

Brazosport High School

***Brazosport Independent School District,
Freeport, Texas***



BRAZOSPORT HIGH SCHOOL

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1998–1999 Data

| Campus data | |
|--------------------------------|-------|
| Enrollment | 1,058 |
| Attendance rate | 94.1% |
| Dropout rate | .2% |
| Economically disadvantaged | 51.8% |
| Mobility rate | 26.1% |
| Limited proficiency in English | 3.5% |

| Campus demographics | |
|------------------------|-------|
| African American | 12.4% |
| Asian/Pacific Islander | .3% |
| Hispanic | 46.4% |
| Native American | .1% |
| White | 40.8% |

| District data | |
|----------------------------|--------|
| Enrollment | 13,247 |
| Number of high schools | 2 |
| Economically disadvantaged | 38.9% |

Source: Texas Education Agency, Academic Excellence Indicator System, www.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/aeis

Average Texas Learning Index scores for economically disadvantaged students (1998–99)

| | Brazosport High School | State Average |
|-------------|------------------------|---------------|
| Reading | 83.1 | 79.2 |
| Mathematics | 82.8 | 74.9 |

Source: Texas Education Agency, www.tea.state.tx.us

Selection Criteria: Texas Learning Index (TLI) scores in reading and mathematics

General Criteria:

- District enrollment of 5,000 or more students
- Campus population of 40 percent or more economically disadvantaged students
- No selective academic entrance criteria
- Grades served: 9–12

Performance Criteria:

Brazosport High School was selected for participation in the study based on its 1998–99 performance on the Texas Learning Index. It was one of only a few Title I high schools in Texas that met all of the following criteria:

- 1998–99 average TLI scores of 80 or above in both reading and mathematics for economically disadvantaged students
- A 1998–99 achievement gap (between students who were economically disadvantaged and students who were not economically disadvantaged) of 5 TLI points or fewer in reading and mathematics
- 1997–98 Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) exemption rates equal to or less than the state average (8.9 percent)

Notes

- In 1997–98, 98.4 percent of the school’s student population participated in the TAAS.
- In 1998–99, Brazosport High School had an achievement gap of 3.8 and 5.05 TLI points in reading and mathematics, respectively, between students who were economically disadvantaged and students who were not economically disadvantaged. Statewide, the average achievement gap was 7.1 TLI points in reading and 5.4 TLI points in mathematics.

BRAZOSPORT HIGH SCHOOL

Brazosport High School is located in Freeport, Texas, a community about sixty miles due south of Houston and only a few miles away from the Gulf of Mexico. The school is the original high school in the Brazosport Independent School District, and it served 1,058 students from eight neighboring coastal communities in 1998–99. Although not visible from the school’s grounds, the waters of the Gulf can be felt in the moist and balmy air on campus and around town. The school mascot name, the Exporters, suggests the extent to which shipping and seafaring have influenced the traditions and economy of the area. More recently, this region has also become an important center for the chemical industry.

Like its surrounding community, Brazosport High School has experienced many changes in the last several decades. One of the most far-reaching occurred as a result of the construction of a second high school in 1970. Up until that time, Brazosport High had served all the high school students from the eight diverse communities that make up Brazosport Independent School District. After the new school opened, students from the southern part of the district, which includes the communities of Freeport, Jones Creek, Oyster Creek, and Surfside, continued to attend Brazosport High, while students from the more affluent communities to the north attended the new high school. Having lost its status as *the* high school, Brazosport High was challenged to overcome marginalization as the low-income high school. Over the last few years the student population has continued to change as more Latino families have settled in the school’s service area. In 1998–99, 46 percent of the student population was Hispanic, 41 percent Anglo, and 12 percent African American. Slightly over half of the students were classified as economically disadvantaged.

Brazosport High School is located on a highway that also leads to the headquarters of several major chemical companies. Driving to the school one passes streets with names like Chlorine Drive. The school building itself makes an unassuming presence, its simple design and unadorned brick exterior typical of many schools built in the 1950s and 60s. Inside, the corridors are painted in nautical colors of red, white, and blue. The white paint and simple blue and red trim lend a freshness to the original brick walls and metal lockers of the 1952 structure. Photographs of past graduating classes and displays of student artwork decorate the entryway, attesting to both the school’s proud sense of tradition and its celebration of current student achievement.

Indeed, students, teachers, and administrators at Brazosport have much to celebrate. With focused and responsive leadership, district support, and hard work, Brazosport High managed to make a dramatic turnaround in student achievement in just one year. In 1995 the school’s rating in the state’s accountability system was low, relationships were strained, and safety and discipline questionable. Negative stereotypes, so often associated with low-income and minority campuses, had taken hold in the community. By the end of the following year, however, the school had achieved the second highest rating, Recognized, in the state accountability system¹; and members of the school community had begun to feel a new sense of confidence. It is also important to note that, unlike many “turnaround” schools, Brazosport High School accomplished this improvement without significant faculty turnover.

Since that time, administrators, faculty, staff, and students at Brazosport have not only maintained their high level of academic success, but have sought and attained higher goals for student achievement. After having achieved Recognized status for four consecutive years, the Exporters realized their goal

of Exemplary in 1999–2000. In 1998–99, the year before our site visit, Brazosport was one of only a handful of Title I high school in the state where student Texas Learning Index scores were above 80 in reading and mathematics.² Student performance on the Algebra I End-of-Course examination has also been outstanding: 74 percent of Brazosport High students passed the test, compared to only 43 percent across the state in 1998–99.³

To make these gains, teachers and administrators at Brazosport High School embraced the belief that all students can learn. They set high goals for student achievement and behavior, and worked together to support students in reaching these goals. They implemented processes to evaluate, focus, and intensify instruction; increased the rigor of their course offerings; promoted college preparation; and created extra support systems to ensure student success. Campus administrators, guided by the overriding goal of supporting effective teaching, fostered teacher collaboration, leadership, and professionalism by creating effective avenues for communication and making policies that freed teachers to teach. Adults on campus, aware that high school students are “still kids,” consciously made the high school a fun and accepting place where students feel cared about, valued, and motivated to do their best.

Underlying each of these strategies is the staff’s commitment to a fundamental goal: that each student will leave high school ready—and able—to take advantage of a wide range of opportunities. Describing his vision for what students should gain during their four years in high school, Principal Doug Boone explained,

You don’t ever want to . . . walk across that stage and get that diploma and have one door you can go through. You want to go on and have several doors, or find the master key that you can [use to] open all the doors. [You want to] be able to choose what you want to do in life and not be limited.

SETTING CLEAR GOALS AND ESTABLISHING HIGH EXPECTATIONS

Adults at Brazosport High School have set high goals for student achievement. Outstanding performance on the state accountability examination (TAAS)⁴ has been an important defining goal of the school since its turnaround in 1996. The goal was not simply to pass the test, but for students to master all the objectives on the test and achieve the honor of Academic Recognition. As Principal Boone explained, “We promote Academic Recognition, which means you didn’t miss anything on the TAAS. It’s not just take it and pass! It’s being the best you can be.” The school focused on obtaining Exemplary status in the state’s accountability system, an honor which requires not only high performance by the tenth graders who take the exam but high overall attendance and low dropout rates as well. This goal served to jumpstart the school’s efforts to improve student performance.

As the students themselves are quick to explain, success on the TAAS is a point of pride, but it does not adequately capture the school’s high expectations or its unique character. Other academic goals at Brazosport include higher pass rates on the Algebra I and English End-of-Course exams and preparing students for college. In addition, while staff at Brazosport work hard to make high school fun, they expect that their students will learn to take responsibility in shaping their day-to-day experience at

school and in creating their future opportunities.

Brazosport High School faculty and administration believe and act upon the conviction that all their students can be successful, provided they have adequate support and high-quality instruction. An assistant administrator shared this view:

That's something that we've preached from day one, that we feel like all kids can learn. It doesn't matter the background that they come from. You give them the time, the resources, and so forth, and I think the motivation, the push. You tell them, "You can do this. We're going to be here to help you in any way we can to get to this point."

Brazosport Independent School District has also actively promoted this philosophy. As one staff member explained, the district's position on this point is unequivocal:

I think it's very easy for educators to say that all children can learn. Well, I can say that all day long, but if I don't believe it, then it's not going to happen. I know the former superintendent has said, "If you don't believe it, you say it over and over and over until you do. And if you still can't convince yourself of that, you're probably in the wrong business."

Teachers at Brazosport indicated that this belief is widely shared at the school and has a powerful impact on student performance. One teacher said:

[We] take the adage "All kids can learn" seriously. It's not just words; [we] believe it. You have to buy it. You have to accept it. You can have all the goals in the world and they're just words unless somebody internalizes them, and this school did.

The students themselves agree that their teachers' belief in them goes far beyond rhetoric. As one student said, "Every teacher roots for every student. They don't leave anybody out."

The story of Brazosport High's success on the Algebra I End-of-Course exam provides an excellent example of turning the belief that "all students can learn" to action. A veteran mathematics teacher who had been very successful preparing her advanced algebra students for the test realized that students in the basic algebra classes could be equally successful on the test given adequate instruction. She decided that she and the other teachers could use some of the instructional strategies that had proven so successful with her gifted students to improve the performance of all Algebra I students. As she explained, "I was convinced that with some of the things I was doing, that all students could be successful on the test."

With the support and encouragement of the mathematics department chairperson and the school's administration, this teacher began to work regularly with the other Algebra I teachers so that all of them would use the best instructional methods and feel competent doing so. For example, teachers began emphasizing the early use of the graphing calculator to check work. By carefully analyzing the results of practice tests given to students at six-week intervals, teachers discovered a need for more work on "translation skills" that will help students convert word problems to mathematical expressions. Over the years, this process, which combines master teaching, regular departmental collaboration, and ongoing assessment of student work, has led to such dramatic results that Brazosport High School student performance on the Algebra I End-of-Course exam far exceeds the state average.

USING DATA TO GUIDE INSTRUCTION

At Brazosport High School administrators and teachers are quite practiced in the use of data to evaluate and inform their work with students. For the past five years, the teachers at Brazosport High have used a process for continuous assessment of instruction and learning, which is locally known as the “Eight-Step Process.” This method lays out eight simple steps that guide teachers’ use of data to evaluate students’ needs, plan instructional timelines, assess achievement, redirect teaching, maintain progress, and monitor student and teacher outcomes.

First developed by an elementary school teacher in the district, this process proved effective in raising student performance on the state assessment, and has since been promoted as a districtwide strategy. Principal Boone introduced the method to the staff at Brazosport High School in 1995 with significant district support and technical assistance. In many ways, the Eight-Step Process can be seen as the cornerstone of Brazosport High School’s continuing success and improvement.

Using this method, teachers have become more purposeful in what they teach and how they teach it. They now focus more on doing whatever is necessary to meet student achievement goals. The school’s testing coordinator, who is also a teacher at the high school, described these benefits from a teacher’s standpoint:

I have a roadmap now for each of my students. I know where they’re at, and I know where I need to take them. And with the data that’s provided me, now I know the most efficient way to get there.

According to the principal, this method of continuous assessment fostered an important shift from a content focus to a student focus. He noted that making such a change in orientation could be difficult for high school teachers:

Secondary teachers—and I am one you know—we’re going to get through the book come hell or high water. . . . It’s like what I call chicken feed teaching. You just throw it out there, and if they get it they get it, if they don’t they don’t. I don’t want the chicken feed teacher on my campus.

FOCUSING ON INSTRUCTION AND INDIVIDUAL LEARNING

Consistent with this shift from a content focus to a student focus, the staff at Brazosport have set in place several policies and practices designed to improve student learning. They use individual student assessment data to determine areas where students need intensive instruction and have modified class schedules to provide these students with increased instructional time. Similarly, they have changed teacher assignments to support freshmen and sophomores, promoted and expanded their AP course offerings to encourage more students to take college-level coursework, and provided extra support beyond that offered in the classroom to ensure that students attain the school’s high performance goals.

Increasing Instructional Time Through Innovative Scheduling

Reviewing results from the eighth-grade TAAS, Brazosport High teachers noticed that many of their students were arriving at high school with weaknesses in mathematics, reading, and writing. Rather than allow this to become an excuse for continuing low performance, the teachers took action to solve the problem. They decided to provide ninth- and tenth-grade students with daily instruction in the areas where they need improvement.⁵ The principal advocated the proposal at the district level, and district administrators then supported the teachers' plan to tailor their schedule and curriculum in a way that best served the needs of students at their campus. Staff at the school describe this daily class scheduling as "double dipping."

Teachers use student scores from the eighth-grade TAAS to determine which students will be placed in the daily ninth-grade classes in mathematics, reading, and writing. When the students make their transition to tenth grade, teachers repeat their review of assessment data. This time they use results from a ninth-grade practice TAAS to determine each student's schedule. If mathematics and reading are still weak, the tenth graders will again be assigned to daily mathematics and reading classes. If writing scores are still low, students attend a special section of English II that focuses on writing skills.

In addition to these far-reaching changes, ninth- and tenth-grade students receive daily instruction focused on specific TAAS objectives in each of their English and mathematics classes. Teachers of these classes spend 15 to 20 minutes daily providing instruction related to the TAAS objective designated on the school calendar. Teachers work on the particular objective—or instructional focus—for a period of time ranging from a day up to three or more weeks depending upon the needs indicated by the analysis of student performance data. In addition, teachers of the other subjects provide reinforcement of the target objective in their own classes.

Changing Teacher Assignments to Support Freshmen and Sophomores

Currently at Brazosport High School, all teachers in the four core disciplines—mathematics, English, science, and social studies—teach at least one freshman or sophomore class. Freshmen and sophomores, who often struggle the most with the foundation courses, are taught by the most experienced teachers. The principal explained the philosophy behind this policy:

I always wondered, "Why do we put our master teacher with the upper-level kids?" Seniority? There's no seniority in the school business! It's just like coaching. You want your best coaches with those younger kids. The same thing here.

Like double dipping, this change also originated with the teachers. In this case, a master mathematics teacher requested to teach freshman algebra. Noting her impressive results in raising student performance, the principal initiated a schoolwide policy that all teachers would teach at least one ninth- or tenth-grade class. This strategy has been quite successful in generating significant improvements in the students' Algebra I End-of-Course exam scores. In the 1998–99 school year, Brazosport High School students far exceeded the state average on the test, with 74 percent of the students passing the exam. Improvement has not been as dramatic in the English End-of-Course exam, but in a characteristic proactive response, the principal has recently intensified instruction and teacher collaboration in English, requiring that teachers from all disciplines work with their students to produce at least two writing samples per semester.

Expanding Student Access to AP and College Courses

At Brazosport High School enrollment in Advanced Placement classes is open to all students. Students need not have been previously enrolled in Pre-AP classes or identified as “gifted and talented.” Teachers actively identify capable and motivated students who have not previously been placed in Pre-AP or honors classes. Faculty see it as their responsibility to encourage these students to try more demanding classes and also to provide the additional support the students need to succeed. Similarly, they see it as their responsibility to keep on track the students already enrolled in these courses. As the principal explained,

We have good kids who are very intelligent, but no one’s pushing them . . . so we push them and tell them you don’t have a choice. They have to keep on that track with Pre-AP and do the college track. . . . We say you can do it, and you’re going to do it.

Determined not to let the limitations of the school’s AP offerings impede a promising student’s progress, the school wrote and obtained a grant to develop distance-learning technology. As a result of this grant, Brazosport High students are now able to take any of the AP classes offered at the other high school in the district.

The principal, counselors, and teachers also promote a “dual credit” program between the Brazosport Independent School District and a local community college. This creative partnership allows high school students in the district to take college courses for credit at no cost. A counselor from the college is available to students at the high school two days a week. While the program expands the courses available to students and increases their flexibility in scheduling classes, many agree that the most important benefit is the exposure it provides to college.

Providing Extra Support for Student Achievement

While making changes to intensify instruction and the rigor of the curriculum, the administration and faculty at Brazosport High School also recognize that many students need additional support beyond that offered in the classroom in order to achieve the school’s high performance goals. Tutoring and enrichment, both integral components of the Eight-Step Process of continual assessment, are actively promoted at Brazosport High. Similarly the school dedicates extra staff and resources to ensure that students attend school and make it through each school year.

Whenever the data indicate that a student is not mastering a particular objective, it is the teacher’s responsibility to provide additional support. Most teachers explained without any tone of resentment that they routinely arrive early or stay late to provide extra help. It was clear that the students appreciated and made good use of their teachers’ accessibility and support. For example, one student described his teacher’s study sessions:

The reason I even passed that class was because of our teacher. She really understands how difficult it is. She holds all kinds of study sessions before every major test we take. She really wants you to come down there. She’ll always mention it and have a sign outside her door, saying, “Pre-Cal Study Session at this time.”

Students noticed their teachers' availability and willingness to help. One student said appreciatively, "They're always there!" Another student explained that many teachers give out their home phone numbers. She said, "My teacher's happy that you want to learn. She'd rather you call her at home and ask her a question than just forget about it." Underlining the impact of this extra academic support another student said, "We don't have to pay people to tutor us. All we have to do is go to our teacher after school!"

In addition to tutoring, the administration and faculty at Brazosport promote enrichment activities for their students. Teachers take advantage of their relative proximity to Houston to provide students with opportunities to visit institutions such as the Houston Museum of Fine Arts and the Houston Medical Center. Closer to campus, Dow Chemical also frequently hosts student visits during which students learn about various facets of chemical research and development. The principal explained,

If you have a GT [gifted and talented] kid that's from a highly affluent background and a GT kid that's underprivileged, the only difference . . . with them is that [one] kid gets exposed to all the arts, sciences, everything else. . . . So we've got to take care of those kids. So we need to have field trips.

To achieve the school's performance goals, Brazosport High School staff have taken many steps to ensure that students come to school and stay in school. Texas high schools need a minimum attendance rate of 94 percent in order to achieve the state rating of Exemplary. Working toward this goal, the school requires that each student have at least a 90 percent attendance record in each class in order to receive credit. To support the school's high attendance requirements, the administration hired a full-time bilingual Community Liaison. This staff member is responsible for making sure students are in school. Each day she calls the parents of every student who is absent. She follows up with letters whenever a student has missed three consecutive days and again if the student misses five days. When necessary she makes home visits or goes out into the community to track down missing students. Her work doesn't stop when the student is back at school. As she explained,

Sometimes I've even walked students to their classes for one or two days. Sometimes they just smile at me and say, "I'm going to go to class. You don't have to walk me." I say, "Oh yes I do, because if not you're going to get lost."

Finally, when students miss ten daily class sessions they must make up their work in a Saturday School held on campus.

SUPPORTING TEACHERS AND ENHANCING COLLABORATION

The administrators at Brazosport recognize that it takes a team effort to attain their student achievement goals and have worked to build the high level of collaboration present on the campus today. The teachers at Brazosport play a key role on this team, and the administration works to support the teachers' work as instructional leaders and to maintain open communication between administrators, teachers, counselors, and other staff. The administrators have also implemented practices that allow teachers to spend their time focused on instruction.

Building a Collaborative Team

The team metaphor is prominent at Brazosport High School. Teachers, students, staff, and administrators feel they are able to rely upon each other as they work to move the school to higher levels of success. One teacher described the easy-going and generous working atmosphere at the school:

It's nothing to get a phone call and have somebody say, "I'm having trouble with grades," and you just go and help because you know everybody is struggling. If you need help with something, it seems like somebody just pops up to help you. I have loved working here. I've never asked somebody to do something for me and they looked at me and said "No, I won't do it." They might say, "I don't know how to do it, but I'll try to find a way to help you do it." But no one would ever look you in the eye and just say, "No."

This attitude is true for the nonteaching staff as well. For example, the Community Liaison emphasized how the ready collaboration of colleagues enhances her work: "I receive help from other offices . . . like the counselors and the registrar . . . even though they aren't official helpers." Administrators also make a point of underlining their membership on the school team. As the principal said, "It's a team atmosphere where everybody shares because we are all going to win. We all win together; we all lose together, including me."

While the teachers at Brazosport High have been fortunate to enjoy supportive relationships with one another for many years, the level of collaboration focused on student achievement has recently increased. This is due in large part to administrative policies that support collaboration and organizational changes in teaching assignments.

The administration recognized the need for all teachers to contribute to student success on the TAAS and to buy in to this important campus goal. To accomplish this they provided an intensive, one-day training for all teachers on the reading, writing, and mathematics objectives and then expected all teachers to incorporate TAAS objectives in their classes. English and mathematics teachers were available as mentors to help teachers in other special areas begin to integrate the TAAS objectives. One vocational teacher described the profound impact of this policy:

I think years ago though, we that were not English and math [teachers] sat back and thought, "It's not our problem. It's their problem; they have to teach it." Not realizing that those kids are the same kids that are in my class and so it is my problem, because my kids, they have to graduate. That's our goal. We've got to be supportive of anything that [the other teachers] do. [The policy] took us to this point, and I think that's why our kids are really successful. We reinforce everything they teach.

In an effort to facilitate this cross-disciplinary collaboration, the administration recently compiled a "Teacher Kit" to provide all teachers with the instructional timelines used to prepare students to master the assessment objectives. This information helps teachers make lesson plans that reinforce the work of teachers in other disciplines. The administration places a high value on such collaboration, acknowledging it when reviewing teachers' lesson plans and conducting teacher evaluations.

The school's policy of having all teachers of the four core disciplines teach at least one freshman

or sophomore class had the unintended but powerful consequence of drawing departments together across grade levels. It facilitated the emergence of vertical teaming⁶ at the school. Now all teachers within a given department are confronted with similar challenges. They work for greater consistency within each grade level and are more aware of the preparation their students need to master material in each grade. The principal described this serendipitous benefit:

It brought those departments closer together, and they collaborated and shared ideas and brainstormed and came up with some fantastic ideas to help our children be successful. So it pulled the team together!

Collaboration has extended beyond the confines of the high school itself. Now with the support of the district, teachers from the high school participate in vertical teaming with teachers at the middle school. Together they are working to ensure that there are no gaps in preparation and no unnecessary overlaps in curriculum.

Supporting Teacher Professionalism and Leadership

Teachers at Brazosport High School feel that their work as educators is valued and supported by the administration. They readily shared their enthusiasm about working in an environment where their professionalism is so respected. The teachers' sense of satisfaction is no accident, but rather is the result of administrative practice that consistently welcomes their input, values their expertise, and supports their primary mission of educating students.

The administration relies on the teachers to be experts in their own areas. In fact, the principal sees himself as the “instructional facilitator” rather than the instructional leader on campus. He was very thoughtful and deliberate in acknowledging and utilizing staff expertise when he took on the role of principal. He explained his approach:

Number one, you always surround yourself with winners, which I have. And number two, you hire people smarter than you, and you let them do their job. I'm really a manager. I'm an instructional facilitator. There's no way I can know all the curriculum and instruction. I depend on my department chairs and those teachers in those classrooms. Those are the instructional leaders, so I do what they tell me to do. When you empower a teacher with that ability, and let them really use their expertise, it's unbelievable what they come up with. It's unbelievable when they're in on the decisionmaking process.

Keeping Communication Open

The principal makes a point of staying in contact with teachers through formal and informal channels. One formal channel of communication that he leverages is the Campus Renewal Team—which includes staff, one parent, and one community representative. Teachers see this team as an effective decisionmaking body.⁷

Through the Campus Renewal Team, faculty have been able to make significant improvements to administrative policy, shaping the campus in a way that matches their values and goals. For example,

block scheduling was one major change that originated in the committee. Similarly, teachers are able to voice concerns about administrative decisions. In one case, the principal had asked that all teachers call parents of each one of their students twice every semester. Teachers had found this burdensome not only for themselves but for the parents, so they suggested a compromise—that they make these calls once every semester. This suggestion fulfilled the intent of the principal’s policy and was immediately implemented. As one Campus Renewal Team member enthusiastically put it, “It’s kind of like being a stockholder. You really have an interest in what you’re doing because you know that what you have to say has an impact.”

In addition to this formal channel for dialogue, the principal actively encourages staff, as well as students, to come to see him at his office. Principal Boone’s office, with the walls covered with charts of student achievement data and his favorite Exporter memorabilia, is a very welcoming place; a comfortable round table and a candy jar make staff and students more likely to drop by. Teachers report that there truly *is* an open-door policy in effect at Brazosport High and appreciate the willing support they receive from the administration. As one teacher said,

You really do feel now like you really can have a say in things. Even if you aren’t on the Campus Renewal Team you should feel that way. [The principal] really wants you to come in and utilize that open-door policy that he has. Students too. He really does prefer that if you have a problem you come and talk to him about it, not write a letter or complain to someone else.

Finally, Principal Boone routinely turns to his faculty, especially his master teachers and veteran staff, to keep him abreast of curricular developments in their disciplines. The mathematics department chairperson described how she updated the principal on a recent mathematics department meeting so that he would be better prepared to represent the needs of his faculty and students in an upcoming district discussion on the mathematics curriculum. The principal acknowledged that the teachers are also his primary source of moral support.

Administrative Support for Teachers

Administrative policy and practice at Brazosport High consistently signals the high value placed on teaching and underscores the school’s commitment to student achievement. Policies and systems have been developed that convey an understanding that teachers’ primary purpose is to educate students and that teachers themselves know best what they need to do their job well. Examples of these practices can be found in the administration’s approach to discipline and extra duty assignments (such as monitoring students in the cafeteria, at bus stops, and in hallways), and in the school’s commitment to do whatever is necessary to facilitate instruction.

The faculty appreciates the administrative support they receive in the area of discipline. In 1995–96 the administrative team implemented a schoolwide discipline plan based on the concept of a “discipline ladder” or hierarchy. Minor and major infractions are spelled out and linked with an equally clear series of consequences. The beauty of this system for both teachers and students is that everyone knows exactly what to expect in any situation. Although teachers are expected to monitor behavior in their own classrooms, the administration takes primary responsibility for monitoring behavior outside the classroom and for enforcement of the plan. An assistant principal spoke about the administration’s approach: “We just try to stay on top of things, keep track of things, and just try to free those teachers

up so they can teach. That's the key."

Teachers at Brazosport are not responsible for watching students in the cafeteria, at bus stops, and in hallways or other areas. Rather, the four administrators—Principal Boone and the three assistant principals—remain visible throughout the campus, and students are given responsibility for monitoring their own behavior. The administration wants teachers to spend their time and energy in the classrooms, with students and with each other in collaborative activities. As the principal asserted, "I don't believe in duty for my teachers. I want the teachers in the classrooms!" Teachers spoke appreciatively about this policy, underlining how it reinforced their primary role and enabled them to get closer to their students: "We don't have teacher duty! Hallelujah! So we aren't police officers in addition to teachers!"

The administration has made it a policy to provide teachers with help and material resources to aid them in their work and to facilitate the implementation of new instructional initiatives. Again the guiding principle is doing whatever is needed to facilitate instruction. This is perhaps most evident in the support provided to teachers when they are working with student data. The district's testing coordinator works with the principal to desegregate the student data. She looks at individual and classroom data, examining performance as a whole and performance on particular indicators. She then prepares the information for teachers and helps them develop timelines that take into consideration their strongest and weakest objectives. Her assistance even extends so far as to make copies of the testing materials and data for teachers. As she explained,

We don't want teachers standing in front of the copy machine. So the district provides the materials they need, as much of the materials as we can possibly get, so that they're not spending their time running off materials, hunting for materials, or anything like that. They can spend their time on instruction.

FOSTERING AN ENVIRONMENT OF RESPECT AND AFFECTION FOR STUDENTS

Students at Brazosport made it clear that they attend a very special high school. They described the school as a place where they feel cared about and where they know that the adults are truly behind them. They emphasized their appreciation for the time and attention they receive from teachers and administrators at the school. Moreover, school is fun. As one student said,

You end up learning more than you ever thought you were going to learn . . . and having fun at the same time . . . which you didn't think was possible. They have a funny way of making you learn without you even knowing it. It's kind of weird.

Adults at the high school have created this environment through practices that signal their commitment to their students' growth and development. On a daily basis, the teachers and administrators encourage and motivate students to do their best by involving themselves with their students, taking time to listen to them, and recognizing and valuing their accomplishments. In addition, their interactions with students reflect a strong informal philosophy, which is that while school is primarily for learning, it should also be fun.

Motivating Students

Administrators at Brazosport take a leading role in motivating students. Each school morning, Principal Boone greets students with a daily pep talk. His messages aim to focus students on the academic objective of the day and to energize them to perform. Principal Boone often says to students, “You’re winners and don’t let anybody tell you anything different. You can be anything you want to be!” The principal also takes every opportunity to remind students of their worth and ability, whether it be through one-on-one conversations in the hall, on the sidelines at a football game, or through regular forums such as the student assemblies he convenes throughout the year.

The staff see these positive messages as a key factor in their students’ success. As one administrator explained, “We have faith in them. [They think], ‘Now I’ve got this person that’s really pushing me, that’s really behind me, trying to motivate me.’”

The students themselves make it clear that they have benefited from this support. One student said,

The principal’s a very, very, very happy man. He always is. But one guaranteed way to make him extremely upset is to say, “I can’t do it.” He doesn’t like “I can’t.” I guess that’s what gives the students the extra confidence too. Because they’re like, “If he believes in me, then why can’t I?” He pushes us all on.

Being Visible and Involved with Students

The teachers and staff make it a practice to be visible and involved with their students. This may take the form of cheering and “hollering and embarrassing” students at one of the many extracurricular events at the school, keeping a watchful eye on attendance patterns and walking a student to class, or simply noting an important shift in a student’s mood.

Brazosport students have come to expect a high level of involvement from their teachers. One teacher, a dedicated fan of his students, spoke about his regular attendance at student activities:

It’ll wear you out, but I do it. If any of my kids have anything that’s at [the school campus] . . . and I’m not working on that night, then I at least make an appearance. And if you aren’t there, they’ll ask you why. They know that the teachers are going to be there, and if you’re not there, they’re checking on it.

Administrators are equally involved. A student emphasized this point:

[The principal is] always there if the school is doing something, like basketball games or football games. He’s always right there on the sidelines with the teams and stuff. Pretty much everywhere you turn, he’s there. He shows up in class to see how we’re doing and make sure everybody is learning. He’s always interacting with us, always!

Taking Time to Listen to Students

Administrators and teachers are flexible and generous with their time. This help extends beyond academic tutoring and study sessions to students' personal concerns as well. Students emphasized that adults at Brazosport High School take time to listen their ideas and to help them puzzle through adolescent dilemmas.

Students described feeling free to go to teachers to talk with them about personal problems. Many Spanish-speaking students turn informally to the bilingual Community Liaison for personal support. Students also go directly to the principal and make free use of his open-door policy and his candy jar. Asked what he would do if he had a personal problem, one senior said,

Take it to the source. It doesn't bother [Mr. Boone]. Anybody can walk into his office. If you have anything to talk about, any problem. It doesn't matter, from anything to do with the school, somebody wrote graffiti, to if your girlfriend dumped you. He doesn't care. Just go in his office and talk to him. Any way he can help, he's there. He's kind of like our counselor *and* our principal.

Students may also voice concerns through the Executive Council, a group of elected student leaders with whom the principal meets once a month. Administrators set up this forum to ensure that students would have a place where they feel comfortable expressing their opinions. Recently, students on the Executive Council raised the need to work to prevent teen pregnancy, and the administration responded by organizing a special assembly. Student leaders also noted the administration's quick and caring response to a recent crisis:

Our bonfire . . . got burned down the day before it was supposed to . . . by a different school, and we came up here the next morning and all got together and walked into his office. He tried to talk with us in there, but there were too many of us. He took us to the auditorium. We all sat down and figured out what we wanted to do. He took the time out, and he let us have the time out, and he was our friend. He let us build that bonfire so we could have it that night.

Recognizing Students

Teachers at Brazosport High believe it is important to celebrate student accomplishment whenever possible, whether this be acknowledging a special accomplishment, remembering a birthday, or simply greeting students as they enter the classroom. They make a practice of recognizing their students' achievements on a daily basis. Explaining the importance of this approach, one teacher said,

There are reasons that you might not talk to a certain kid very often in your class, and you hope that maybe he gets more attention in another class, but maybe he doesn't. So certainly we want our kids to come to school and know that we know they're here. We don't want them to be invisible.

Staff members at Brazosport take this approach so seriously that they have created school rituals and policies to ensure that a wide variety of students receive recognition. For example, each teacher honors a "Student of the Month," and staff present Citizenship Awards whenever a student is especially

helpful to a school visitor. Teachers contact parents of each of their students at least once a semester to say something positive about the student, and the principal rewards high performance on the state assessment and end-of-course exams with special prizes. In the classroom, many teachers routinely acknowledge good work with treats, special stickers, or notes. As one teacher emphasized, “There are just lots and lots of ways to recognize kids.”

As a prime example, the Campus Renewal Team recently facilitated a teacher proposal to change the election procedures for Homecoming Queen so that a wider group of students would be honored. A teacher explained the proposal and the rationale:

Instead of having students nominate their friends and then having them all vote and getting the top three, the teacher wanted organizations and even the band and athletics to each nominate a girl, and a boy for Homecoming King, then everyone would be voted on and only one time. We’d have five finalists and then we’d announce it. We recognized more kids. One from every club. It was really nice. Some girls who would never have been recognized got to dress real pretty and go out on the field and have their father escort them, a lot of girls who maybe would never have had that opportunity before. It was a real nice change, I thought.

Indeed, an air of festivity is evident at Brazosport, where every day birthdays are publicly announced on the morning television show, and the day’s honorees walk the halls sprinkled with glitter and tethered to bunches of balloons. An assistant principal stressed the importance of these attentions for high school students:

Many times people think at this age group they’re too old, too mature for kindness and love, but that’s not true. They all still need someone to say, “You’re a good kid. Keep it up.”

ACKNOWLEDGING SUCCESS AND LOOKING AHEAD TO THE FUTURE

Over the past five years the Brazosport High School community, with the support and leadership of the district, has indeed turned the school around. As the school’s academic performance data show, more and more students are achieving at high levels. Students, teachers, administrators, and parents all reflect with pride on the magnitude of the changes on campus. A parent’s words capture the school’s shift in focus:

I can remember four years ago when our oldest daughter graduated from here . . . some of the table conversation that we had with her was so-and-so is going to have a baby or so-and-so is doing drugs or something like that. So between that time [and now] the table conversation has gone from that to, “How was your day? How did you do in school? I did fine.”

While proud of their present achievements, administrators, staff, and even the students themselves recognize that the school is not a perfect place, that there are still many areas in which to improve and higher goals to accomplish.

A major goal is to extend the methods and success of the continuous assessment process to all courses and not just those that are subject to state assessment. Indeed, a spirit of striving to improve is what seems to most characterize all members of this school community. As one teacher expressed, “You never arrive. You are always looking to improve.”

ENDNOTES

- ¹ As part of the Texas public school accountability system, each school receives an annual rating that takes into consideration their students' performance on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) and the school's dropout rate. Among other things, a Recognized rating means that at least 80 percent of the students who took the TAAS passed all core subject areas—that is, reading, writing, and mathematics. In addition, it means that at least 80 percent of each ethnic group and 80 percent of students identified as economically disadvantaged passed each subject area test.
- ² The TLI is a scaled score anchored at the spring 1994 exit-level Texas Assessment of Academic Skills, or TAAS. This test is administered to high school students for the first time in grade 10. Because we were interested in selecting schools where students were performing above the expected minimum standards, we set as an inclusion criterion that a school's economically disadvantaged students must have an average 1998–99 TLI score of 80 on both reading and mathematics. A TLI score of 80 represents student performance considerably above the minimum passing level of 70. In choosing the schools, we also looked for schools where the TAAS participation rate was equal to or less than the state average (for 1997–98) and where the TLI achievement gap between students who were economically disadvantaged and students who were not economically disadvantaged was low—five TLI points or fewer in reading and mathematics.
- ³ End-of-course examinations measure student learning in certain high school courses—Algebra I, Biology, English II, and U.S. History. Specifically, the Algebra I EOC exam measures how well students understand the mathematical concepts set forth in the Texas state curriculum standards (known as the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, or TEKS) for Algebra I.
- ⁴ The Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) is a criterion-referenced test given to students in grades 3 through 8 and grade 10. The test is administered during the spring semester of each school year. In grade 10, the test measures student achievement in reading, writing, and mathematics. The grade 10 test is known as the exit-level test; students are required to pass it in order to qualify for graduation from high school.
- ⁵ Before this change, classes were scheduled for every other day.
- ⁶ Vertical teaming refers to the practice of teachers from different grade levels within a school meeting with each other to plan and coordinate. These meetings often focus on aligning curriculum across grades. Vertical teaming can also occur across school levels such that teachers from the elementary, middle, and high schools meet to coordinate their efforts.
- ⁷ Beginning in 1992, the Texas legislature required all campuses to develop school-based management teams that include administrators, classroom teachers, campus staff, community members, and parents. At Brazosport, this team is called the Campus Renewal Team.

