

# *Martin*

# *High School*

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***Laredo Independent School District,  
Laredo, Texas***



# MARTIN HIGH SCHOOL

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## 1998–1999 Data

| Campus data                    |       |
|--------------------------------|-------|
| Enrollment                     | 1,984 |
| Attendance rate                | 94.7% |
| Dropout rate                   | 1.2%  |
| Economically disadvantaged     | 92.2% |
| Mobility rate                  | 25.2% |
| Limited proficiency in English | 25.5% |

| Campus demographics    |       |
|------------------------|-------|
| African American       | .1%   |
| Asian/Pacific Islander | .1%   |
| Hispanic               | 98.2% |
| Native American        | .1%   |
| White                  | 1.6%  |

| District data              |        |
|----------------------------|--------|
| Enrollment                 | 22,061 |
| Number of high schools     | 3      |
| Economically disadvantaged | 89.5%  |

Source: Texas Education Agency, Academic Excellence Indicator System, [www.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/aeis](http://www.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/aeis)

**Selection Criteria:** Advanced Placement (AP) enrollment

**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:**

Martin High School was selected for participation in the study based on its 1998–99 performance in the area of Advanced Placement (AP). It was one of only a handful of Title I high schools in Texas that met all of the following criteria:

- Texas accountability rating of Acceptable, Recognized, or Exemplary
- Enrollment in four or more of the six AP classes selected for this study (Biology, Calculus AB, English Language, English Literature, U.S. Government and Politics, U.S. History)
- A high proportion of low-income students enrolled in the selected AP courses relative to the percentage of low-income students enrolled at the school (a ratio of .70 or better)
- For at least three of the six selected AP courses, the percentage of eleventh- and twelfth-grade students enrolled exceeded the state average
- Students taking College Board AP examinations in over half of the six selected AP courses

**Percentage of eleventh- and twelfth-grade students enrolled in selected AP courses 1998–99**

|                              | Martin High School | All Texas High Schools |
|------------------------------|--------------------|------------------------|
| Biology                      | 1.3%               | 7.9%                   |
| Calculus AB                  | 11.1%              | 7.1%                   |
| English Language             | 21.1%              | 10.5%                  |
| English Literature           | 15.5%              | 8.9%                   |
| U.S. Government and Politics | 18%                | 7.1%                   |
| U.S. History                 | 16.3%              | 7.9%                   |

Source: Texas Education Agency, [www.tea.state.tx.us](http://www.tea.state.tx.us)

**Note**

Enrollment in these courses is representative of the school's overall student population in terms of the participation of low-income students. The ratio of the percentage of low-income students enrolled in AP relative to percentage of low-income students enrolled at the school is .95.

## MARTIN HIGH SCHOOL

Raymond and Tirza Martin High School is located about a mile north of the U.S.–Mexico border, in one of the older barrios, or neighborhoods, of Laredo. The school was founded in 1937 and until 1965 was the only public high school serving the city’s largely Hispanic population. During these years, Martin was at the center of civic life in Laredo. People would gather in the school gym for community events and dances, and almost everyone would come out to cheer at athletic competitions of the “mighty Tigers.” Students at Martin today are proud of their school’s long history and tradition, and many of their parents and grandparents graduated from the school. That many of their teachers also graduated from the high school is a source of motivation for some students. As one student explained,

I guess teachers want to see us succeed because they succeeded. They passed through these halls themselves. They passed through most of these classrooms. . . . They went through so much and they want to see the next generation continue its success.

There is a sense, as another student explained, that the students at Martin “are walking in the footsteps of the many people before [them].”

Martin is one of three high schools in Laredo Independent School District. At the time of our visit in 1999–2000, it had an enrollment of 2,330 students in grades 9 through 12. Of the students enrolled in 1999–2000, 98.5 percent were Hispanic, 26 percent had limited proficiency in English, and 91.8 percent were identified as economically disadvantaged.

At first glance, the main building of Martin High School looks like it has changed very little in the past 63 years. The building and a nearby housing project were both built with Works Progress Administration money in the 1930s, and the school retains its art deco exterior. Although the administration has plans for renovation of the two-story brick structure, the long halls are still lined with tall metal lockers (no longer in use) and the classrooms have their original wood floors. Beyond these reminders of the school’s past, however, the campus has changed dramatically to meet the changing educational needs of its students.

The former cafeteria is now a vibrant student-counseling center, the old library is a well-stocked teacher resource room, and the classrooms contain computers wired to the internet. Behind the main building, the school has expanded to cover every available foot of its confined inner-city grounds, including the former football field. The campus includes a library with conference rooms and a distance-learning facility, science classrooms with fully equipped adjoining laboratories, and a cafeteria/auditorium. It also houses the district’s new Health Science Magnet School, which about 5 percent of Martin’s student body attends on a half-day basis.

While all of these changes are exciting, the teachers and administrators at Martin know that it takes much more than infrastructure to make the students at their school successful. The school and its Campus Education Improvement Committee<sup>1</sup> have taken a series of steps to increase the rigor and effectiveness of their academic programs and prepare students to excel in the classroom and in life. They have implemented initiatives designed to challenge students and provide them with the support they need to be successful, embraced the focused use of data as a way to help guide both curriculum

and instruction, and created systems of communication that encourage collaboration and teamwork. They have also fostered an environment where students and teachers feel recognized and supported and where a premium is placed on service to each other and the community.

Much to the excitement of everyone at the school, Martin High School's efforts have begun to yield results:

- Since 1998, over 80 percent of each graduating class has received the Recommended High School Program—the 24-credit, college-preparation program recommended by the Texas State Board of Education.<sup>2</sup> State and district figures for the class of 1999 were 15 percent and 74 percent, respectively. (Ninety-six percent of the Martin class of 2000 graduated under either the Recommended High School Program or the Distinguished Achievement Program.)
- In 1999, Martin was one of only a handful of high-poverty Texas high schools where a large proportion of low-income students was enrolled in Advanced Placement (AP) classes. Moreover, the percentage of grade 11 and 12 students enrolled in AP was greater than the Texas state average for five of the six “core” AP courses: Calculus AB, U.S. Government and Politics, English Language, English Literature, and U.S. History (see cover page for details).
- In the 1999–2000 school year, the school's passing rates on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) in reading, writing, and mathematics were all at or above 80 percent.<sup>3</sup> This was a significant improvement over their scores six years ago, which ranged from 31.7 percent in mathematics to 57.7 percent in writing.

## SETTING CLEAR GOALS AND ESTABLISHING HIGH EXPECTATIONS

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Since the early 1990s, Martin High School's staff have implemented a series of policies, practices, and initiatives designed to challenge students and provide them with the support they need to be successful. Underlying these initiatives is a shared belief that students will “do as much as you expect” and that teachers should encourage students to go as far as possible. As a veteran instructor with 32 years of teaching experience and five years at Martin High School explained,

We're expecting them to do better and they rise to our expectations. We're not supposed to drop our expectations down to their level. We're supposed to have them come up to meet ours, and they do. To me, that's a significant change from what had been going on elsewhere or in previous years. The kids are excited.

Importantly, these high expectations are not limited to students in the school's Advanced Placement program. All students are encouraged to take more rigorous coursework and to perform to their fullest potential. Students who receive special education services, for example, are not automatically exempted from the state assessment system.<sup>4</sup> Even though their scores will be included in the school's accountability rating by the Texas Education Agency,<sup>5</sup> the staff at Martin encourage these students to try passing the exams. To help them to succeed, the school provides students with in-class and out-of-class academic support by special education staff, their classroom teachers, and specially trained

university and high school student tutors. As a special education teacher explained,

The philosophy that we have here with our kids is that we give them all the opportunity to take the TAAS test, then maybe after a year or two they pass and we exit them out of the program. You see that their self-esteem and the way they see themselves really changes for the positive. That now is happening more often than it used to happen. That's not just a good feeling for them, but it's a really good sense of accomplishment for us.

The staff at Martin High School have set many academic goals for their campus. They plan to increase the number of students who are TASP exempt<sup>6</sup>; improve student performance on achievement measures such as end-of-course and AP exams; increase student participation in concurrent enrollment at local community colleges; and improve student performance on important college entrance exams. As principal Frances Wawroski noted, “We have to be the key that opens that door and says, *look, all of this is available.*”

## USING DATA TO GUIDE INSTRUCTION

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The staff at Martin High School use student performance data to guide curriculum and instruction, to set and reach campus improvement goals, and to measure the success of special programs and initiatives. In these efforts, they are not alone. The new superintendent and staff at the district office have worked very closely with the school on the use of data in planning. As the principal of Martin High School explains,

[The superintendent is] very data-driven. Everything is data-driven, and if you're not going to do it for the kids, don't do it. If you're going to do it, get results. If you don't get results then you need to go back and restructure. That's the way I work, too. . . . This is the type of thing that I'm comfortable with and I think that has helped me as a principal. He's brought in a lot of good ideas.

One of the primary ways that the school is using data is to guide what happens in the classroom. Every six weeks, the school conducts student assessments in the areas of reading and mathematics as required by the district. Beyond the district assessments, however, the staff at Martin High School have also decided to use a reading diagnostic test to get a baseline measurement of the reading abilities of all freshmen, and have developed assessments in writing, biology, and U.S. history. As two teachers at the school explain, the results of these assessments are critical to the planning of instruction:

It's not just, give a test for the sake of giving a test. We study what happened, who did well, who didn't, [in] what area are we still showing weakness? And then if we find that, we can go back and re-teach. . . . It's not just analyze but not plan. It's “What can we do? What are we going to do?” — Master teacher

The math facilitator, she gives each teacher a printout of how each student did in that class. As a teacher I can see [that] this person is still weak on this objective and I can concentrate that student on that objective. If I see it's the general pattern, I'll go back and redo that objective. She does a lot for us, providing the information. It's very detailed. — Classroom teacher

Administrators at the school and district office help make this student- and class-level data accessible to teachers—thus allowing teachers to spend their time on instruction.

In addition to guiding instruction, data are used to monitor programs that the school is implementing to meet improvement goals. The new freshman Math Homework Center, for example, is monitored on a monthly basis. As the master teacher of mathematics explained, the program will be modified or dropped altogether, depending on how it affects end-of-course algebra scores:

In May, we'll have the end-of-course exams. Of those students that have attended voluntarily, how many of them were successful. If the statistics don't show that it made a difference then we'll come back and say, "It didn't work," and [do] something else. Right now it's one of the things that we've implemented, and we're monitoring on a monthly basis.

Data, rather than seniority, are also used by the administration to determine teacher placements. Information about teacher effectiveness, the types of lessons that a teacher delivers, teacher qualifications and interests, and the demands of particular courses—all play an important role in determining teacher placements. Even though it has meant stepping on some toes, the principal insists on meeting the needs of students first. "No longer can you assume that because you're here thirteen, fourteen years, [that] you're going to stay with that class forever," she says. "It's just not possible." Instead, placements are based on where the teacher can be most effective in helping reach the school's student achievement goals.

## **FOCUSING ON INSTRUCTION AND INDIVIDUAL LEARNING**

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The staff at Martin High School are committed to providing students with the instruction and support they need to be successful. They look closely at what happens in the classroom and experiment with ways that the curriculum and their teaching strategies can be modified to enhance student learning. They look for ways to expand and improve their AP course offerings and implement policies designed to encourage all students to take more rigorous coursework. In addition, they provide students with multiple opportunities for one-on-one tutoring and support, and work to ensure that students don't fall behind in their coursework.

### ***Modifying Instruction to Enhance Student Learning***

The teachers at Martin High School spend a lot of time discussing the best ways to teach particular concepts and skills. Teachers in the same subject areas share common conference periods. During these conference periods and department meetings, teachers share strategies that work, areas where their students are having difficulty, and new approaches that they have learned at conferences and workshops. They exchange ideas with each other, the leader of their department (or master teacher), and the curriculum specialists. They also attend professional development training year-round and are constantly learning new techniques to apply in the classroom. As one teacher explained,

We . . . have teacher developments throughout the year, and we have some available in the summer that pertain to your field, of course. In mathematics, we get staff development dealing with hands-on activities, calculators, computers, websites, and so forth. All of those things help us be better teachers. I think all that adds up to our students doing better.

In the classroom, teachers at Martin High School are given the latitude to choose the instructional strategies that work best for their students and the topic at hand. In some cases, this means traditional approaches to teaching and learning, such as lectures and drills on the basics. For example, in algebra classes, mathematics teachers give daily warm-ups that deal with the TAAS, end-of-course, or district assessments. In other cases, though, it means the use of hands-on activities, technology, and tailored course materials to engage students, deepen their understanding of difficult concepts, and help them to succeed in the classroom:

- *Hands-on activities.* A lesson on genetics, where the teacher has students build and discuss chromosome maps; and a lesson in algebra, where the teacher has students use tiles to factor quadratic equations. These activities are used to deepen students' understanding of the subject matter.
- *Use of technology.* A social studies class, where students visit the websites of several news agencies to monitor and critique live coverage of a breaking news event. The teacher uses technology to engage students in the subject matter and to expose them to the most up-to-date information. "The kids were fascinated with it," he explained.
- *Use of tailored course materials.* A U.S. history class where the teacher doesn't use a textbook, but instead draws on a wide range of resources to "get students really involved and motivated."

In addition to modifying what happens in the classroom, the staff at Martin High School have changed the format of selected courses such as algebra to help students succeed. Based on input from Martin High School's feeder middle schools, which suggested that students perform better when exposed to algebra over a full year, about 85 percent of Martin's algebra classes are now paced. Martin also instituted a trailer course so that if a student fails the first semester of Algebra I, the student can go back to the same material during the second semester. According to Martin's principal, these strategies have helped struggling students be successful in mathematics.

### ***Expanding and Improving the School's Advanced Placement Program***

One of the areas where Martin staff have worked to improve is in their AP course offerings. Since 1993–94, Martin has gone from having a modest AP program, with only 4.6 percent of its student body enrolled, to a large and inclusive program where enrollment figures are well above the state average for many classes, as shown in Table 4.

**Table 4: Percentage of eleventh- and twelfth-grade students enrolled in selected AP courses (1998–1999)**

|                              | Martin High School | All Texas High Schools |
|------------------------------|--------------------|------------------------|
| Biology                      | 1.3%               | 7.9%                   |
| Calculus AB                  | 11.1%              | 7.1%                   |
| English Language             | 21.1%              | 10.5%                  |
| English Literature           | 15.5%              | 8.9%                   |
| U.S. Government and Politics | 18%                | 7.1%                   |
| U.S. History                 | 16.3%              | 7.9%                   |

Source: Texas Education Agency, [www.tea.state.tx.us](http://www.tea.state.tx.us)

In addition, the proportion of low-income students enrolled in AP classes is representative of the school’s overall student body. The program is open to any student who feels prepared to enroll. As one AP student explained, “Anybody can be in the advanced program. You just have to have the will to succeed in it after you’re in there, because it is challenging.”

Administrators and teachers at Martin have focused on improving their AP program since the mid-1990s. At first, they placed emphasis on increasing the number of AP course offerings and on exposing more students to the most challenging coursework. The school’s teachers, counselors, and administrators actively recruited students to participate in the program, and students were encouraged to enroll. Change at the middle school level, where emphasis was placed on Pre-AP coursework, also helped boost AP enrollment to the school’s impressive 1999 figures. Now the staff’s AP focus has shifted from an emphasis on quantity to a concern with quality—making sure that students are successful in the courses and on the College Board’s Advanced Placement exams.

With the push to enroll more students in AP coursework, a growing number of the students enrolled were struggling to keep up with the demands of the program and failing their courses. Concerned with this trend, the staff at Martin decided to make several changes to the AP program. First, they implemented a system for monitoring student progress at the middle of each six-week period. The goal was to help teachers identify and address problems quickly. As one of the curriculum specialists explained,

We . . . put in a little monitoring system where a teacher has to let me know [if] the student is not doing well. We bring in the parent and we look to see how we can either keep him there and help him get better, or maybe exit him. . . . We wanted to provide an intervention, prior to the student failing the course.

The staff at Martin High School also designed a Pre-AP/AP probation system that involves the participation of the student and his or her parents, as well as the teacher, a school administrator, and a counselor. A student placed on probation for truancy, behavior, or lack of academic progress is monitored for a six-week period and considered for placement in a regular classroom setting. In

addition, the school now provides information and counseling about the rigors and expectations of the AP program for prospective students and their parents.

Alongside these changes, the administration is working on improving the capacity of AP instructors in the classroom. AP instructors receive ongoing staff development and training, including Gifted and Talented training, and, through a U.S. Department of Education Gear-up Grant, will also be spending more time with the feeder middle schools, aligning the Pre-AP/AP curriculum. Through these efforts, teachers, administrators, and counselors at Martin High School hope to see improvement in their students' College Board test scores but are, as one counselor explained, prepared for the long work ahead:

It doesn't happen overnight. You have to work at it and it involves everybody's hard work, dedication, and not giving up. Sometimes we just say, "We did so much and look at these grades. Look at the results." But we don't give up and we say, "Well, let's try something else."

Students in Martin High School's AP program enjoy the challenge of the coursework and feel that the high expectations that they hold for themselves are paralleled by the high expectations of the school's teachers, administrators, and counselors. As one AP student explained,

They know that we're capable of doing it, so they're not going to let us just take any courses when they know we can take AP courses.

With the encouragement and support of staff at Martin High School, many of these students have not only enrolled in Advanced Placement but have signed on for the additional work of graduating under the state's Distinguished Achievement Program, or DAP. In 2000, 10 percent of Martin's student population graduated under the DAP. One student explained the process for getting into the DAP and how the school has helped students complete the program:

The DAP has been great. It started from the state of Texas our freshman year, so we were the first class that was introduced to it. . . . We started with an integrated project through our three classes—English, social studies, and math. . . . I studied short-term memory in high school students, so that was one of the measures that was acquired through the DAP. Then you have the administrators, you have a mentor that's assigned to every student, and they tell you, "This is how you get your measures. You can do this. You can take college courses. You can do the tech prep." You just decide what way is best for you.

### ***Encouraging All Students to Take More Rigorous Coursework***

In addition to expanding and improving the Advanced Placement program, the staff at Martin High School encourage all students to take more rigorous coursework. For example, staff members advocate that students pursue a minimum of the Recommended High School Program, and counsel students to take additional credits in selected subject areas. As a counselor and a student at the school explained, Martin's counselors enroll all students for the Recommended High School Program and consider the Minimum Program only as a last resort:

We encourage all students, and I mean *all* students, to follow the Recommended graduation plan, or the DAP, the Distinguished Achievement Program. Very few follow the Minimum, very few. . . . The ones that graduate [with] the Minimum would be the students that have failed throughout the years. — Counselor

Our counselors and administration are really trying to push everyone to graduate Recommended as opposed to graduating Minimum, unless it's absolutely necessary.  
— Student

Through these measures, Martin has successfully encouraged the majority of its students to graduate under the new Recommended High School Program—81.3 percent of the class of 1998; 80 percent of the class of 1999; and 86 percent of the class of 2000. State and district figures for the class of 1999 were 15 percent and 74 percent, respectively. The Texas Education Agency implemented the Recommended Program in 1994–95 and expected to begin seeing students graduate under the program in 1998.

Beyond the credits required by the Recommended High School Program, the staff at Martin High School encourage students to take four years of courses in selected subject areas such as mathematics and science. In mathematics, for example, teachers, counselors, and the principal advise students to enroll for four full years of coursework and stress the importance of mathematics at popular family events such as the school's annual math nights. As the mathematics facilitator explained,

We let parents know what's going on and what's expected, and how we're trying to push the AP classes. We ask them to help us out. Many of the kids just want to take what's required and then they want to quit. Algebra II, and that's it. So we ask the parents to help us out. We try to explain the program. We also like to encourage them to call us up if they need to—if there's a problem in math.

Similarly, student scheduling and schedule changes are carefully monitored. Sometimes, students wish to drop a mathematics course because they have already taken the three credits required for the Recommended High School Program. According to the principal, the administration will sometimes contact the parents directly to discuss the potential impact of such schedule changes.

As a result of these measures, Martin High School's administration and teachers report that students are getting more exposure to curriculum in the core academic subject areas such as mathematics, science, social studies, and the languages. As one teacher explained, this may be the reason why subject areas such as mathematics have experienced consistent gains in their TAAS passing scores:

That's the reason that we've kept that increase of 9, 10 points . . . because our students are taking more math. . . . The algebra—we make it a full year. The geometry—we give them geometry and Math Models, so that they're in a math class all year. Then the junior year, some of them are taking Algebra II and then precalculus, so again, [it is] all year. Calculus—we have it all year. Our students, a lot of them are going four years complete, even though we have the block system. Our students are getting a lot of exposure to math.

## ***Providing Multiple Opportunities for Additional Support***

When students at Martin High School have difficulty in class and need additional help, there are many people to whom they can turn. The first person they often turn to is the classroom teacher. Students are comfortable asking their teachers for help and report that their teachers are routinely available—both in class and after school—to work with students who need additional encouragement and support. One student reflected on the importance of this support to her achievement in class:

I love science, but just something about chemistry was so hard, I could not understand. . . . I cried one time and [the teacher] just came up to me and patted me on my back and he said, “Don’t cry. Come here. I’ll help you.” I was like, “I can’t. I can’t do it. I don’t understand.” I was crying like a little girl. He goes, “Stop crying, listen to me.” He spent that whole hour with me and finally I just stopped and ever since then [when] I’d have a problem, I’d go up to him. . . . We could talk to him about anything. He was a friend. I will never forget [him]. He showed me [that] he was interested. He said, “I know you can do it. I know you can do it. Just listen to me.” At the end, I passed his class.

Like this student, other students at Martin High School noted the personal interest that teachers and administrators take in their achievements, and how this support has positively affected their overall experience at the school.

Students also turn for help to the college students who provide in-class tutoring at the school. Using funds available through Title I and Special Education, Martin High School hired 23 college tutors to help in selected classrooms during the 1999–2000 school year. The school has been hiring college tutors for several years and, in some departments, has been able to keep the same tutors for three continuous years. One high school staff member noted that the tutors—like the teachers and staff members—are proud of the school and committed to helping their students to succeed:

There’s a lot of pride here in our school. . . . If you walk in here you can sense that, and you feel that that pride is there. So everybody always tries their best to help the kids out, everybody, including the tutors that just come in three days of the week or three hours a day.

In addition to their teachers and the tutors, students turn to each other for support. Two formal structures that the school has put in place to encourage peer tutoring are the Math Homework Center and the Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) Program.

The Math Homework Center is a new after-school program designed to help ninth-grade algebra students. Juniors and seniors and the master teacher of mathematics staff the Center. Students can visit the Center for help with algebra homework and access to calculators, computers, workbooks, and other resources that they may not have at home. The student volunteers provide one-on-one tutoring support to the freshmen and for this work, gain community service hours that count towards the DAP graduation requirements. In its first year of implementation, the Center is being carefully monitored to determine its impact on student academic performance as measured by the end-of-course exams.

Through PAL, students in the school’s special education program can receive academic tutoring and individualized help with their homework from other Martin High School students. Juniors and seniors who sign up for the PAL course are paired up with students receiving special education services.

The goal is to help the students function in general education classrooms. As one of the special education teachers explained,

It's kind of like a win-win situation. The students are getting their community service hours. Our kids are getting the additional help. It's also freeing to the teacher in the classroom. [It allows the general education teacher] to concentrate a little less on our students and concentrate on the classroom as a whole because they are aware that they are also getting additional help for that student.

### ***Ensuring That Students Don't Get Lost in the Crowd***

In addition to providing students with academic support, the staff at Martin High School are working to ensure that individual students don't get lost in the crowd. To this end, the teaching staff use student assessment data to pinpoint individual student learning needs and, in the summer of 1999, the administrators hand-scheduled all students, including students in the special education program. Despite the enormity of this task, the curriculum specialists felt that the process was invaluable and planned to implement it again in subsequent years.

The process allowed the curriculum specialists to catch possible scheduling problems early and troubleshoot solutions. To the extent possible, they also tried to match students with teachers and courses where they would be the most successful and to meet students' expressed interests. According to the curriculum specialists, this personal touch—along with the ongoing support provided by the school's counselors—helped show students that the administration is concerned about their interests and needs. Moreover, “students really knew why they were there and what their goals were.”

Similarly, the students at Martin feel that the counselors really know them well and are there “one hundred percent” to help them prepare for college. Students feel that they are kept up-to-date about college entrance exams, scholarships, and application deadlines. As one senior quipped, “there's no way you can say, *well, I didn't hear about it,*” because the counselors are constantly telling them about important deadlines and opportunities through flyers, announcements, and personal contact.

## **SUPPORTING TEACHERS AND ENHANCING COLLABORATION**

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One of the factors contributing to Martin High School's improvement is the amount of collaboration and teamwork that goes on across campus and within the district. Focused around the academic goals of the campus, this collaboration is fostered in many ways—through the open-door policy of the administration, a highly effective system of master teachers, and the involvement of a broad range of individuals, including parents, in decisionmaking at the school.

### ***Providing Opportunities for Communication***

For the principal, open communication and close collaborative relationships with the staff and students are critical:

If you notice that organizational chart, I am at the top but the communication has always been key. We have administrative meetings, we have staff meetings, but the communication is always

there. That is the key to the success of whatever is occurring here at Martin High School. Every teacher knows what's going on. I like to know what's going on. I have contact with my custodians, I have contact with my teacher aides, I have contact with the counselors. . . . and I have to have that working relationship with everybody in the staff, and with the kids.

One of things she has done to encourage open communication at the school is to institute an open-door policy for herself and the rest of her administration. Teachers, students, and parents report that the principal is always available to them without an appointment. She is easy to approach, visible, and active in all aspects of the school and its administration. This includes attending extracurricular activities and events, teaching after-school tutorials in mathematics, following up on student absences, and attending to student issues and concerns. As one of the administrators explained, "She never closes her door to us. Not to us, not to a student, not to a parent."

According to the chairperson of the school's Campus Education Improvement Committee (CEIC), this open-door policy of the administration has contributed positively to his experiences as a teacher and to the overall functioning of the school. It has facilitated collaboration and teamwork and helped the CEIC in its work to improve the campus:

I came from a campus where there was a closed-door policy, or a policy by appointment. It is very important to me as an instructor and as a member of this committee that all our administrators here at Martin High School . . . have had an open-door policy. They have always been very receptive. Even [our district office] liaison has an open-door policy . . . and that is why the flow of communication here is so smooth and there is a positive effect and it really helps the atmosphere. This campus wants to strive to always do better for the community, for our students and for our parents, and for ourselves as a whole. The open-door policy helps a lot.

The principal has also worked to create strong communication and collaborative working relationships within the core administrative team. Keeping in mind each individual's strengths, she reorganized the team so that every member had some curriculum responsibilities related to his or her areas of expertise. The core team now includes three curriculum specialists and two assistant principals. This reorganization created not only a tight working team but also a team committed to supporting classroom teachers and focused on the academic goals of the campus. They show this support not only through a hands-on, open-door approach to leadership but by actually participating in and teaching after-school tutorials.

Perhaps as a result of these efforts, the teachers and counselors at Martin High School feel comfortable coming to the principal and her core administrative team with concerns and suggestions about how to improve the school. They feel that the administration is there to help brainstorm solutions and is willing to experiment with new ideas, as long as they are focused on improving student achievement. The master teacher of English, for example, felt that the students at the school needed help with their vocabulary. She presented the problem to the principal, who asked her to come up with a solution and to present a proposal to the faculty. The faculty approved her proposal and the school earmarked \$40,000 for a new vocabulary program to begin in fall 2000.

## **Promoting Collaboration Among Teaching Staff**

Despite the size of the school, the teachers at Martin High School collaborate constantly, both within and across departments. One of the factors contributing to this high degree of teamwork is the school's network of master teachers. About five years ago, the district office implemented a master teacher system to facilitate collaboration, coordination, and school improvement across the district. At Martin High School, the master teachers are leaders of their departments. They bring teachers together to discuss instructional strategies, to share with each other what they have learned at professional development workshops, and to brainstorm initiatives that will improve student performance. Several teachers report that the master teacher is the first person that they turn to with questions about their class or comments on something they would like to see changed.

In recent years, coordination within departments has increased. The master teachers and their departments have developed a syllabus for every course, along with a timeline of specific learning objectives and the dates by which they must be met. These are modified in the summer to incorporate changes to the TEKS,<sup>7</sup> end-of-course exams, and other objectives, and to take into account any textbooks that have been recently adopted by the state. The teachers share the course syllabi with students, so students know what's going to be covered and what projects and assessments are coming up. With the syllabi and timelines in place, departments are using their common planning periods to work together on lessons. As one master teacher explained, this level of intra-departmental coordination and teamwork is a change for the school and may be a factor in its improved assessment scores:

I think that is the biggest change that I've seen. Before when we were not scoring high, it was everybody to his own. I would teach something, she would teach something else. We were not coordinated. That's what's happening now. That, I think, is why we are succeeding, because it's teamwork. We are together now. We plan together and we know exactly what we're going to be teaching, what objective we're going to be teaching.

In addition, a lot of professional development happens at department meetings. The master teachers do presentations for their teams, and the teachers are expected to share what they have learned at workshops and conferences. Teachers are seldom denied requests to attend professional development training. In fact, money for teacher travel to conferences has been safeguarded despite budgetary constraints. The teacher who chairs the school's budget committee described an incident that illustrates this point:

We're sitting there trying to [cut the budget]. I said, "Well, we've got a lot there for out-of-district travel"—that's the teachers' [professional development money]. "We can cut there." "No! You can't cut there!" This was coming from an administrator. "You can't cut there! Those teachers need to go out."

In addition to supporting collaboration and teamwork within departments, the master teachers of all departments meet on a monthly basis and work together on cross-departmental initiatives. Included on this instructional team is the head of the athletics department, who also serves as the school's football coach. With the belief that Martin's kids are "students first and athletes second," the athletics department works hand-in-hand with the other departments on a series of schoolwide academic initiatives. In addition, members of the coaching staff provide one-on-one tutoring support to

students. The administration is proud of the fact that in 1999–2000, 28 of its football players were participating in the DAP graduation plan.

One area where the departments collaborate is on preparation for the TAAS. Social studies and English teachers work together on the objectives in reading and writing, and science and mathematics teachers work together on the objectives in mathematics. Similarly, last year, all the departments participated in the listening comprehension program, Drop Everything and Listen. In the program, students stop what they are doing and listen to a passage over the announcement system. They are then asked to answer questions about the passage. When asked how they felt about participating in such cross-departmental initiatives, the master teachers in areas other than mathematics and English responded that they are willing to support almost anything that will help the students and Martin High School to succeed.

Initially, interdepartmental collaboration didn't come easily. About four or five years ago, when the school first started its schoolwide initiatives around the TAAS, some of the teachers were reluctant to get involved and didn't know how to integrate the objectives into their class work. But with a strong mandate from the former principal, workshops, inservices, and time, the commitment of teachers grew. As one AP teacher explained,

[They used to say that TAAS was the responsibility of English and math. But, in the early 90s, the former principal said] “Everybody’s going to do this. Everybody.” [Teachers of other disciplines] would come and they would ask us [for help], and I thought that was pretty cool. Slowly, slowly they’re like “Okay, we’ll help you guys out.” . . . We had workshops and inservices where the English teachers would work with the social studies teachers, actually with the whole school. . . . Everybody was part of it, so all of the courses were doing the same thing. I think that helped.

### *Coordinating with middle and high schools*

In addition to facilitating collaboration and teamwork at Martin High School, the master teachers also coordinate with the school's feeder middle school and with the other two high schools in the district.

All the master teachers in the district attend a summer institute where they decide on their objectives and a calendar of meetings for the year. Mathematics teachers from across the district, for example, meet once a month. At these meetings, Martin staff learned that 60 percent of all students take algebra in middle school. To help those students with the transition to high school, the department is now considering a full-year geometry course.

Similarly, the teachers at Martin get together with teachers at the middle schools to discuss specific curriculum issues and how they can help one another. For example, Martin has asked the middle schools if they would be willing to introduce particular objectives that would help prepare students for AP coursework. The mathematics department has also worked with the middle schools on how to address changes to the end-of-course and TAAS exams. As the master teacher explained,

We got together with the middle school because a lot of the objectives are coming from the eighth-grade curriculum and some are coming from the algebra curriculum. Some of our

materials [didn't support] the new changes of the targets. We got together, they showed us some of the materials that they have, they loaned us some material, and they've helped us in terms of planning.

Beyond these activities, teachers at Martin High School also sponsor several events to familiarize middle school students with the high school and its curriculum. The science department, for example, puts together a series of activities to get students excited about science, and teachers from the athletics department meet with middle school kids to emphasize the importance of passing their classes and the TAAS and of getting to know their teachers.

### ***Increasing Community and Parental Involvement in the School***

Through the Campus Education Improvement Committee and the school's outreach efforts to parents, Martin High School is involving a broad range of individuals in decisionmaking and in life at the school. "We're the ones setting the policy and what we want to do," noted one CEIC member. For example, through the CEIC, over twenty-five people have a voice in how the school operates and where its money is spent. The committee includes three student representatives and eight community or parent volunteers.

The CEIC is open about the decisions it makes and informs as many people as possible about the work that it is doing. Agendas are posted seventy-two hours ahead of the meetings to encourage anyone who is interested to attend. They are posted in the teacher's workroom, in the library, and in the school office. They are also faxed to community and parent representatives and to several individuals at the superintendent's office. Parent and community members of the CEIC make an effort to share what the school is doing with the community. As a community representative explained,

Having this opportunity, serving here, I've been able to reach out to some parents and have them understand their important role in the education of their child, and what they can do, what they're responsible to do.

This CEIC member has also helped families take advantage of the resources available through the school, such as counseling.

Another way that the school reaches out to parents and the community is through its PTA and Academic Nights. In the past, parent meetings drew only a handful of participants. The teachers were mostly there alone. Now, one of the administrators explained, "It's turned around. Our parents are now [saying] 'We want more teachers here,' and they've had up to 500 people in the gym." A few years ago, the school started to combine its parent nights with the distribution of report cards, information sessions about various assessments, student presentations, and departmental showcases. At the meetings, parents can ask teachers questions about how their children are doing. Every parent who comes to a meeting gets an extra-credit coupon that his or her child can use in class. All the meetings are conducted in English and Spanish.

## FOSTERING AN ENVIRONMENT OF RESPECT AND AFFECTION FOR STUDENTS

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In the pursuit of their improvement goals for the campus, the staff at Martin High School have placed emphasis not only on academics but also on the social, emotional, and civic development of their students. They have worked to foster an atmosphere where students feel recognized, supported, and involved, and where value is placed on service to each other and the community.

### ***Promoting Student Involvement***

One of the ways that the school has worked to create this environment is by encouraging students to become involved in the school through athletics, clubs, the University Interscholastic League (UIL), student council, and other activities. They have also encouraged students to serve as tutors and peer mediators at the school and as volunteers in the community. One teacher explained,

What's wonderful about this is that it isn't all academics. These kids don't have to be the world's geniuses to give of themselves to the community. It's teaching them responsibility, too. When it comes to the school pride and all of this, they're out there representing not only themselves, but the high school. To me, that's real important.

All of the students interviewed—including students in special education, Advanced Placement, and the Recommended High School Program—participated in some sort of extracurricular activity. For these students, involvement in extracurricular activities is critical to their sense of belonging at the school. It provides them with opportunities to connect with teachers and students outside the classroom setting and with the venue for some of their most valued accomplishments. In settings such as UIL, two students explained, it's easier to meet friends and get to know teachers. It's more of a “family environment” where students can talk with teachers about topics of a personal nature, such as a teacher's own experiences in high school.

Other students talked about how being involved in extracurricular activities has boosted their self-confidence and allowed them to grow in ways that better prepare them for the future. As one student explained,

Joining sports helps open up a lot of doors. I recently signed on to play football at Kingsville. I know without that I wouldn't have had the chance. I wouldn't have had the chance to go meet different people, [to] go talk to people from different schools. . . . It's just a good experience growing up with somebody who's going to teach you to be responsible. A lot of [that has to do with the way the coaches train us]. They tell you, “Hey, you got to do this. You've got to remember that you're here as a student first.” They teach you, and they're trying to help mold adults that are going to be productive in society. That's what I think helps out a lot.

Students also recognize the importance of being involved in volunteer and community service activities such as tutoring, river cleanups, bell-ringing service for the Salvation Army, and food drives. Among other things, these activities allow students to give back to the school and their community. Reflecting on why she volunteers, one student explained,

Everything we do, we should do it for the school. We should do it for our people. We should do it for our community. We should do it so we can feel that we're putting something back into the

community that has given us a lot. I'm very proud of my community. I'm very proud of Laredo. . . I'm very proud of being Mexican-American. Whatever I do, I'll do it always because I want to help my people, not because I want to get recognized.

To many staff members at Martin High School, the academic benefits of student involvement in extracurricular activities are clear. A story told by one of the school's counselors illustrates this point. For over a year, the counselor has been working with a student who was having difficulty focusing in class. His home life was extremely difficult, and after a while the student just gave up—he stopped attending school, deciding that he couldn't do it and that “nobody cared anyway.” Recently, the student's attendance has begun to improve. He's coming to class and not failing his courses. According to the counselor, involvement in extracurricular activities has played a part in this improvement:

What has helped? We got him involved . . . with Theatre Arts. . . . He wasn't competing, but the teacher in charge of UIL kind of was helping him and would encourage him to just get involved, participate, and he started liking it, . . . [the] encouragement and the positive feedback, which he didn't have at home.

### **Recognizing Students and Their Accomplishments**

In a variety of public and personal ways, the staff at Martin High School recognize student accomplishments and make sure that individual students feel *known*. Beyond participation in district and statewide efforts, such as the District Student of the Month Awards and Girls State, school staff have implemented a series of measures designed to recognize and reward student achievement. For example, students who attain perfect attendance receive goal seals on their report cards. Students who accept the challenge of the Distinguished Achievement Program are recognized on a bulletin board in the hall. And students who perform 100 or more hours of community service are recognized with silver cords at graduation. Although some of these efforts may seem basic, teachers and administrators at the school feel that they help.

It's easy to think, one teacher explained, that once students reach high school they don't need the same amount of positive feedback given at other grade levels. “We tend to think, ‘That's elementary level, putting little stars on their papers,’ [but] the kids, they're looking for their star, too.”

Another way that teachers and administrators recognize students is by attending academic and extracurricular events and by making a special effort to praise individual students for their accomplishments. Nowhere is this more evident than with the principal herself. Always dressed in school colors and visible at virtually every school event, the principal is one of her students' biggest fans. She keeps tabs on individual students' progress on standardized tests and lets them know that she's there, cheering them on. She talks with great pride and affection about the specific accomplishments of individual students that she meets in the halls. As one student explained, “She's like a big mother—she'd like to be a mother to all of us. You know, a proud mother that goes around bragging, that's basically the way she is.” Hearing this comment, another student concurred: “That's the type of lady she is. It's real good to have somebody that's always going to be proud of you, no matter what.”

## ***Listening and Responding to Student Issues and Concerns***

The school provides an atmosphere that it feels like you can go and talk to somebody. You can go talk to a teacher. You can go talk to a counselor. . . . You feel better. You feel more relaxed. You can talk to somebody. You can come out and be somebody in life. — Student

The staff at Martin High School have made an effort to provide an atmosphere where students can talk to teachers and administrators about a wide variety of issues and concerns. One way the school has done this is by encouraging student participation in decisionmaking at the school. Students sit as members of the Campus Education Improvement Council, and they feel that their concerns are well received by administration. Last year, for example, student leaders were concerned about vandalism on campus, especially in the parking lot on big game days. Due to the principal's open-door policy, the students felt comfortable sharing these and other security concerns with the administration. Since then, they have seen great improvements in the way discipline and security is handled on campus.

Students also feel comfortable turning to school staff members for help with personal problems and concerns. When asked who they would talk to if faced with a serious personal problem, students at Martin High School identified a network of individuals at the school, including teachers, administrators, counselors, and coaches. As one student explained, "What's good is that here [at Martin High School] you can go to almost anybody that you feel safe talking to and if they can't help you with the specific problem, they'll direct you to somebody who can."

An integral part of this support network is the school's counseling department. Several students reported turning to counselors for help with personal problems. One student described how his counselor helped him deal with a particularly difficult situation:

I was going through a very hard time and [my counselor told me about] one of her personal experiences. . . . She trusted me enough to tell me what she went through and how she dealt with it. . . . About a month later I started analyzing what she [told] me, and I was intrigued. I said "Okay, because of her, I can handle this situation in this way."

This student went on to say that if he hadn't spoken with the counselor, he would still be "out in space, not knowing what to do."

## **PLANS FOR THE FUTURE**

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**I**t is hard to describe the level of excitement at Martin High School. The teachers, administrators, and staff at Martin are excited about their improved standardized test scores, the number of students enrolled in college-preparatory and college coursework, and the extracurricular accomplishments of their students. They are also excited about the high level of collaboration and teamwork on campus and about the overall direction that the school is headed. But the staff at Martin High School are not yet satisfied with their accomplishments. They would like to see more of their students excelling on the end-of-course, SAT, and ACT exams; more students who are exempt from taking the TASP exam; more students enrolled in the Distinguished Achievement Program; and more students who receive

scholarships for education beyond high school.

Two issues of particular concern to the principal and curriculum specialists are freshman retention and the performance of students in their English as a Second Language (ESL) program. Like many high schools, Martin loses a number of students during their freshman year. To help tackle this problem, the school applied for and received state funding from the Ninth Grade Success Initiative. With these monies, the school plans to build on its success with the Math Homework Center and to open freshman homework centers in social studies, science, and the language arts. They are also looking at implementing a team approach to freshman instruction—a cadre of teachers who are responsible for a group of students and who stay with those students throughout their freshman year. Similarly, the principal would like to revamp the school's ESL program. To this end, the staff are putting together a plan that will intensify ESL instruction and allow ESL teachers time for common planning.

In these and many other ways, the team at Martin High School plans to further their progress toward high academic achievement for *all* students.

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> 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 Martin, this team is called the Campus Education Improvement Committee, or CEIC.
- <sup>2</sup> Beginning in 1997–98, to receive a high school diploma in Texas, a student must complete the requirements of the Minimum High School Program, the Recommended High School Program, or the Distinguished Achievement Program, as well as the testing requirements for graduation. The Minimum program requires the completion of at least 22 credits and is not considered a college-preparation program. The Recommended program is the 24-credit college-preparation program recommended by the Texas State Board of Education. Also a 24-credit program, the Distinguished Achievement Program requires the satisfaction of four measures, which may include an original project or research, a score of three or above on a College Board Advanced Placement examination, completion of college-level courses, and/or high scores on the Preliminary SAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test.
- <sup>3</sup> 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.
- <sup>4</sup> Although state law mandates that every student in grades 3 through 8 and grade 10 must be tested, there are circumstances under which some students do not take the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills. For example, students with limited English proficiency and students with disabilities may be exempted from taking the TAAS.
- <sup>5</sup> 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.
- <sup>6</sup> All students entering Texas public colleges and universities are required to take the Texas Academic Skills Program (TASP) Test or show proof of exemption prior to enrollment. Students are exempt if they receive a qualifying score on the SAT, ACT, or TAAS test.
- <sup>7</sup> The Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, or TEKS, are curriculum guidelines set by the state of Texas. They articulate what over four million Texas children must know and be able to do in each subject area (mathematics, English language arts and reading, and so on).

