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# Reward Schools Case Study Project YES Prep West YES Prep Public Schools

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## A SNAPSHOT OF YES PREP WEST

### 2013-2014 demographics:

- 700 students
- Grade span – 6th-10th
- 88% Economically Disadvantaged (i.e., students eligible to receive free or reduced price lunch)
- 18% English language learners
- 5% Special Education
- 4% Student mobility rate
- 70% Hispanic
- 17% African American
- 11% Asian
- 2% 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% Closing Performance Gaps, and Postsecondary Readiness

## Introduction and Context

Founded in 2009, YES Prep West Middle School serves a predominantly minority student population in Houston, Texas.

From the very first steps inside of the campus, it is obvious that student academics, college and career readiness, and articulating instructional guidelines are of utmost importance. All of the hallways and classrooms are adorned with celebratory announcements, notices of social events, reminders of standards, objectives, and academic expectations, and inspirational posters and messages to remind students that they can achieve their dreams through hard work, dedication, and a commitment to family and the community. These messages and commitments are reinforced by the administration and staff in their classrooms, in the hallways, and in the community where staff and students learn, engage, and build relationships.

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 staffs, the following CSFs were particularly evident and strong at YES Prep:

- **Critical Success Factor 2 - Quality Data to Improve Instruction**
- **Critical Success Factor 5 - Family & Community Engagement**
- **Critical Success Factor 7 - Teacher Quality**

### Critical Success Factor 2 - Quality Data to Improve Instruction

The principal, teachers, and staff were asked to describe how they collect, analyze, and use data to drive instruction. They mentioned the following strategies:

- Data-driven discussions
- Multiple measures of individual student learning

**Data-driven discussions.** There is an extensive use of data to monitor and inform nearly every aspect of the campus environment at YES Prep West. Data is used in all conversations from curriculum, to operations, to culture, to planning, as well as in evaluations of

teachers and students. While the use of data includes monitoring and establishing goals and objectives at the district-, campus-, and teacher-levels, the monitoring of student-level data is the most extensive. The review of student-level learning data, at all levels, begins each year at the annual summer leadership summit, followed by routine monitoring and revising based on data throughout the school year.

#### **Multiple measures of individual student learning.**

Individual teachers have access to the extensive data and use it daily, including dashboards that provide real-time assessments of their student's progress and growth, and notifications of individual and/or collective issues that should be watched or that need immediate attention. Typically, the campus leadership teams examine progress to goals associated with the campus report card and assess campus-, course-, and student-level progress.

YES Prep West teachers also use various assessments and diagnostics to provide a more comprehensive and appropriate look at student growth and progress. Teachers conduct course-level assessments of their student's comprehension and progress throughout the year using pre- and post-tests, as well as more frequent tests and assessments that allow them to identify any issues or trends that need to be addressed immediately. Also, three times a year, all students in the YES Prep Schools system take a common assessment, scored on an AP scale. The district-wide assessment allows the district to examine district progress, identify any issues and/or trends across campuses, content areas, or grade levels, and inform any changes to instruction or PD as a result. Additionally, YES Prep West requires students to take the annual Measures of Academic Progress® ("MAP") assessments in math and reading. Not only do the MAP assessments provide reliable estimates of annual student progress and growth, but the math and reading Lexile levels allow them to compare YES Prep West students against students across the country. This is important in gauging where their students fit on a larger scale and can be informative in determining how competitive they will be when applying for college.

#### **BEST PRACTICE**

Identified issues and trends trigger a broader, campus-wide discussion about revising instruction, adding materials, or including professional development (PD) to address the issue during weekly professional development days or quarterly data dives where the campus leadership team examines campus specific data through spreadsheets from their data tracking system and the campus report card.

### **Critical Success Factor 5 - Family and Community Engagement**

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

- Setting goals every year
- Planned outside volunteer work
- Open and frequent communication

**Setting goals every year.** YES Prep West understands that the success of their instruction is as much about what they do during school hours as it is about the assistance and support that students receive at home and from the community. For administrative staff and teachers, this value is addressed and reinforced throughout the school year, beginning with the summer leadership summit, where campus

leadership teams set new family and community engagement goals and objectives for the upcoming school year. Throughout the school year, the goals and objectives are monitored and any trends or issues revealed in the data or through feedback are discussed and revisions to the plan are developed and implemented.

#### BEST PRACTICE

At the beginning of each school year, following the leadership summit and teacher in-service, individual teachers are expected to visit the homes of new students. During these home visits, teachers share YES Prep West's commitment to family and community engagement, discuss specific procedures and activities, and begin building a relationship with their students' families. Some of the initial discussion includes notifying families about upcoming events (e.g., open house, parental observations, college nights, etc.), the quarterly student and parent/family survey, student "pay-checks," and contact information (i.e., teacher's cell phone number) so that families can contact teachers directly with any questions, notifications, or concerns.

**Planned outside volunteer work.** The family and community engagement plan is also shared with families and community stakeholders at the beginning of the school year. Many of the family and community engagement events are also highlighted on the classroom and hallway walls so that teachers, students, and parents who visit the campus can be notified and/or reminded of upcoming events and activities.

One of the most important discussions that YES Prep West teachers have with new families is around the campus service days. These community engagement events involve staff and students working together to assist in the community. In the past, the service days have included helping with cleanup following natural disasters (e.g., flooding, hurricanes), serving meals at a local homeless shelter, or distributing food and clothing to local homeless residents. In fact, when YES Prep West students travel for grade specific events they are expected to serve their host community during their stay. A recent trip to New Orleans, Louisiana found YES Prep West students and teachers assisting in the building of home destroyed by a hurricane.

**Open and frequent communication.** Following the initial home visits (see Best Practice callout box above), teachers are expected to call at least three students' homes every week. These weekly calls are to provide updates on students' academic and behavioral progress as well as to discuss any questions or issues that their parents might have. Teachers also routinely send email updates to families as well as distribute weekly "pay-checks," updates on individual students' academic progress / growth, or other issues (e.g., behavioral issues, attendance, etc.). Families also receive weekly announcements and updates of campus-wide events and activities through the Marvel Memo ("Marvel" is the YES Prep West mascot). The Marvel Memo is available in pamphlet form or online at the campus website. Lastly, families also receive notifications and updates directly from students, who are reminded of events and activities during the school day, both by their teachers and through notifications and updates on classroom and hallway walls.

In addition to the many different activities and events designed to build relationships with students' families and the broader community (e.g., summer barbeque, Hispanic heritage night, Thanksgiving dinners, etc.), the YES Prep West campus leadership team also provides opportunities for members of the school community to engage for purposes related to student learning. Like most schools, at the beginning of each year, the YES Prep West campus leadership team holds an open house for parents to meet the staff and teachers and to hear more about their approach and commitment to academics, family, and service to the community. This is an important time for all parents, but especially for new families who are new to the school and are able to meet other parents in their student's grade and join

their “pack.” A “pack” is how YES Prep West categorizes students in different grades (i.e., a cohort). The parents of the students in the packs usually work together to organize social events for students and teachers (e.g., Thanksgiving dinner, dances, movie nights, etc.), but, in some cases, they come together to address academic issues as well. YES Prep West also organizes periodic events for parents of students who are struggling academically. These events are designed to provide the parents with information about the schools approach to addressing the issue(s) as well as information about additional resources, including tutors and after school instruction. The events are also intended to allow parents to meet other parents with students in similar situations and encourage them to collaborate to organize study sessions, group tutoring, or to support one another.

### **Critical Success Factor 7 – Teacher Quality**

When asked how the campus supports its teachers and helps them improve their practice, the principal, teachers, and staff described the following strategies:

- Individual data plans for teachers
- Professional development is tied to teachers needs

**Individual data plans for teachers.** The monitoring of individual teacher goals and assessment of their overall “quality” is deeply rooted in data. While YES Prep West uses data to review, monitor, and inform instructional, cultural, and disciplinary changes, the assessment of overall and individual teacher quality is no different. Teachers routinely meet with campus leadership teams, Deans of Instruction, instructional coaches, and content area leads to review teacher-lever goals and objectives associated with achievement, discipline, and culture/climate. If the data reveal trends or issues associated with the individual teacher’s courses, the group identifies potential reasons and develops individual plans to address them. The process is as much about addressing the needs of students as it is about providing individual teachers with the feedback and support necessary to improve their effectiveness and achieve their individual goals and objectives.

**Professional development is tied to teachers needs.** Included in these discussions is a focus on building individual teacher capacity. While YES Prep West teachers are given great flexibility in their implementation of instruction, they tend to use specific modes of instruction over others (i.e. small group vs. whole class vs. individual learning). In some cases, individual teachers are challenged to employ modes that they may have little experience with, to expand their “tool kit,” and to improve their ability to instruct and support students with different learning styles or challenges. Individual (and collective) teacher capacity building also takes place during their weekly, Wednesday professional development. Teachers are also offered numerous opportunities to attend external professional development to improve their individual capacities. In some cases, the PD is provided by an external provider (e.g. Education Service Centers, professional conferences, etc.), while others are internal to the YES Prep system, including observations of teachers at other campuses that teach the same course or grade level. These observations are designed to share best practices or simply to ask questions. This is especially important (and effective) for younger, less experienced teachers and those not having other content area teachers at the YES Prep West campus. It is also important for experienced teachers who are looking to expand their tool kit by learning new approaches or modes of teaching. The process also allows teachers to build relationships and a stronger sense of family between and among campuses in the YES Prep system.

## Summary

The academic progress that has enabled the YES Prep West campus to be designated a state of Texas “Reward School” is the result of the thoughtful orchestration of many different programs and actors working together to achieve their individual and collective goals. The use and discussion of data drives decisions, but all school actors (district and campus administration, teachers, students, and parents) realize that it is the understanding of individual needs and talents and the strong relationships that they share that ensure that the decisions are meaningful and appropriate. Additionally, each know that academic progress is not the only factor that contributes to the college and career success of their students; being a considerate and helpful to others and contributing to the welfare of the community are equally important.

Like most schools, to sustain their success and continue to serve their students and community, YES Prep West understands that retaining their teachers and maintaining a consistent funding stream are essential. At a time when new, inexperienced teachers leave the classroom at increasing rates, YES Prep West, and the entire system, is committed to building relationships, improving teacher supports, and providing teachers with flexibility and discretion they need to feel empowered and remain at the campus and dedicated to their mission. Teachers at YES Prep West have confirmed that these commitments have made a difference for them and played a part in their decision to stay at the campus. The teachers also cite that the family environment – among leadership, staff, teachers, students, parents, and community – keep them inspired and dedicated to becoming more effective teachers, leaders, and partners in the YES Prep mission.