



## EXEMPLARY

### TEN LOCAL SCHOOLS WIN STATE DISTINGUISHED SCHOOLS TITLE

**T**his year's Distinguished Schools designation was awarded to ten Sonoma County elementary schools in recognition of exemplary academic achievement. This award identifies and honors schools that demonstrate educational excellence for all students, with a special emphasis on narrowing achievement gaps.

Each school earning the award agreed to share two signature practices that have contributed to their success. This information will be compiled on a searchable database housed at the California Department of Education, serving as a school improvement resource for all of the state's schools.

To begin the resource-sharing process, this issue of the SCO E Bulletin highlights the Distinguished School practices that are based in our county. You'll find common characteristics and unique features in the programs that have helped make these Sonoma County schools such high-achievers, but there is one recurring theme woven throughout them all: an unwavering belief in the ability of *all* students to achieve success. Read on to learn more.

#### AUSTIN CREEK SCHOOL

*Devon Leaf, Ed.D., principal, 538-2122*

Strong collaborative **professional learning community (PLC) teams** drive Austin Creek's school improvement process and focus staff on the goal of ensuring that every student reaches or exceeds proficiency in English-language arts. For the past three years, teams have been concentrating on moving students who are below proficient to the proficient level, while also moving proficient students to the advanced level. Grade-level teams meet bimonthly for 30-60 minutes and use the PLC protocol of analyzing data, refining lessons, developing assessments, and setting new learning goals. The result of this work is that very few students are scoring below proficient in English-language arts and the school is seeing substantial gains in the number of students at the advanced level.

The school credits its **life skills/leadership** program with creating

★  
The teachers in ★  
Distinguished Schools  
are constantly looking  
for what else they can  
do to help students  
succeed.

**Pictured above:** Teachers from Schaefer School (front row) Judy Armstrong, Tracy Henry, and Tawyna Martin; (back row) Lee Brown, Lynn Garlock, and principal Jennie Snyder have focused their improvement efforts on intervention and English language enrichment.


a learning environment that fosters high academic achievement through academic risk-taking, student leadership, and cooperative learning. This program begins in kindergarten, where basic life skills and positive character traits are introduced. These ideas are then woven into classroom activities across all grades and communicated to parents. Students demonstrate mastery of the skills as they take on leadership roles, perform community service, participate in rigorous academic events, and complete challenging tiered assignments delivered by teachers using GATE strategies schoolwide. Staff have documented a correlation between their life skills program and higher achievement in science, a content area that systematically increases in depth, breadth, and complexity throughout the grades.

## BROOKS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

*Shannyn Vehmeyer, principal, 837-7717*

When a district analysis revealed that underperformance in mathematics at Windsor High was a systemic problem originating in the lower grades, Brooks Elementary staff took stock and **retooled their math program**. Working in PLC teams, they designed an articulated program to increase student mastery of grade-level power standards and decrease the achievement gap for subgroups. They created pacing plans to align instructional time to the standards, identified benchmark assessments, implemented interventions, regrouped students within and across classrooms, and regularly monitored student progress. They changed from using texts to cover content to planning how texts could help focus instruction on the standards that were most important for students to master. These strategies have boosted math achievement for all students and for the school's underperforming subgroups.

The school has also filled a gap in its core language arts curriculum and reformatted its pull-out ELD program to **improve writing proficiency** on the CSTs. Approximately half of a daily 90-minute language arts block is now allotted for writing instruction using Writing by Design, an articulated program that leads students through step-by-step writing assignments using "job charts" and student-friendly rubrics. To ensure that their needs are met, English learners receive all or part of this writing instruction in small-group settings. The school also discontinued its pull-out ELD program, which was causing students to miss core instruction, and replaced it with a daily 30-minute rotation that delivers ELD and language arts instruction to leveled groups.

“Both students and parents said that what they like the best about their school is that the staff does whatever is needed to help every student be successful. ‘They pick you up when you fall down’ was one of the quotes that impressed us.”  *Quote from a site validation team member*

## GRANT ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

*Judith Martin, Ph.D., principal, 778-4742*

Grant School has fully integrated its standards-based curriculum with **21st century technology**. Clear technology standards and more accessible resources have created a technology-rich learning environment for all students and teachers. A professional development initiative, dubbed “No Colleague Left Behind,” partners tech-savvy teachers with emerging tech users. A wiki, created in 2007, serves as an online portal for students, teachers, and parents. One example of how technology integration has advanced student achievement is seen in the school's use of Accelerated Reader. One hundred percent of grade 2-6 students are using this online tool, which has motivated independent reading, encouraged students to track their “millions of words read” milestones, and raised language arts achievement.

Students are also benefiting from the school's emphasis on **positive behavior programs**. Discipline referrals and Healthy Kids Survey data revealed a need to balance this school's high academic demands with a more robust system of social and emotional support. This work began with implementation of the Building Effective Schools Together (BEST) behavior program. Weekly BEST assemblies have become a centerpiece of the school community, a place to acknowledge positive behavior and connect students to the school and each other. Playground activities, big buddy-little buddy experiences, an improved P.E. program, a school garden initiative, and implementation of “caring school community” lessons all further this effort. A full-time guidance counselor, funded by a federal early intervention grant, has been especially important in addressing student needs.

## MARGUERITE HAHN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

*Bonnie Barron, principal, 588-5675* 

Marguerite Hahn School identified **professional learning communities focused on mastery of essential standards** as one of its signature practices. Teachers working in PLC teams target one essential standard every two weeks, collaborate on instructional strategies, agree on a timeline, and identify common formative assessments that will enable them to monitor student progress. This biweekly feedback loop allows them to adjust instruction and provide immediate intervention as needed. The

commitment to collaborate has become an integral part of the school's culture, and teachers credit it with helping them raise the percentage of Hahn students scoring proficient or above on state tests.

The school also restructured its resource program and support staffing to create an

**early intervention reading club** for struggling first- and second-graders. These Tier II guided reading groups are led by the school's resource specialist, an experienced beginning reading teacher who is now able to serve a greater number of at-risk students. Teachers identify students for participation at "safety net" meetings, determine individual needs, and group students facing similar challenges. Students receive 30 minutes of small-group reading instruction three to four times per week for 8-10 weeks. Progress is carefully monitored. The resource specialist and classroom teacher stay in close contact and exit students when goals are reached. Pre- and post-assessments over the past two years have shown consistent gains for all students.



## MARK WEST ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

*Tracy Lavin-Kendall, principal, 524-2990*

With a goal of moving the school and district "from good to great," the Mark West district created **structured collaboration time** via a district-wide early release schedule. These formal collaboration days have given teachers time for the professional conversations that research shows are so critical to advancing student achievement. These conversations and articulated professional development for all teachers in the district have resulted in a common language and clear expectations for student outcomes. Active engagement strategies, oral response, and a belief in "every student responsible" is now the norm in all classrooms. Time is also allocated for site-specific collaboration; areas of attention at Mark West School have included technology, data analysis, and addressing the needs of focal students.

Collaboration has also helped build a program of **blended services** that maximizes the use of school personnel—Title I, RSP, ELD, classroom teachers, and paraprofessionals—to address the literacy needs of all students. For 30 minutes a day, four days a week, students are grouped based on assessment data related to their literacy skills. Research-based instructional materials and assessments center on an identified content standard for each group. In this way, struggling students get help before they fall too far behind, while those above grade level benefit from an accelerated curriculum. Groups with the greatest need have the fewest students, but placements are fluid so students can progress to new groups as they demonstrate mastery of focus skills.



## OAK GROVE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

*Wayne Yamagishi, principal, 823-5225*

Oak Grove Elementary is using a **comprehensive arts education program** to close the achievement gap in language arts for its socio-economically disadvantaged students. This strategy was identified after several best practices for teaching and intervention yielded little positive change in SED achievement. Reviewing research on the benefits of arts education and how it could help

"level the playing field" for children from disadvantaged circumstances, the staff felt it was a viable alternative that could be an asset to the entire student body. Today, every grade K-5 class participates in an articulated curriculum that integrates dance, visual arts, music, and theater into the core curriculum. Gap-closing growth in language arts for the SED subgroup has coincided with the implementation of the arts program.

The slow rate of language acquisition by the school's English learner subgroup was also a concern, so teachers worked in PLC teams to develop a **comprehensive ELD program** that put research from EL experts Kate Kinsella and Kevin Clark into practice. They initiated the Academic Vocabulary Excellence (AVE) program to integrate academic vocabulary instruction in the core curriculum and increased "structured talking" opportunities in every classroom. The district's ELD teacher provided training to classroom staff on these and other effective instructional strategies. A family component was also added, along with after-school tutoring by high school students who had previously attended Oak Grove Elementary.



## PENNGROVE SCHOOL

*Kathleen Larsen, principal, 778-4755*

To re-engage students who were withdrawing from group interactions during lunch and recess—including students with disabilities and those most at risk of academic failure—Penngrove School began infusing adult-supported activities into these time blocks. First an art club was formed, then a knitting club, followed by cooperative games, S'cool Moves activities, and a program that engages older students as "social ambassadors." This **recess renaissance** has changed the school climate to one of inclusiveness, where every student has positive experiences building peer-to-peer relationships and acquires the social skills necessary to be successful. After participating in support activities at recess and lunch, students return to the classroom ready to focus on academic learning.

Improving writing skills has been a particular priority in those classrooms. The school inaugurated its **write for success** program by bringing together new and existing tools, teacher expertise, and assessments with a goal of giving students from all subgroups the foundational skills they need to produce quality writing. Thinking Maps were already being used successfully schoolwide to help students organize pre-writing tasks. School staff decided to add Write from the Beginning, which works in conjunction with Thinking Maps to build narrative and expository writing skills. Paralleling this effort was the development of a districtwide writing assessment, complete with prompts and rubrics, that allows teachers to monitor student progress. Noticeable improvement in writing skills has been seen throughout four years of program implementation.





## SCHAEFER SCHOOL

Jennie Snyder, principal, 522-3015



Schaefer School formed a Response to Intervention committee in 2007 to guide the development of a **comprehensive system of intervention** that would lift the achievement of its struggling students. To support this effort, the school obtained a SCOE Framework for Intervention mini-grant and joined the Sonoma County Response to Intervention pilot program. They began working with content specialists to refine K-6 teaching practices and develop robust, tiered interventions. Modeling their work on research-based best practices and implementing strategies through schoolwide collaboration, the staff developed and is now implementing a coordinated system of screening, intervening, and progress monitoring. This has led to substantial achievement gains, especially among its student subgroups.

To further respond to their students' needs for leveled **English language enrichment**, teachers carved out a block of time—35 minutes four days per week—to implement targeted small-group instruction across the grade levels. Their program has a four-part focus:

- 1) English Language Development (ELD) based on student language proficiency;
- 2) extra support in decoding, fluency, and/or comprehension for struggling readers;
- 3) enrichment for students working at grade level; and
- 4) challenge for GATE students.

All grade 1-6 teachers have assumed responsibility for teaching one of the four components in multi-grade instructional groupings. Using progress monitoring tools, they have accessible, up-to-date information and can make adjustments in student placements as needed.



## J.X. WILSON SCHOOL

Jane Futrell, principal, 525-8350



Two major programmatic changes have contributed to J.X. Wilson School's dramatic increase in English-language arts achievement among its diverse student population. The first was a decision to establish a common language arts block and place grade 2-6 students in homogeneous groups for a **reading rotation program**. Collaboration is a key: teachers "share" students and everyone works together to ensure that all students succeed. Meeting in grade-level teams every Wednesday afternoon, the staff reviews student progress, analyzes assessment data, and makes placement changes as needed. The leveled groups are very flexible, allowing movement when students demonstrate growth or begin to struggle. Staff use the adopted Houghton Mifflin Reading curriculum and its supplemental components, but also carefully choose research-based materials known to be effective in addressing the specific needs at each level.


Establishment of a **reading intervention program** for students who need support beyond core reading instruction has also made a difference at J.X. Wilson. This initiative, now part of a schoolwide Response to

Intervention model, gives struggling readers access to more intensive, targeted instruction using the most effective curriculum available. Experienced paraprofessionals provide small-group instruction during the school day for primary-grade students four days per week, and after school for upper-grade students three days per week. DIBELS assessments and ongoing progress monitoring enable staff to respond quickly to student needs and gear instruction to assessed gaps in phonics, vocabulary, fluency, or comprehension.



## WINDSOR CREEK ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Maureen Grafeld, principal, 837-7757



When the staff at Windsor Creek Elementary "dug into their data" in 2007, they found that language arts scores for White and English-only students were rising, but disadvantaged subgroup scores were not. Recognizing that this was inconsistent with their core beliefs, the staff instituted a three-pronged effort to **restructure language arts instruction**. They began by adding a strong writing program, Writing by Design, to fill a gap in their curriculum. They also expanded the Reading Counts! motivational program to ensure 100 percent participation, especially reaching out to reluctant and struggling readers. Finally, they revamped their "reading regrouping" intervention practices, adding specialists into the rotation so they could provide more targeted instruction to smaller groups of students.

**Closing the math achievement gap** was Windsor Creek's second challenge. The staff approached this by working in PLC teams to identify power standards, then develop pacing guides and common assessments. Teachers meet in grade-level teams to analyze data and modify instruction based on results. They use small instructional groupings so they can "double dose" math instruction as needed. The school has formed a Response to Intervention learning center to provide short-term specialized math instruction and they are using the multi-sensory Touch Math program to hone skills. Home-school communication is a focus and an ELD Homework Club now supports students whose families can't assist them with math at home. API subgroup scores for both language arts and math are up as a result of these efforts. ■

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*Credits: Karen Arter, Sonoma County coordinator for the Distinguished Schools awards, contributed to this article. Suzanne Gedney, editor. Patty Bernstein, photography.*



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