7: Teacher Quality

Teacher Quality focuses on the need to recruit and retain effective teachers while supporting and enhancing the knowledge and skills of current staff with job-embedded professional development. Over two decades of research has demonstrated a clear connection between teacher quality and increased student performance. The evidence from one study shows that low-income students are more likely to benefit from the instruction of a highly effective teacher than are their more advantaged peers (Nye, Konstantoupoulos, & Hedges, 2004). In another study, students enrolled in successive classes taught by effective teachers showed greater gains in student performance than student groups taught by less effective teachers (Sanders & Rivers, 1996). Walcott exemplifies this CSF with an informal and vibrant professional culture that constantly fosters job-embedded professional development and robust district support. In particular, staff have used their creativity and ingenuity to establish highly effective practices such as the following:

- Professional development,
- Additional structures, and
- Team meetings.

Professional Development

Walcott's success at maintaining master-level teachers is a result of teachers developing close and trusting relationships; consequently, they constantly turn to each other for input to improve their own teaching performance. Teachers make use of this trust in a schoolwide culture of informal professionalism. This culture allows them to consult each other to address problems that students are having as soon as the problems surface. One teacher explained, *"There is no time limit. If you have a problem today, it's like let me go over to kindergarten and ask this question. It's not, 'Oh, I've got to wait for her conference time or certain meeting.' It's very laid back."* Another teacher elaborated, saying, *"We don't really call special meetings. It might be in the hall, it might be at lunch, it might be at breakfast, it*

Best Practice: Teacher Growth

"It's like we get a teacher here [who has] been here 26 years. She has grown and improved every year, I believe, for 26 years. That's what we want. That's the kind of teacher we want, and that's the kind of teacher we have. They're not going to teach the same way they did the year before and just stick with the same old routine. They're going to grow and get better. That's their attitude. I'm trying to promote that attitude, so basically I give them the academic freedom and stay out of their way."

–Superintendent

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might be standing out loading [the buses].... It gets resolved, and it gets solved. It's just a different way."

Teachers provide professional development to each other daily, and they frequently participate in school discussions of additional professional development needs. They cited examples of giving their teacher aide temporary lead of the class while they ran to another classroom with a question for a colleague. A common example was when a teacher realized that one or two students did not understand a concept or lesson that was taught the year before. The teacher went to the previous-year teacher to discuss the lesson and the students to figure out the best strategy. The teachers expressed a deep appreciation for being able to address issues immediately while they are taking place rather than waiting for weekly or other structured meetings. Furthermore, when teachers identify an area where they need refresher training or training in new areas, they discuss those needs with their leaders. The result is almost always training through Region 16 ESC. The school relies heavily on Region 16 staff, who offer trainings during and between school semesters. Of Region 16 the principal said, *"I don't know how the Texas Panhandle would survive without our service centers."*

Additional Structures

Walcott Elementary School depends on ingenuity to keep functioning in a remote and sparsely populated area. Staff willingly operate in a way that allows them to continue providing the best education possible for their students. That culture of creativity and ingenuity led them to develop their transportation structure in which teachers drive the buses that pick up and drop off all students at their homes every day. In addition, teachers are allowed the benefits of an informal professional culture that permits teacher aides to temporarily take lead of the classroom so that teachers can go to another classroom to consult with another teacher about a problem that a particular student is having. That other teacher would already know the student from the previous school year. The informal professional culture also allows teachers to have daily vertical team meetings to meet their needs in their classrooms and in the school.

Team Meetings

The teachers' responsibility of driving the school buses limits their availability before and after school, so they have become adept at using their time in the building to get what students need. The teachers know each other well, personally and professionally, and they welcome opportunities to spend time together outside of work as well as at school. They say things like, "We're sisters. We're family," or "We just got back from a weekend. We spent a weekend together." For example, they have gone to New Mexico without their families just to have time relaxing together. They talk about

Best Practice: Daily Team Meetings

It got "handled in 30, 45 minutes, not a two-hour meeting where everybody is already not paying attention. It's brought up, it's handled, it's discussed, what's next?"

–Teacher

their closeness as well as fostering a family atmosphere at the school that includes the teachers' relationships with each other, with students, and with everyone else in the building. One teacher associated that atmosphere with teacher retention, saying, "You see that it's such a family atmosphere that that's why we haven't left." One informal structure they have developed is a daily team meeting at noon, which happens to be their lunch hour. They spend lunch together in one of their classrooms and discuss anything that is needed at the school, including celebrations of good news in students' and each others' lives.

District Support

The Walcott district has one school, Walcott Elementary School, and three school board members who are each full-time ranchers in Deaf Smith County. Although the county has very few students in elementary school, the community has remained committed to the school and willingly transports students from other counties to provide them with a high-quality education. All three board members have regular contact with school leaders and staff and may drop by the campus on any given day in the spirit of assistance—not critique. They are all aware that their school is different from whatever a typical Texas school is. Yet they maintain high achievement while honoring their local culture. The principal offered an apt depiction of their circumstances: *"Our school board members are wonderful, I've always had a good supportive school board. I think that's why [our superintendent] also loves it. I did too. The school board lets us lead; they don't try to micromanage and tell us how to do it. Sometimes you get that board member that has an agenda, and that's not them; they've never been that way. We actually have two brand new board members, and they're hilarious. They're just young blood, and it's just funny to see them. They come in here with their big old cowboy hats and their boots up to here. One day they were here, and our computer guy was here and he was like, 'Who are those people?' I'm like, 'Our school board members.' I mean, they're ranchers."*

Leaders at Walcott Elementary have a hands-on approach to their role in supporting the school. The board members, superintendent, principal, and teachers all know each other by name. They greet each other and engage in personal as well as professional conversation. Above all, they are constantly aware that they are there to help the students in any way possible toward becoming educated adults who participate fully in their communities.

District support is especially evident regarding the following aspects:
- Teacher quality and
- Leadership effectiveness.

> **Best Practice: High Expectations**
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> *"I think we're getting high expectations from the parents and high expectations from the teachers and high expectations from the children and board and everybody. We've got high expectations. We think these kids can use the talents that God gave them, and they've all got talent to one degree or another."*
>
> –Superintendent

Teacher Quality

District support for teachers begins at the school board level, where an attitude of making the teachers comfortable so they can do what they do best permeates decision making. A good example is that budget constraints make it difficult to pay teachers above the state base level, yet the district wants to do all it can to support teachers. When teachers asked for full health insurance coverage, the district agreed that the district could pay the expense of complete health insurance coverage for each teacher. That decision has remained for years, even as budgets have been reworked in financially difficult times. Another form of support is the agreement to plan teachers' professional development carefully so it is useful and limits how much time is taken away from their classrooms. This matter is important to the teachers, and the district and leaders honor their wishes.

Leadership Effectiveness

The superintendent described the school board as fully supportive of his and the principal's leadership. The superintendent and principal each described the process by which the superintendent encouraged the principal to continue her career development toward administration when she was still a teacher at Walcott. She went to graduate school, and then the superintendent gave her responsibilities in the school so that she could gain hands-on experience with the master's degree she earned. At that time, the superintendent also served as the principal. The school board encouraged the redefining of roles and then allowed a couple of years for the superintendent, an octogenarian, and the newly graduated administrator to find the best use of their skills and interests. At the time of this writing, the superintendent is the person who once held both the superintendent and principal titles. The principal serves as a teacher and librarian along with her principal role.

Summary

Walcott Elementary School draws from the best of the Texas Panhandle culture to maintain an academically successful school where students are prepared for a lifetime of success. The staff achieves this success by bringing open minds and flexibility to allow master teachers to provide what students need and by nurturing a place where everyone takes multiple roles with the best interest of the students in mind. The school has established effective leadership by sharing responsibilities with teachers. These responsibilities include all aspects of operating the school—from driving buses to selecting curricula and professional development as well as allowing teachers full autonomy within their classrooms and communicating a clear vision and goals. The school also retains high-quality teachers by allowing a team of master teachers to constantly offer each other job-embedded professional development along with latitude to creatively establish systems and processes that best suit their students' learning. District leaders support the school by providing resources that teachers have identified as most needed and by protecting the teachers' autonomy in their classrooms.

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