

Jackson Elementary School

1810 Third St.

Sanger, CA 93657

Principal: Brad Huebert

Jackson Elementary is located in the rural town of Sanger, California, 25 miles southeast of Fresno. Approximately 20,000 people live in the town.

- ◆ Elementary (K-5)
- ◆ 81% Hispanic
- ◆ 77% Free or Reduced-Price Lunch
- ◆ 13% Special Education
- ◆ 19% English Language Learners

Over three years, Jackson Elementary School moved from being in Program Improvement status to becoming eligible to be categorized as a California Distinguished School. Seven years ago Jackson Elementary School's Academic Performance Index (API)¹ score was 608 out of 1000. For years, Jackson's score increased very slowly. The turnaround process began in 2004-05, and spanned two principals. In 2004-05, the school's API score rose to 760. In 2005-06, the current principal, Brad Huebert, came to Jackson as the second turnaround principal to continue the initial efforts. Mr. Huebert had two goals: to move Jackson out of Program Improvement (PI) status, which would make the school eligible to be a California Distinguished School, and to raise the API score for the school to over 800. These goals were met. In the 2005-06 school year, Jackson exited PI status after achieving above minimum levels of proficiency for two straight years. In the 2006-07 school year, Jackson received an API score of 811. The school then became eligible to apply for California Distinguished School status. The turnaround effort involved using standards to shape instruction, using data to improve instruction, and building a sense of professional community through communication. The first turnaround principal introduced the school to some key ideas in 2004-05, but it was Mr. Huebert who helped the school operationalize these ideas to make dramatic gains in test scores.

Standards-Driven Instruction

When Mr. Huebert became principal, he did not make major changes in the composition of the staff. In the first year of turnaround, staff was committed to working hard to help students achieve. The staff was practicing "1,000 random acts of kindness" designed to help students learn, but there was no clear strategy to focus these efforts on achieving their goals. Under the principal's direction, the staff was focused on standards, but did not have an understanding of what it meant to have a standards-driven curriculum. Many teachers used the textbook as a focal point and only incorporated standards if the standard fit with the textbook content. The textbooks were driving the instruction, not the standards.

¹ The Academic Performance Index (API) summarizes a school's performance on California standardized tests and high school exit exams. It is measured on a scale of 200 to 1,000.

Mr. Huebert developed strategies to more deeply integrate standards into instruction. With consultant support, staff at Jackson identified essential standards for instruction and created curriculum maps, which included all of the essential standards. Standards were also deconstructed into learning objectives, when appropriate, and used as guiding points in the curriculum. As a result, instead of using the textbook and fitting standards in if they could, staff started with the standards and utilized the textbook when appropriate.

At the beginning of the turnaround effort, in 2004-05, the school adopted a new instructional program, Explicit Direct Instruction (EDI). EDI complemented the standards-based approach by providing instructional strategies to deliver the standards-based content. With district support, Jackson and the other elementary schools in the district received EDI training. The shared approach facilitated communication across district schools. Jackson's role as the focal point of EDI training further helped the principal connect to other educators in the district.

Data-Driven Instruction

A second major element of Jackson's turnaround effort was using data to drive instruction. In the first year, 2004-05, there were assessments in place but teachers were not focusing on using data to drive instruction. They only used the assessment results to report progress to parents. Teachers did not know how to derive meaning from the data and to apply it to instructional planning.

When he became principal at Jackson Elementary, Mr. Huebert knew that assessments needed to drive instruction. Under his direction, staff began using two levels of performance assessment. The first level was the District Progress Assessment (DPA), a language arts, language conventions, and math assessment given in the district three times a year. Schools are able to see results at the student level, class level, grade level, and standards level.

For the second level of assessment, teachers created common assessments for each grade level. They developed at least three assessments for every standard—and every objective within every standard—to make sure they had a valid and reliable picture for students' mastery of the material. Questions on the assessments were specifically related to standards and learning objectives and were mainly teacher-created, although they were able to use questions from publishers when it was appropriate.

Professional Community and Communication

Jackson established grade level and subject-specific professional learning communities (PLCs), as part of a districtwide effort, to review performance data and to plan instruction around the results. PLCs met to examine data and answer questions about which concepts needed to be taught (or retaught), which measures would be used to assess the learning, how to help students who did not understand the concept, and how to enrich instruction for children who did understand. In addition to the teams based at Jackson, the district operated one district-level team. Principals met in the district PLC to discuss school reform; this helped the Jackson principal keep a focus on standards since they were a priority across the district.

The principal also believed that for the staff and community to buy into the reform process, they had to know the plan. He outlined the vision for the school to staff and the community. He also explained the procedures that needed to be maintained in the

school and areas that needed further improvement. Mr. Huebert disseminated information via monthly newsletters, weekly letters to staff, and in staff meetings. Some teachers were resistant and challenged him at times, but generally these changes were accepted. The principal built a sense of community by getting staff to participate more in the schools' extracurricular activities and events. The staff became more involved and, in turn, an appreciative community wanted to be more involved in the school. As a result, there was much higher involvement by teachers and parents.

Mr. Huebert attributes his success to understanding who among the staff would help maintain the momentum and support him, and which staff would stop or slow the momentum. He talked with key supportive staff as a sounding board before a new idea was introduced to all staff. Every staff member needed to know the goal was increasing student achievement—not just academic but whole-child-oriented achievement.

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