



TEXAS SCHOOL BEATS THE ODDS WITH A SHARED COMMITMENT TO STUDENT LEARNING

BY TIMOTHY BERKEY
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The odds were stacked against the new elementary school from the beginning. In its favor, the school was a beautiful building with an established principal. Beyond that, anyone would predict that the first year would be tough. The staff consisted of new teachers and transfers from across the district. The students were reassigned from two neighboring elementary schools and represented the lower-performing populations of each. Some of the older students were involved in gangs. From the outset, they were determined to bring the same behaviors they displayed in their previous schools. Was it fate that this new school was named after William C. Velasquez, founder of a youth organization aimed at social

action, a visionary, and a leader of Mexican-American youth?

One year after opening its doors, Velasquez Elementary School in Richmond, Texas, beat the odds in 2007 and was designated an Exemplary School, the highest award given to schools in Texas for outstanding academic results.

A CONTRACT FOR EMPOWERMENT

The faculty who had chosen to become part of the new staff had a common motivation. They wanted to be part of something different. They turned to Elizabeth Dow, their new principal (and co-author of this article), for a vision, and she responded with a challenge. She asked her teachers what it would take to create a campus where every student experienced success.

The resulting conversations focused on the need for strong relationships and the empowerment of every professional. In an August retreat, teachers created a social contract that became the foundation for a culture of mutual respect and unified effort. Words and phrases such as “willing to share” and “team player” were written into the document, not as empty promises, but as commitments to relationships that would empower every professional and build a collaborative culture.

A BATTLE OF WILLS

The opening days were difficult for the staff. Fights broke out in hallways and students from opposing schools bullied each other and dis-

Velasquez Elementary School
 Richmond, Texas

Grades: Pre-K-5
Enrollment: 622
Staff (certified teachers and support staff): 49
Racial/ethnic mix:

White:	31%
Black:	26%
Hispanic:	41%
Asian/Pacific Islander:	0%
Native American:	0%
Other:	2%

Limited English proficient: 16%
Languages spoken: English, Spanish
Special education: 8%
Free/reduced lunch: 56%
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rupted classrooms. Dow was determined to win the battle over the type of school Velasquez was to become, so she modeled what she wanted to see. She didn’t suspend students, but instead held them accountable for their behavior. Staff addressed misbehaviors with an immediate consequence given out of love, not dislike. Students were shaped, not labeled. Teachers joined together and patrolled hallways, demonstrating that the new school would be controlled by adults, not by students with a history of disrupting classrooms.

Within weeks, the atmosphere at Velasquez was changing and the culture aligning with what we know is an essential baseline for an effective school — a safe and orderly environment. Parents who in the past had fought attempts by their previous school to discipline their children were now handed expectations of a

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new partnership. They also were given a promise: “Your child will not fail.”

THE VISION: TOGETHER WE CAN

As the staff and administration settled into the school year and examined students’ academic records, they saw that they had a larger battle to face — that over expectations. Based on past performance on state assessments, the staff doubted their students could make significant gains in time to pass the state assessments in the spring. Students were accustomed to failing and feeling the weight of low expectations. Yet teachers experienced a new sense of efficacy in coming to terms with their out-of-control school. They learned that by working together, they could change the course of events. Some believed that if they pooled their talents as teachers, a majority of students could pass the state assessments.

Dow raised the stakes even higher. Her motto: “100% of 100%.” When a veteran teacher told her that she was sure that the majority of her class would fail the state reading test, Dow showed up at her door the next day ready to teach. The staff expected all children to succeed. Teachers’ learning and sharing together would become a primary vehicle for improvement.

USING DATA TO BEAT THE ODDS

Rick Stiggins (Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, & Chappuis, 2005) reminds us that if you want to build a culture of confident learners, you must gather data that is analyzed in the right manner to inform teachers and improve learning. This is exactly what the staff at Velasquez has learned to do, beginning with Monday morning strategy sessions. The week begins with a core team that gathers for a block of time in the school’s “war room.”

The principal, assistant principal, counselor, and instructional technologist meet with three veteran teachers assigned full time as the reading facili-

How Velasquez shifted its use of data

CHALLENGE	STRATEGY
Reliance on state assessments that measure minimum expectations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers design formative and summative assessments based on higher levels of Bloom's Taxonomy. Students are given standardized tests that are based on national standards.
Accountability is limited to the results of state assessments and rating of the campus.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accountability is attached to weekly performance data issued on each student by teams of teachers.
Formative data on the progress of students are collected and held by the teacher to whom the student is assigned.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students are assigned to a team of teachers, and data are shared by all.
Data reveals that students continue to struggle after several attempts to remediate.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Student data is shared with a core team in order to find new strategies and solicit intervention support from others.
Students leave school frustrated with their learning (nonmastery) or bored (mastery).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers use formative data from the day's lesson to design corrective instruction for nonmastery students and advanced activities for mastery students. The last 30 minutes of the day is used for remediation or advanced learning activities.
Leadership limits their involvement with data to state assessment results and report cards.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The principal and assistant principal serve on the core team and review weekly data on individual students and directly participate in the identification and delivery of intervention strategies.

tator, Title I coordinator, and math/science Title I instructor. This core team has one purpose: to brainstorm a set of strategies and interventions for every child identified in the previous week's grade-level meetings as struggling. The team develops strategies that it will take back to teachers to address the learning problems of each child.

The room looks like organized chaos. Charts and data tables are posted all over the walls. Diagrams and curriculum maps prepared by each team of teachers provide visual displays of key objectives that will be addressed through cross-curricular teaming. One member of the core team takes detailed minutes of the strategy sessions.

GATHERING THE RIGHT TYPE OF DATA

For years, Wiggins and McTighe

(1998) have promoted their backward design process for planning curriculum. Planning starts with identifying the desired student learning results. The challenge under No Child Left Behind is that many states have set standards too low. Sanders (2003) points out that "especially for schools serving disadvantaged populations of students, we have observed too often that students whose achievement was above the proficiency level had suppressed academic gains." Texas is one of those states. This was a paradigm shift for Velasquez teachers as they began to view the state assessments as a minimum standard instead of an academic goal.

Velasquez now uses a combination of common formative and summative assessments in addition to state-released practice tests. The school recently introduced the Stanford 10 assessments to get a more accurate

external audit of proficiency levels than the state TAKS tests provide. Teachers get weekly assessment data that is disaggregated and easy to use in monitoring the progress of each student.

INTERVENTIONS AND STRATEGIES

Well-intentioned use of data can often lead nowhere. People get together and talk about results, and not much follows. This is not the case at Velasquez. Each pair of K-1, 2-3, and 4-5 grade-level teams has a representative who works with the core team to implement the interventions and strategies identified from the Monday morning sessions.

Specialists from the core team visit classrooms and co-teach the interventions. The instructional technologist designs special assignments and lesson supplements using technologies in the classrooms to support

differentiation of content, processes, and assessments that target student learning problems profiled from the previous week's data.

Unsuccessful interventions are reported to the core team and redesigned for the following week. The staff never accepts failure. Differentiation, time, and teamwork are the variables. Learning is the constant.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Every seventh day at Velasquez, teachers have a two-hour block for shared learning and practice. The social contract developed and revised at the beginning of each school year is the foundation for these meetings. The meetings are intense and structured. A portion of the time is focused on book study to enhance the skills of the team. For much of the meeting, the teams focus on data from teacher-developed student assessments and state-released assessments.

Team members plan for the differentiation of lessons beginning with agreed-upon standards. They separate these into levels so that students at the bottom are pulled up and those in the middle and upper levels are pushed ahead. Teachers chart out six weeks of planned lessons at a time to take advantage of cross-curricular opportunities to enhance learning through shared practice.

USING DATA TO MAINTAIN A FOCUS ON STUDENTS

Teachers are focused on individual progress of students and pay close attention to data that allow them to identify struggling students. Teachers use a 45-minute conference period once a week to compile a profile of students for review by the core team the following Monday morning. Teachers disaggregate data from the week's formative assessments to target

students in trouble for discussion and intervention strategies.

COMMON LEARNING TIME

Every Wednesday afternoon, Velasquez teachers gather for a one-hour meeting at the end of the workday. On one Wednesday, teachers in vertical teams coordinate their work on curriculum, instruction, and assessments. On the alternate Wednesday, teachers share their work in whole-campus faculty meetings, and vertical teams report on their activities. Dow also uses this time as one of many opportunities to celebrate team accomplishments and student success stories.

Teachers agree that no one will address personal needs (doctor's appointments, family obligations, etc.) on Wednesday afternoons. How does Velasquez get this type of commitment? Dow's teachers know that she will stretch the rules and help them with personal needs and family obligations on other days of the week in return for their unwavering commitment to students.

EVERY DAY ENDS WITH CONFIDENCE

Students end each day with a 30-minute session customized to meet their learning needs. Teachers provide tutorials for students needing corrective interventions to reach mastery. For students already mastering the day's objectives, teachers provide learning activities that stretch their skills to higher levels of Bloom's Taxonomy.

This happens through an intricate series of discussions throughout the day among grade-level teachers and core interventionists, who share, observe, strategize, and design learning experiences that will enable each student to finish the school day with a high level of personal satisfaction and confidence in learning.

It is no accident that the atten-

dance rate at Velasquez is high. Students are challenged and know that their teachers will help them find success before getting on the bus.

WHAT IT TAKES TO TEACH AT VELASQUEZ

Dow makes clear what she wants for her students: "I don't want good teachers. I want great ones." When she interviews job candidates, she asks if they can be a team player. Success at Velasquez is built on a culture of teacher collaboration and mutual respect, and by constantly asking, "Is this what is best for children?"

Communication is a critical component among teachers, and staff must exchange data throughout the day. Students are assigned to a team of teachers, not a single adult, and teachers leave their egos in the parking lot. When parents new to the school express concern about this nontraditional approach, Dow takes them by the hand and pledges, "I love your child, and I promise she will get the best education at our school."

Students at Velasquez are the winners, and their teachers earn an intrinsic reward that no one but struggling children who succeed can offer — confident smiles and renewed excitement about learning.

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