

PSJA Memorial High School

***Pharr-San Juan-Alamo Independent School District,
Alamo, Texas***



PSJA MEMORIAL HIGH SCHOOL

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Alamo, Texas

1998–1999 Data

Campus data	
Enrollment	1,543
Attendance rate	92.9%
Dropout rate	1.3%
Economically disadvantaged	86.8%
Mobility rate	29.7%
Limited proficiency in English	25%

Campus demographics	
African American	.1%
Asian/Pacific Islander	.1%
Hispanic	97.4%
Native American	.1%
White	2.3%

District data	
Enrollment	21,050
Number of high schools	3
Economically disadvantaged	88%

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

Selection Criteria: Performance on the Algebra I End-of-Course (EOC) Examination

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:

PSJA Memorial High School was selected for participation in the study based on its students' performance on the Algebra I End-of-Course Examination in spring 1998 and spring 1999. Memorial 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
- Spring 1998 Algebra I EOC exam passing scores for economically disadvantaged students that were above the state average for all students
- Spring 1999 Algebra I EOC exam passing scores for economically disadvantaged students that were above the state average for all students
- Spring 1998 Algebra I EOC exam participation rates greater than the state average (92.5 percent)
- Spring 1998 Algebra I EOC exam achievement gap in passing rates (between students who were economically disadvantaged and students who were not economically disadvantaged) of 7 percentage points or below

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

	Memorial High School Economically Disadvantaged Students	All Texas High School Students
% passing in Spring 1998*	76%	21.3%
% passing in Spring 1999	96%	29.1%

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

*97% participation rate for all students

*5% achievement gap in passing rates (between students who were economically disadvantaged and students who were not economically disadvantaged)

PSJA MEMORIAL HIGH SCHOOL

PSJA Memorial High School, located in the town of Alamo in far south Texas, is part of a tri-city school district that includes the neighboring communities of Pharr (pronounced “far”) and San Juan. Located only fifteen miles north of Mexico, Alamo has a population of approximately 11,000 people. Driving to the campus from the highway along a straight, flat, two-lane road, you see palm trees and large bougainvillea planted in the yards of the modest one-story houses. Across from the campus is a mobile home park where many “winter Texans,” retirees from the north, live during the winter. Near the homes are acres of orange, grapefruit, and lemon orchards. The region has a history of poverty. Average wages are low and the cost of living is moderate.

At the time of our visit in the 1999–2000 school year, Memorial High School was serving over 1,600 students, the majority of whom were Hispanic and from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The teaching staff is about 80 percent Hispanic and has an average nine years of teaching experience. The teaching and administrative staff are extremely respectful toward each other and their students. This respect, along with the business-like atmosphere of the school, is demonstrated by the way the teachers dress. Men generally wear ties and long-sleeved dress shirts and women, dresses or suits.

The school itself is just three years old. In the past, two high schools served the students of the PSJA school district—PSJA North High School and PSJA High School. Due to the expanding student population of the region, however, the district decided to open a third high school. Thus, PSJA Memorial High School was unveiled in the fall of 1997. Most of the students attending Memorial High School come from the city of Alamo. When the school opened, juniors and seniors were given the option of transferring or staying at their original campus. The first year, only about 100 seniors chose to attend Memorial. The second year, the number of seniors increased to 200, and by the spring of 2000, there were 380 seniors.

Seen from above, the two-story building looks like an “x,” a design that allows for easy access to opposite ends of the school. One teacher described the building as being like an airport, in that someone standing at one end of a hallway can see all the classrooms in that wing. He felt that this building arrangement has contributed to the school’s safe and orderly environment. The arrangement may also contribute to the sense of community reported on campus, for it allows the school staff to be readily visible to students between classes. Moreover, rooms in a wing are assigned to teachers of the same subject, providing opportunities for teachers to informally discuss content issues between classes.

The library is in the middle of the building, in the intersection of the “x.” Along the edges of the library, the college placement counselor, the migrant counselor, the school-community liaison, and other special services support staff have their offices. Throughout the building, the hallways are pristine. The cinderblock walls are painted beige with green accents, and bulletin boards display important notices such as testing or college application deadlines. There are expansive facilities for the band, orchestra, choir, and drama classes, and the career and technology classes have equally impressive accommodations. One teacher described the advantages of working in a new school: “It was new, so everybody was very high on doing the right thing.” An assistant principal had the same perception:

Opening up a brand-new campus, it was exciting. We had high expectations. The staff was real

excited to be here, even though a lot of people may say, “Well, it’s very difficult to get a new campus started.” Yes it is, but at the same time, it helped because we had a good staff.

The school did not open with a hand-selected staff, however. Before the school opened, the district invited staff from other PSJA high schools to ask for transfers to the school. The remaining positions were filled by teachers with the least seniority in the district. As a result, many of the staff are young and have fewer years of teaching experience. As one teacher mentioned, “The parents would say, ‘Oh my God. Están bien jovencitos. Están bien chiquitos. They [are] all very young.’” That many of the teachers were relatively new to the profession, however, was not perceived as a barrier. What the teachers lacked in experience, they made up in enthusiasm and hard work.

As evidenced by the school’s performance on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills¹ and the Algebra End-of-Course (EOC) examination,² this hard work has really paid off. In 1999–2000, the school achieved a Recognized rating on the state accountability system.³ In spring 1999, 96 percent of Memorial’s students taking the Algebra I EOC exam passed it, while the state passing average was 29.1 percent. The percentage of Memorial students taking the exam (19.6) was also higher than the state average percentage (18).

According to the principal, Roberto Loredó, this academic achievement is the result of a common vision shared by the staff and students at the school:

I told [the staff] my vision—that our expectations are going to be high and will inspire maximum involvement in all students. We will be conscientious and objective [in order] to impart dignity and knowledge to young adults, in an effort to build minds for the future—effective communicators, critical thinkers, and lifelong learners. [We’re] building a cooperative school and community [where] the individual student is first and foremost.

With this vision in mind, the staff at Memorial have established challenging, measurable goals for student achievement, and have adopted instructional strategies and student support systems to achieve those goals. They have embraced the use of data to guide instruction and have developed a collaborative environment where administrators, teachers, students, and parents work together to reach their common goal of student achievement. Beyond this, they have worked to ensure that students feel welcome, recognized, and supported, both as students and as young adults.

SETTING CLEAR GOALS AND ESTABLISHING HIGH EXPECTATIONS

From the day Memorial High School opened, the staff has been working to create an atmosphere that fosters high levels of academic and personal achievement for *all* students. As he watched the walls of the new building going up, the principal formulated a motto for the school that encompasses the new building and what he wanted to see happen within those walls: “Building Minds for the Future.” At the beginning, the principal took the lead in establishing goals, clearly articulating them to administrators, teachers, students, and parents. Now everyone connected with the school has embraced these goals and is involved in developing even more challenging objectives.

Initially, Memorial’s staff decided to focus their efforts on improving the school’s rating within the

Texas accountability system. Memorial earned an Acceptable rating during the 1998–99 school year, and for 1999–2000, they set their sights on Exemplary. In order for a school to be rated Exemplary, 90 percent of its students must pass the TAAS. In addition, 90 percent of each student ethnic group must pass the TAAS, the school’s attendance rate must be at least 94 percent, and the dropout rate must be 1.0 percent or less.

The school brought students in on their achievement goals for the campus, thus helping build a shared vision of success. “We tell kids that just like they get a report card, we as a campus also get a report card,” the principal explained. “And of course, we kind of say Exemplary is an A, Recognized is a B. We’d be happy with a B but we’re always shooting for the A because you [the students] are, too.” The principal reiterates the campus’s goals at every opportunity, expressing them in many different ways to meet the different learning styles of students. He has even asked students to present the goals dramatically:

We [got] the drama kids to perform [during assembly] a skit [depicting] the ultimate goal of where we want to be this year. When kids know where we want them to be, I think it becomes more of a goal for them. . . . I think they need to know.

Although the TAAS scores would contribute to the Exemplary rating, the staff at Memorial wanted to go beyond that measure to mastery of coursework based on the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS)⁴ requirements. A focus on the TEKS would ensure that students were being taught the more rigorous high school curriculum standards that include courses at the junior and senior level, rather than the eighth-grade level measured by TAAS. To measure gains in mastery of the TEKS, staff decided to use end-of-course exams.

The staff and community goals for Memorial High School go far beyond graduation to preparing students to be successful in life. One teacher expressed these goals in terms of preparation for the world of work, saying: “All of us are working for our students to prepare [them] for the future and to succeed as well, to get them ready for the workforce.” Another teacher pointed out that what is best for students drives all of the activities at the school:

Everybody’s going for that one objective, and that’s to educate our students to reach their ultimate success in education. That’s what I’ve seen. We’re all working for the students.

USING DATA TO GUIDE INSTRUCTION

Memorial High School staff begins every school year with an examination of student achievement data. During staff development days, they not only examine the current data, but also look at student achievement longitudinally back to the eighth grade, in order to identify specific objectives for each student. After examining this data, departmental teams determine whether they need to address particular objectives for everyone, for small groups of students, or for individual students. They then plan their instruction accordingly.

The principal believes that a key element in using data is making sure that everyone understands where the campus stands and how they can be involved in the school’s overall improvement. He

explained:

Once I know [the campus data], once I know that and it becomes global for me and all of us know it, then it's up to us to instill in teachers that we're here for all [students]. If I'm teaching Advanced Placement sections I probably have all the GT [gifted and talented] kids. Does that mean I cannot get involved with [other students at another] level? . . . [A]re there other ways that I can get involved assisting someone else in meeting some of their goals?

Through the years, the district has provided staff development on how to disaggregate data. As teachers examine their data, they not only look for students who need extra assistance, but also reflect on their own practice and constantly look at ways they can improve their instructional program. A district curriculum coordinator explained:

Everyone understands exactly the process . . . for identifying those students that are borderline that will need extra assistance or remediation. Looking at the item TAAS analysis as well, they know how to analyze why . . . the students [did] so well or why they didn't they. . . . They look at their TAAS or EOC data and they study the scores there. "We're weak in this certain objective. What happened? Did we all cover this particular objective or not? What did we do different?" Because if one teacher scored better than another it could be that maybe they covered more current events than another, or had a special interest in that particular area.

The district requires that practice TAAS tests are administered every nine weeks, and this formative assessment data assists teachers in making instructional decisions. The school sets its own schedule for administration of the practice tests, and is thus able to be flexible in the amount of time needed for particular instructional objectives. To ensure that all teachers understand the data, the departments meet during staff development days to disaggregate and analyze the data together.

Teachers who teach the courses with EOC exams take advantage of the opportunity to score their EOC tests locally after turning in the student tests to the state. This practice allows them to immediately address any deficiencies, so they are assured that students know the material. It also allows the teachers to make immediate changes to their curriculum and instruction strategies for the next semester's classes.

FOCUSING ON INSTRUCTION AND INDIVIDUAL LEARNING

The team of administrators and teachers at Memorial are determined to ensure the academic success of every single student, and they are relentless in pursuing this goal. The dean of instruction described this determination on the part of one teacher:

[He] has a lot of patience and when somebody doesn't understand something he stays behind. He gives up his lunch hour. He comes in and says, "You know what, bring your trays, we'll eat in here and we'll go over this."

Identifying where students are academically and meeting students' needs are important strategies practiced at Memorial High School. Even if students are not at the level expected for their grade,

teachers don't use this as an excuse for failure. The dean of instruction described the "no excuses" attitude exhibited by the staff:

[A] one-liner for this campus is, "Failure is not an option." It is not an option. The teachers say, "I don't care how far down [you are] on that totem pole, I'm going to bring you back up. If I've got to go back to this level, even though I don't want to do that, [I] will do it." They'll bring them back up. . . . Failure is not an option.

To ensure that students succeed, the staff has implemented a number of instructional strategies and support structures focused on the needs of students. They have modified the schedule to allow more time for instruction and have leveraged this time to bring students to higher levels of achievement. In addition, they have provided individual help to students through tutoring and review sessions held before and after school, during lunch, and on Saturdays. Teachers are persistent and persuasive in getting students to avail themselves of this extra help. A district curriculum and testing coordinator works closely with the counseling staff to assure that the specific needs of every student are being addressed.

Modifying the Schedule and Instruction

One of the first changes the administration at Memorial High School implemented was the modified block schedule. This schedule takes account of the fact that all students don't enter high school at the same level of achievement and that some students require more time to master the most challenging courses. With the block schedule, classes meet for ninety minutes each day. A course may be completed in eighteen weeks, but some courses, like Algebra, Geometry, and English II, are taught over thirty-six weeks to all students.

This block-scheduling pattern is unique to this campus in the district. The principal was successful in convincing the superintendent and district office staff that the schedule and the increased staffing it required were necessary to provide the extra time and support that students need to reach high levels of academic achievement. The block schedule also required a commitment from all staff at the school. For example, the band schedule had to be changed to fit within the new block schedule.

In addition to the block scheduling, the staff chose to implement a special schedule for algebra classes. Algebra classes are divided into four segments of nine weeks each. Students who are not meeting course expectations at the end of the first segment can repeat that segment immediately with another teacher. This keeps students from struggling through a whole year only to fail the course. In addition, teachers provide extensive opportunities for students to get tutoring so they will not fail the segments.

These scheduling changes were accompanied by changes in instructional strategies so that the extra time spent in class was focused on bringing students to higher levels of achievement. The new instructional strategies introduced include more hands-on, creative lessons that involve students actively in their own learning, such as more frequent use of math manipulatives and project-based lessons. One campus administrator described the kind of active involvement of students that leads to increased learning:

There's a lot of sharing. We don't do just the lecture transparencies. If you're doing just the

lecture and looking at a textbook and you're doing the questions at the end of the book, which is the easy thing to do, you're not going to [succeed]. The teachers know that and the department heads know that.

The administration provides teachers with continual support in improving their instruction and the variety of curriculum resources available to them. The dean of instruction was hired one year after the school opened to provide increased support in this area. One of the ways she does this is through weekly reviews of teacher lesson plans. She described how these reviews help:

[Y]ou can . . . see whether there's continuity or where they have a certain resource and you might have something extra you can provide. You would go in and say, "You know what, I also have this, do you think that could help you?"

As one department head explained, getting students interested in the subject matter is an important motivating factor. "If you get that twinkle in their eye," he said, "then you've got them. That's what we try to do." Teachers not only make the subject matter interesting, but also take a personal interest in the students and their achievement. The dean of instruction described how teachers and students eat together in the cafeteria, at the students' request, and she went on to describe one teacher who patiently tries to make the classroom fun for all students:

He makes it fun. If he sees somebody really struggling he's the type that would go and bring something from home. He'd bring chips or whatever else. He says, "You know what, I'm going to bring this other stuff and y'all come in." It makes them want to come in because it's going to be fun. For example, they might go to the Santa Ana wildlife refuge and study something over there. Field trips. And if they don't have the money he will find a way. They do a little fundraiser, and they all go. He doesn't exclude kids.

Building Student Support Structures

Much of the atmosphere of respect and learning at Memorial High School is due to the willingness of staff to do whatever it takes to be sure that students are successful. The principal described this willingness:

The majority of teachers that we have are very energetic and willing to go above and beyond and not say, "Well, this is not part of my job," or "Am I going to get paid for this?" They see that if it can make a difference, and I guess it can put us on the map, [then] they're going to go ahead and do it.

Students with whom we spoke reflected the positive attitude of the staff. One student said:

We all have a positive attitude when it comes to everything, practically. When it comes to clubs, to competition, to working, to tests and studying. We're very positive. We go out there saying, "We can do it. We can tackle it."

That attitude of success is evident in a series of programs and practices that Memorial High School developed to help students stay in school and be successful. Prominent practices include keeping parents informed of their children's progress, providing extra help for students struggling with

standardized tests, actively working to raise attendance rates, revising discipline procedures, and advising students on their work in high school and their options for going to college.

Encouraging parental involvement

The staff at Memorial High School have taken several steps to encourage parental involvement on campus. First, the teachers at Memorial host teacher-parent collaboration sessions at an event called the Parent Academy. The academy targets a group of parents of freshmen to become leaders and advocates for student achievement. These meetings take place over four consecutive Tuesday nights. Second, since the Parent Academy can reach only a small number of parents, the school makes a concerted effort to contact all parents on a regular basis. One of the ways they do this is by sending cumulative computerized report cards home every three weeks. This frequent reporting of student progress to parents provides more frequent feedback to students and helps involve the parents in celebrating successes and addressing problems. It provides parents with an opportunity to become involved when their child is struggling. Clerks enter data for these reports, so teachers are not overloaded with extra recordkeeping requirements.

Finally, school staff encourage parents to help students prepare for the TAAS and other tests. Teachers, students, and parents participate in a community walk, distributing bilingual brochures door-to-door at homes of students who are going to be tested. The brochures tell parents how important the tests are as a measure of student achievement, and advise them about how to help prepare their children for the assessments.

Providing extra help with standardized tests

For students having trouble with standardized tests, staff at Memorial High School and the school district provide multiple avenues for support. The school, for example, has implemented Power TAAS and Power End-of-Course sessions. These intensive tutoring sessions take place immediately before administration of the tests. A roster of students who have not mastered diagnostic assessments is provided to the teachers, who then determine which students will be pulled from their regular classes to participate in this intensive, short-term tutoring. In addition to the school's efforts, the district provides test preparation with TAAS summer school. With extra funding obtained from grants, students are given financial aid to attend summer school classes. Summer school teachers earn a small incentive for every student who passes summer TAAS exams.

Working to raise attendance rates

In addition to tracking academic progress, school staff keep an eye on attendance rates. After close examination of dropout and attendance data, the principal had staff prepare a progress report for those students who had excessive absences, and found that the majority of the students were second-year freshmen. Armed with this information, the school implemented a series of measures designed to track the progress of second-year freshman and to provide them with intensive support where needed. The principal described some of these interventions:

We've made a concerted effort on our dropout rate. . . . We talked to [the ninth-grade repeaters] about how we felt. Just because they were behind didn't mean that they couldn't do it, that there was a lot of help. We had a couple of the counselors go in; we had some outside agencies go in and talk to them. There's a committee of people that took it upon themselves to follow up

with [this group], and they've been talking to them on a three-week basis and seeing how they're doing so that they don't start falling behind even more.

Beyond the cohort of ninth-grade repeaters, *all* students were reminded of the school's goal to have at least a 94 percent attendance rate, and were provided with incentives to come to school. Every few weeks those students with perfect attendance could put their names in a lottery for prizes. Moreover, teachers and administrators focused students' attention on the need to attend class every day in order to achieve academically.

Creating a safe and orderly environment

To ensure a school environment that is safe and conducive to learning, the staff at Memorial High School have created and adhered to clear discipline policies and procedures. The staff practice a zero tolerance policy that includes a strict dress code. To make sure that discipline is handled consistently for all students, teachers have access in their classrooms to an electronic recordkeeping system that identifies past infractions of students. According to staff at the school, knowing a student's history of behavior helps teachers to make more appropriate decisions about particular discipline issues. Students and teachers know that when a discipline problem is serious, the administration will take responsibility for dealing with the issue. One teacher related:

Fortunately we have the administration. This administration [says], "You have any problems, just let us know." If the students misbehave in class and we call the parents, and the students keep misbehaving, we send them to the office, and the principal will take care of it. We'll conduct parent conferences, and [the administration will] solve the problem. They don't leave everything to the teacher. [They say], "If a student is not letting you teach, let us know and we'll take care of it."

Teachers also know that when students are referred to the principal for discipline problems, the school's staff will try everything possible to help the students be successful in school. A former counselor himself, the principal has helped establish counseling techniques as a way to work with students who are experiencing behavior problems. The dean of instruction described how this process resulted in achievement for one particular student who was not experiencing success academically or socially:

It took a lot of patience for [the administrator] to just work with her and talk to her the way he did. We kind of took her under our wing. We encouraged her to be involved with things. . . . I think it's the positive attitude and the unity that we have on this campus. That's what it is. These teachers never, never gave up on this girl. I really do believe that had she been in another setting, maybe another school, or with a different set of teachers, she would have fallen through the cracks. She is a true success story, and it took all of us, in all honesty. And it took a lot of her, because it had to come from her. She needed somebody to believe in her that she could do it.

Guiding students in decisionmaking

In addition to addressing broad student issues, the staff at Memorial High School try to make sure that each student is guided through important academic and personal decisions. To meet this goal, the staff created an advisory class called STARS. Through STARS, each staff member is assigned twenty students to advise throughout the students' high school years. Staff members and students meet once a month to discuss topics like self-esteem, grades, and future plans. The principal prepares the staff with the curriculum for each meeting. This program allows staff to get to know students more intimately and over a long period of time.

Another area where counseling starts early is preparation for college. Memorial High School counselors meet with middle school students to encourage them to take the more challenging curriculum that they will need for entrance to college and to encourage them to become involved in outside activities. At the high school, a full-time financial aid officer helps students and their parents locate and apply for financial aid and sends letters to parents, in Spanish and English, informing them of the availability of scholarships. The school also holds a financial aid night and a college night to inform parents of college opportunities for their children. For the staff at Memorial, preparing students for life beyond high school is yet another component of doing what is best for students.

SUPPORTING TEACHERS AND ENHANCING COLLABORATION

Administrators at Memorial High School have worked hard to develop a warm and inviting climate that is conducive to motivating teachers in their work and to improving student learning. Teachers at the school feel that they are treated with dignity and respect by a cordial and congenial administration. The administrators have strong interpersonal skills and good relationships with the teachers. As the principal explained, the administration recognizes the work of its teachers and the impact of this work on student achievement:

I think we as an administration constantly tell the teachers that they are the ones that make the difference. They are the decisive element, if you will, in the classroom. . . . What I feel should be recognized is the teacher, because they're the ones that have thirty students every period. . . . The teacher can heal and humor. The teacher is the one in the trenches, the one that has the power to make that student happy or sad. If the student is happy, the student is going to work for you and for himself.

Administrators also take the time to show that they care for the faculty and staff. The importance of this is evident in one teacher's comment:

They are always ready to help, always acknowledging you, always making sure that you have everything that you need to teach the students. They see you down the hall, no matter if they're traveling 100 miles an hour, they'll extend a hand and say "Good morning. How are you?" [You feel] you're important to them.

Beyond such expressions of appreciation and concern, several practices at Memorial seem to contribute to the positive working environment evident during our visit to the school. Administrators

have worked to support teacher commitment by making sure that teachers have a say in school policies and have the resources they need for instruction. Administrators have implemented structures to help teachers who are struggling in the classroom and actively support opportunities for teacher professional growth. Moreover, they have tried to organize in ways that support collaboration and teamwork.

Supporting Teacher Commitment

Administrators express trust that teachers are committed to making the school a place where students achieve at high levels. The principal's philosophy is "ownership contributes to success." He describes how he let teachers know at the first faculty retreat that he expected them to make recommendations for improvements to the school. In addition, he explained that he wanted to see that they had researched their recommendations and that the recommendations would very likely result in improved student achievement.

Another administrator said of the teachers: "We empower them. They have a stake in this school, in their position." Along these lines, one teacher said, "We have a big say on what's going to happen to our school and what we want our school to accomplish." The Campus Performance Objective Committee (CPOC)⁵ is a frequent vehicle used by teachers to propose changes and make suggestions. For example, the school's attendance, grading, and exemption policies began as teacher proposals to the CPOC. The decision to extend English II to two semesters was also the result of a proposal by English teachers to the CPOC.

Administrators demonstrate their support for teachers by listening to their needs and doing everything they can to get what teachers need to be successful. An administrator expressed this when he said,

In order for a teacher and a student to be successful, I need to provide them with everything that they need, and it's a cycle. I tell the teachers, "What do y'all need? What do y'all want? How do you prefer to do this? Let me try to work it out that way." It's a sharing. I've noticed that through the sharing process they want to do better and the scores reflect it.

This support is evident in the way the administration makes budgetary decisions and helps teachers who are struggling in the classroom. When it comes to supplies and money for instruction, the administrators trust that the department heads and teachers are focusing on student success and have thoroughly researched what they need to reach their goals. The assistant principal in charge of the budget related his response to requests from department heads:

[W]hatever he needs, I get it for him. If he tells me "I need a class set of books for this and it's going to be \$5000," I'm going to get it for him. Or he tells me "I need 200 practice booklets, and it's going to run \$6000," I get it for him. It doesn't make any difference what it costs.

Memorial High School is no different from any other high school in that there are some teachers who need extra support. An assistant principal described the actions taken to support a struggling teacher:

We did more walk-throughs to give her guidance: "This is what I saw." A lot of positive [guidance], too: "This is a good, you have really improved in this area." Instead of demeaning and

badgering, you're trying to capitalize on the positive and say, "You know what, you can expand from that." . . . We'[d] provide as much guidance and resources as we could on campus, but in addition to that we would send them, for example, to workshops and seminars . . . where they would hear it from somebody else outside the campus. We put the teacher on a growth plan and we guide her as she's going along.

In addition, new teachers and teachers on a growth plan are assigned a mentor teacher who provides them with guidance and support. The mentor teachers receive training for this role, which includes observing and providing frequent feedback to the novice teacher. A first-year teacher related,

When I had trouble at the beginning I went to my mentor, and also to [the dean of instruction] and said, "I need some help," and they were really glad to help me. Right away they dropped what they were doing.

Encouraging Professional Development

The staff at Memorial search out professional development that will provide them with the tools to address the strengths and needs of their students in ways that are appropriate to the rigors of the curriculum and the learning styles of the students. They attend sessions away from school and also bring in specialists for small- and large-group training on areas of identified need. One department head provided this description:

The people that we have are doing a great job. They go to clinics and they go to sessions and conferences to keep updated with the newest and the latest technologies so that we as a campus and a department don't fall behind on that. And it's rapidly changing. Certain things are obsolete in six months. So we constantly go for training and try to keep one step ahead of the kids.

In addition to frequent attendance at professional development sessions, the staff at Memorial create and provide much of their professional development in-house. In a spirit of sharing what they know, they invite teachers from other schools to come and learn. In fact, Memorial teachers have taken a leading role in the district in creating and providing professional development training.

Organizing for Communication and Teamwork

Structures that encourage communication, cooperation, and teamwork were put in place even before Memorial opened. These structures include department meetings, staff retreats, Campus Performance Objective Committee meetings, and assemblies.

Teachers and administrators interviewed felt that they were an essential part of a team working toward the common goal of high academic achievement for each student. Time has been set aside for groups of teachers and staff to meet together regularly. For example, department heads meet weekly, and according to staff, this frequent collaboration has resulted in more cooperation between departments. The department heads have been able to convey an attitude of teamwork to their teachers in weekly department meetings, and to elicit their cooperation in working toward the common goal of student achievement. The dean of instruction explained:

For example, for the writing it's not just the English teachers. It can't work that way. We've got history [classes] doing a lot of writing so if [the teacher has] a lesson and . . . can incorporate some writing, he's going to do that because there's going to be some integration and they know that. Science for example, when they're doing experiments they're not doing just the experiment for science, they're doing a lot of mathematics. The teachers know that. They're networking.

All department heads are included in the meetings. In this way, departments traditionally not included in academic and test preparation planning—like physical education and the fine arts—have become involved in integrating schoolwide academic objectives. The staff of these departments see themselves as important members of the instructional team.

Department heads practice the same kind of participatory leadership that has been modeled for them by the administrators. One department head described his technique to actively involve teachers in decisionmaking as “consensus building”:

That creates a little bit more camaraderie. We kind of understand each other a little bit that way, rather than [my saying], “You're going to do this. You're going to do that.”

Because they see that their input is valued and feel that they are part of a team, teachers also feel free to turn to their department heads with suggestions, questions, or concerns. Teachers expressed a willingness to openly discuss their successes and their failures. For instance, several teachers explained how they share information on how they went about accomplishing specific TAAS or TEKS objectives, and how they feel free to ask each other what they are doing in the classroom and to discuss what did not go well.

A spirit of friendly competition that does not exclude the sharing of work and ideas contributes to the camaraderie among staff. The competition is a challenge to do better. According to one teacher,

We're always working . . . as a team. And always challenging each other. Let's see who has the better students—who can perform better. That challenge—we do it in a positive way. [The challenge is] to improve . . . the students' grades and their performance.

FOSTERING AN ENVIRONMENT OF RESPECT AND AFFECTION FOR STUDENTS

Although the administrators and staff at Memorial focus their considerable energies on helping students reach high levels of academic achievement, they have not ignored the students' need to be nurtured and cared for. Considerable thought has been put into bringing the students together to build a cohesive body of students who have a sense that they belong. The principal began the school year with a student assembly, during which he said, “We love you, we care about you and we want you succeed. We expect you to succeed.” This message was not lost on students. As one student emphasized, “This school cares a lot.”

The principal recognized the importance of establishing a sense of unity at the school the first year when he met with the senior class to discuss the first graduation to be held at Memorial. Instead of

continuing a district tradition of having graduating seniors wear different colored gowns to signify their achievements in school, he suggested that they should all wear the same school color. This change demonstrates that Memorial students belong to a unified team. Sashes designating academic achievements are worn with the gowns.

Participation in ROTC, vocational programs, and extracurricular activities helps foster students' sense of belonging. The staff has brought their competitive zeal and energy to these activities to motivate students not only to participate, but to excel. Staff members see success in all areas as a way to build student self-esteem. The staff enumerated many instances of success in district and state competitions. The band director explained the connections that he sees between extracurricular activities, academic achievement, and a unified school:

Choir, orchestra, and band I think [are] an important part of the success of this school because kids who are involved in fine arts, talking actively, involved in performance, it's been shown that they do much better on their SATs, they're better in math, they have better thinking skills, plus they're able to work together as a team because of the activities that they do, . . . I think that's part of the reason the school has success in what it's doing.

The collaboration and teamwork of the staff combined with these efforts to build unity among the students have resulted in a school where students are seen not as a product, but as contributing members of a vibrant community.

PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

The administrators and faculty at Memorial are very proud of the achievement of their students. They do not, however, express that they are satisfied with the level of achievement that they have reached. When asked about the future, the dean of instruction put it this way: "If there's a vision, it's that we continue working together and that our scores, because of that, are improved even more. They're already good and we're so proud, but you can always do better."

To further the progress of student achievement, the staff at Memorial recognize the need to continue to hire dedicated teachers who believe in the school's mission. The entire staff is interested in bringing together teachers who share the commitment and vision already in place. An assistant principal commented, "We're very particular. . . . [A] lot of it has to do . . . with attitude. That's major. If we can sense that positive attitude and that energy, you can train the rest." Because they have experienced success with their current staff, they want to continue attracting teachers who are innovative and open to new ideas. They are proactive in their hiring process. A department head reflected,

When they do see an opening, they don't have any trouble recruiting even during summer. If they see someone that's doing quite well they recruit them. . . . I'm not sure that the other campuses who lose teachers that way are that excited about it, but it works. A lot of times teachers, I think, feel somewhat isolated out there, and to know that you've been recruited and that you're wanted in the group is special.

The principal outlined several areas in which he wanted to see improvement, such as better support

for students with limited proficiency in English. He also sees the district's involvement in the Alliance Schools—an initiative that works to engage parents in schools and to make schools the center of the community—as a way to improve the relationship between the school and parents, and as a way to build the capacity of parents to be more involved in decisionmaking processes at the school. In addition, he is excited about the potential for greater involvement of the “winter Texans” as tutors and mentors for students. In these and many other areas, the staff at Memorial High School are developing plans to continually improve. Teachers and administrators have their eyes on the possibilities and continue to work as hard as possible to provide the best opportunities they can for their students.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ 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.
- ² 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.
- ³ 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.
- ⁴ 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).
- ⁵ 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 Memorial, this team is called the Campus Performance Objective Committee, or CPOC.

