



## CLOSE TO HOME

J.X. WILSON SCHOOL HAS IMPLEMENTED AN IMPROVEMENT STRATEGY AND IS REALIZING IMPRESSIVE RESULTS



If there is a secret to the success of J.X. Wilson School, it may be that the staff established a clear strategy and has stuck with it, without getting distracted.

***Pictured above:***

*J.X. Wilson School teachers Janette Witte, Darla Stone, Elin Chadwick, and Bonnie McKenna review assessment results and chart the academic progress of the students in their reading groups.*

**A**cross the nation, there are numerous examples of schools that are ensuring the success of *all* students regardless of their economic or linguistic status. Research on these efforts now spans more than a decade. There are the 90/90/90 Schools identified by Douglas Reeves and the high-performing, high-poverty No Excuses Schools studied by the Heritage Foundation. There are also schools that are Beating the Odds or Doing What Works, and districts that have found success through Professional Learning Communities (PLCs).

While these examples have improved our understanding of research-based instructional practices, bringing their formulas for success into our own local schools has been extremely difficult. But now, through the work of our county's collaborative Aiming High initiative, we have longitudinal data on a number of *local* schools that are closing the achievement gap and raising achievement levels of both socio-economically disadvantaged students and English learners.

J.X. Wilson School, located in the Wright School District, is one such school. With English learner and socio-economically disadvantaged populations nearing 50 percent, J.X. Wilson has an impressive record (see box, next page).

The question for those of us in the field is, "Is J.X. an anomaly, a rare island of excellence, or have they identified and implemented a strategy that can be replicated in neighboring schools and districts?" Certainly there are characteristics that are unique to this district—its leadership, its staff,



“All of our discretionary resources are put into helping struggling kids,” says principal Jane Futrell.

and its culture—but there is also ample evidence of explicit and consistent implementation of a coherent strategy for student success.

Taken from interviews with principal Jane Futrell and excerpts from the school’s own self-studies, this publication highlights the features of J.X. Wilson’s strategy for educational excellence. Our hope is that this information will prove useful to teachers and administrators in other schools who are likewise working to close the achievement gap.

## DECIDING TO ACT

A significant drop in API scores was the catalyst for the J.X. Wilson staff to begin developing an improvement strategy. Principal Jane Futrell explains that, in 2004, a three-year 45-point decline in the school’s API score got everyone’s

attention and motivated staff to really take a look at student data. The approach they took was unique. Instead of strictly analyzing what happened in the past to result in falling scores, Futrell urged her teachers to focus on the current year.

She provided each teacher with a list of incoming students and asked grade-level teams to disaggregate student performance for their classes. Students were categorized into one of the five performance levels on the California Standards Tests (CSTs)—far below basic, below basic, basic, proficient, and advanced—then teachers at each grade level were asked, “What should we do differently for these students?”

Central to this conversation were two statements that Futrell made to set the stage for reflection. Without placing blame on teachers or students, she said, “We can’t continue to do the same thing and expect different results,” and “We need to work smarter, not harder.”

To frame their discussions, the staff examined the tenets of high-performing schools in the best practices research from Just For The Kids–California. The five ideas showcased in that research became the impetus for their forward momentum. These practices gradually evolved into the school’s own philosophy for improvement, which has

### J.X. WILSON ... BY THE NUMBERS



<b>Grade Levels</b>	K-6
<b>Enrollment</b>	502 students
<b>Free/Reduced Lunch</b>	50% – 253 students
<b>English Learners</b>	44% – 220 students

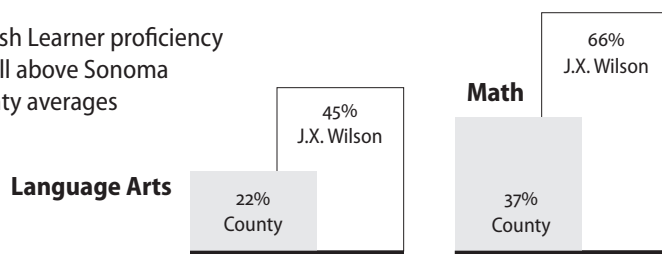
API Growth	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
All Students	787	818	840	848	849
Economically Disadvantaged	729	777	798	815	817
English Learners	-	-	826	822	826

Compare Sonoma County 2008 median API for elementary schools:

- All Students – 793
- Economically Disadvantaged – 706
- English Learners – 701

STAR, Proficient and Above	English-Language Arts	Mathematics
All Students	57%	74%
Economically Disadvantaged	48%	69%
English Learners	45%	66%

- English Learner proficiency is well above Sonoma County averages



guided instructional planning and the development of a strategy for raising student achievement.

- Take initiative. Make no excuses and keep striving for success.
- Develop and execute a clear strategy for improvement.
- Continuously assess progress and intervene immediately when students are struggling.
- Make high-quality teaching and research-based instructional practice a top priority.
- Collaborate, both inside and outside of the school.

The key features of J.X. Wilson’s improvement strategy, described below, are similar to ideas widely cited in professional development articles and at conferences, but this school has implemented them with uncommon clarity, coherence, and depth.

## INSTRUCTION IS TIERED AND DIFFERENTIATED

***Students at J.X. Wilson receive additional targeted instruction in identified areas of skill deficit during and beyond the school day***

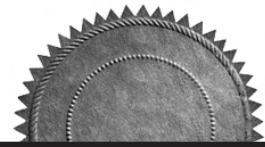
Through their examination of state testing data and collaboration around what to do differently, the staff overwhelmingly decided to pursue a strategy of targeting intervention for all students. Their intervention system has evolved over the years and continues to change today, but their basic strategy has remained consistent across the years. It focuses on improvement of the instructional core in English language arts, mathematics, and English Language Development and the delivery of effective targeted intervention in these content areas.

*English language arts:* The staff identified reading as the most pressing academic challenge for J.X. students and began exploring how they could effectively teach students at their identified performance levels. This process started with simple conversations among grade-level teams: “You have four ‘below basics,’ I have three, and she has two. Let’s group them. I’ll take your below basics and her below basics and set up a group.” Grade levels adopted a common language arts time and began to “share” students in leveled reading groups throughout the week.

Explains Futrell, “Third through fifth grades decided to start leveled reading on their own. After that, it caught on like wildfire.”

Every student who is reading below grade level is included in the school’s intervention program. Students are assessed using Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), then grouped by identified instructional need—phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension—and served in grade-level clusters. Intensive supplementary instruction is provided, most often by experienced, trained para-professionals.

- Primary-grade students receive an additional 30 minutes of small-group



## AWARDS & ACCOLADES

J.X. Wilson School has received many accolades at the state and federal levels. In state accountability measures, the school has had a similar schools ranking of 10 for the past three years. In 2005 and 2006, it was recognized among the highest performing public schools in the state Honor Roll program established by California Business for Education Excellence Foundation and Just For The Kids–California.

At the federal level, the school received Title I Academic Achievement Awards in 2006 and 2007. These awards recognized the school for doubling its API Growth score for both the total school population and the socio-economically disadvantaged subgroup for two consecutive years. In the fall of 2008, J.X. Wilson School received the highest education award in the nation, the No Child Left Behind–Blue Ribbon Schools award from the United States Department of Education, recognizing it as a national model of excellence. ♦



instruction four days per week following lunch. First-graders are taught by kindergarten teachers, who already know them from the prior year, while para-professionals work with the other groups.

- Upper-grade students receive an hour of reading intervention three days per week in an after-school program.

*Mathematics:* Although their adopted instructional program has changed this year, the school continues to implement targeted mathematics support as they have in prior years. A schoolwide emphasis on automaticity in math facts begins

in first grade with timed tests and continues through sixth grade with “Mad Minutes,” “Beat the Clock,” and “Rocket Math” activities to ensure memorization of basic computational skills.

Beginning in 2007-08, the school initiated a mathematics intervention program before school for grades 3-6 and after school for second-graders. This “Math Club” meets twice weekly for 45 minutes and is taught by grade-level teachers. Instruction is tied to the district’s current adopted program, Pearson Scott Foresman *enVisionMath*. Students are identified for placement based on district benchmark tests, which are linked to each grade’s instructional pacing. They participate in a ten-week intervention program that targets specific skill deficits. Pre- and post-tests are used to monitor student progress.

*English Language Development (ELD):* Until this year, supplemental ELD instruction was delivered solely as a leveled pull-out program. A trained para-professional provides this instruction under the direction of the district’s English learner specialist. In this model, students from the three lowest CELDT levels are served in small groups. The duration and frequency of instruction varies by grade level:

- Kindergarten and first grade, 30 minutes four times per week
- Second and third grade, 30 minutes three times per week
- Fourth, fifth, and sixth grade, 30 minutes two times per week
- Newcomers receive an extra hour of ELD instruction every day

## HAVING A CLEAR STRATEGY IS ESSENTIAL

In simple terms, J.X. Wilson School can be credited with knowing what it wants to do, then doing it. Easy to say, but it’s often difficult to connect the goal of education—success for all students—with the day-to-day work that can make it happen.

Researcher Stacey Childress of the Public Education Leadership Project (PELP) at Harvard University has written extensively on the role of strategy in public education, which she believes is often the missing link between aspiration and implementation. She maintains that all organizations—schools included!—need clear and coherent strategies in order to get things done and accomplish their objectives. Here is a quote from her 2004 *Note on Strategy in Public Education*:

When an organization’s strategy is either undefined or unclear to the people responsible for implementation and execution, good things might still happen, but the full potential to accomplish important goals and objectives goes unrealized. People are very busy—in fact, they have more to do than they could possibly get done; projects are launched one after the other, often moving on related, yet disconnected tracks; programs are launched with fanfare and enthusiasm, and layered on top of existing programs that are not particularly effective and should have been stopped long ago. In the midst of this busyness, people ask themselves and each other, “What are we trying to do here, anyway?” Strategy helps people answer this question by providing a sense of purpose, direction, and clarity to their work, and by connecting it directly to the inspiring mission of the organization.

If this sounds familiar—too much to do, initiatives layered on top of one another, goals that never quite get addressed—it may be that setting a clear strategy is the first step to take. ♦

Beginning in 2008-09, this model was augmented by the addition of another part-time ELD assistant. Now, in addition to the pull-out program, the two para-professionals provide push-in support during the reading-language arts block, working with grade 2-6 English learners in the lowest-level reading groups. They use Houghton Mifflin extra support materials and the QuickReads curriculum to help build students' language skills.

***Pictured below:***  
*Carolina Valencia reads aloud while her partner Savannah Janik-Pecknold follows along. They'll reverse roles so each has a chance to read the selection out loud.*

## STAFF COLLABORATE WEEKLY AND SHARE STUDENTS

***Shared ownership of students ensures that no student falls through the cracks***

Collaboration takes place every Wednesday at J.X. Wilson School. Staff meet in grade-level teams to review student data, discuss curriculum, and complete instructional planning. These discussions have evolved from an initial focus on instruction—what we are teaching—to how students are doing and what the instructional staff needs to do differently.

“Homogeneous grouping across classrooms



## DATA ANALYSIS MEETING AGENDA

### **Break out in grade-level teams to review assessment results**

As a team, evaluate the following:

- What percentage of last year's students were proficient in language arts? math?
- What were areas of strength? What were areas of weakness?
- To the extent that there was growth or decline from the previous year, what factors were in play and/or what conclusions can be drawn? (e.g., Were students significantly different? Did you modify instructional strategies?)

### **Break out in grade-level team to discuss the incoming class**

Look at the available assessment data for the students coming into your grade:

- What percentage are not proficient in language arts? math?
- What percentage score Basic in language arts? math?
- Are there any low sub-scores in language arts or math that indicate areas for instructional focus and attention for your grade level in the coming year?
- Using your class roster and the master list of students by CST levels at your grade level, find the students in your class and organize them by proficiency level. What strategic plans/ideas do you have to effectively address the academic needs of your students in the coming year?

—Sample half-day agenda for staff development prior to the start of the year



Discussions evolved from an initial focus on instruction – what we are teaching – to how students are doing and what the instructional staff needs to do differently.



Through examination of state testing data and collaboration about what to do differently, the staff overwhelmingly decided to pursue a strategy of targeting intervention for all students.

for core reading instruction has fostered a sense of shared responsibility for all students at each grade level,” explains Futrell. “The very fact that teachers share kids has reinforced collaboration, because they all want to know how their students are doing in other classrooms. It’s not ‘my kids’ any more; it’s ‘our kids.’ This was an unexpected, positive outcome. Now *everyone* has a vested interest in all students.”

Sharing students requires trust and that now characterizes the workings of the J.X. Wilson staff. For example, when they get together to examine data, they don’t feel that they’re looking at data for a specific teacher’s class, so the process isn’t threatening. The data reflects the work of all teachers collaborating to educate the school’s students.

Para-educators also have a prominent role in instruction and intervention, which gives students an especially wide support network and adds to the sense of schoolwide collaboration. Students see the same aides in their classrooms and on the school playground—and they’re the same people who are helping them with their reading skills.

Collaboration and connection have bonded the school and its students, while still supporting the idea that each child has individual talents and needs. Staff work together to identify those needs—and address them. Ensuring that no student falls through the cracks isn’t just a catchy saying at J.X. Wilson; it’s real.



**Pictured above:** Retired teacher Neva Fleckenstein has continued to work at J.X. Wilson School as a substitute teacher. Here, she uses DIBELS to assess the literacy skills of kindergartner Arella LaRose.

## STUDENT DATA INFORMS DECISIONS

***Teachers use data to identify what students know and are able to do, and to determine how areas of need will be addressed***

At J.X. Wilson, there is a coordinated and well-articulated accountability system in place. It links rigorous curriculum to excellent instruction and is driven by a sustained focus on the cycle of continuous improvement.

Assessment of student performance is a key component of this system. The ongoing process of collecting and analyzing data is used not only to monitor student progress, but also to refine and improve curriculum and instruction, evaluate needs for—and efficacy of—various student support programs, and, ultimately, determine the effectiveness and success of the system itself.

Teachers meet with the principal at the beginning of each school year to assess student progress from the previous year and collaboratively plan for the incoming class. Grade-level teams evaluate the CST scores and summative year-end district benchmark assessments in reading, writing, and mathematics for each incoming student.

Using this data, teachers can begin to form academic profiles of individual students, evaluate their skill levels, identify any gaps in their learning, and create initial grouping plans for differentiated instruction. Through this process, grade-

level teams are also able to identify content standards that require attention and professional development needs they have in specific content areas. A plan to address student, curricular, and professional development issues is then incorporated into the school's yearly strategic planning document, the Single Plan for Student Achievement.

Grade-level benchmark assessments for reading, writing, and mathematics are administered across the district every trimester. The results of these assessments, performance data from curriculum-embedded tests, and teacher evaluation of student work are used to measure student progress toward grade-level standards. The staff uses this same information, along with the progress monitoring assessments incorporated into their intervention programs, to determine which skills and concepts require re-teaching and which students need further assistance.

Teachers have full use of a computerized data management system, Edusoft. Not only has this expanded their ability to create standards-based progress monitoring assessments, it has allowed them to access, track, and analyze student data, then disaggregate it to guide and improve instruction. This information is a critical component of the school's Wednesday collaboration meetings.

"Since 2004, we've focused on using meaningful data to improve our instructional program," explains principal Jane Futrell. "The regular collection and analysis of assessment results and the collaborative work of the grade-level teams help us make the best possible decisions for students based on their identified needs."

## RESOURCES ARE ALIGNED TO STRATEGIES

***Even with limited resources, the school is making the most of what they have***

J.X. Wilson is not a school loaded with categorical funding. It received a small amount of Title I in 2006-07, but not in other years. Unlike many schools serving similar populations—even those in its district—J.X. lacks a reading specialist, English learner specialist, and other credentialed staff to support its intervention programs, coordinate data analysis, or provide instructional coaching.

However, the school is committed to aligning its resources to support its



## A NOTE ON INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS

The "time and materials" profile of J.X. Wilson School is not unlike many other schools in Sonoma County. The staff uses Houghton Mifflin for its core language arts program and teachers have been fully trained in its implementation.

They have also identified a wide variety of supplementary materials for core leveled-reading instruction and reading intervention, including PALS, Passageways, Power Readers, QuickReads, Read Naturally, Six-Minute Solution, Spelling Through Morphographs, Soundabet, SRA Reading Labs, Text Talk, Vocabulary for Achievement, and Writing by Design. Recently, they have been particularly impressed with the results from QuickReads, a fluency-building program developed by Dr. Elfrieda "Freddy" H. Hiebert that uses nonfiction reading and repeated vocabulary.

The district adopted Pearson Scott Foresman *enVision Math* in 2008. Following a summer of trainings, they are now in their first year of implementation with these materials.

J.X. Wilson provides the state-recommended instructional minutes in each of these content areas and has established a separate instructional period for English Language Development (ELD). Identified English learners receive ELD in homogeneous groupings using a variety of instructional materials. ♦



**Pictured above:**  
First-grade students Martin Mendez and Nayeli Orozco sit side-by-side to review vocabulary before engaging in paired reading as part of a small group intervention session.



The school holds its students accountable for rigorous academic and behavioral standards at the same time that it supports staff efforts to ensure that all students can achieve those standards.

instructional goal of providing targeted intervention support for all identified students. Thus, almost all of the school's categorical funding and para-professional support is used to support its comprehensive reading and mathematics intervention programs. With per-pupil expenditures about \$200 less than the state average, J.X. Wilson sustains its before- and after-school intervention programs on a budget of approximately \$40,000. School and Library Improvement Block Grant (SLIBG) funds, along with Title V and Economic Impact Aid (EIA), are used.

With limited resources, the school has been especially strategic in selecting how to use funds optimally and maximize support for students. "All of our discretionary resources are put into helping struggling kids," says Futrell.

## WHY HAS THE STRATEGY WORKED?

If there is a secret to the success of J.X. Wilson School, it may be that the staff established a clear strategy and has stuck with it, without getting distracted. Over the years, their work has grown into a strong system of support targeting the needs of all students. The school holds its students accountable for rigorous academic and behavioral standards at the same time that it supports staff efforts to ensure that all students can achieve those standards.

The mission of J.X. Wilson School is to prepare children academically and socially to function responsibly in society and to envision and achieve their goals in life. The staff consistently act with this basic premise in mind: *student learning should drive the work of the adults in their school.* They believe that their fundamental purpose is to plan and prepare powerful curriculum, then provide targeted instruction using the most effective, research-based practices. Their goal is to ensure that each student has access to and is fully supported in meeting rigorous, grade-level standards.

As noted throughout this publication, this school has connected its theory of action—what you might call its collective belief about how to ensure that all students receive targeted instructional support in their areas of need—to a clear strategy for providing this support. This has characterized their uncommon success over the past several years, making J.X. Wilson School a model for our county. ♦



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