



Photo by LAURA TAFT

Teachers at Monte Vista Elementary update and analyze student data tags that are used to track student progress in literacy. From left, Sheila Ortega (4th grade), Jimmy Garcia (4th grade), Tamara Benjamin (special education), Rosemary Medina (4th grade).

WHAT'S BEST FOR OUR STUDENTS?

OUTCOMES ARE THE DRIVING FORCE AT ONE HIGH-ACHIEVING ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

By Cathy Kinzer and Laura Taft

Monte Vista Elementary School is one of 24 K-5 elementary schools in Las Cruces Public Schools, an urban district in southern New Mexico. The school's 450 students reflect the diversity of its Southwestern community: 75% Hispanic, 17% English language learners, and 68% free or reduced lunch, thus qualifying Monte Vista as a Title I school.

Monte Vista opened in August 2010 under the leadership of principal Theresa Jaramillo-Jones with a staff committed to making a difference for the community through a focus on student and professional learning, shared and supportive leadership for all students and teachers, and collaborative professional learning ensuring high achievement for all students.

Since that time, Monte Vista has exemplified Learning Forward's Outcomes standard, which states: *Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students aligns its outcomes with educator performance and student curriculum standards* (Learning Forward,

2011). The school’s staff accomplishes this by engaging in purposeful collective learning with shared accountability to each other and to students. Monte Vista’s teachers are developing knowledge and skills for effective teaching through collegial classroom experiences, using multiple sources of data to inform their decisions, and studying teaching and the outcomes of these efforts on student learning and achievement.

FOCUS ON CULTURE AND OUTCOMES

In its first year, Monte Vista was one of three elementary schools in the district to make Adequate Yearly Progress in mathematics for all students, as well as all subgroups. In January of its second year, Monte Vista received an A rating as the state converted to a federally approved state system. Monte Vista’s score of 82.6% put the school in the top 9% of schools statewide and made it the highest-rated school in its district. After the school’s second year of academic testing, Monte Vista again rated an A, scoring 89.4%, the second highest in the state. The school led the district on the rigorous state assessment.

Monte Vista attributes its academic outcomes to two factors: 1) building a professional learning community culture based on collaboration and learning for all — students, families, and staff; and 2) focusing on academic standards and outcome-based student achievement data. By maintaining this focus on culture and outcomes, Monte Vista filters every decision, from scheduling and staff assignments to assemblies and student discipline, around one question: What is best for student learning?

A LEARNING CULTURE

At Monte Vista, educators use professional learning communities to improve their skills, knowledge, and effectiveness as educators for the single purpose of increasing student learning and achievement.

The schedule at Monte Vista is structured so teams of teachers have time during the school day to meet and collaborate. Teams have 4½ hours each week to plan lessons, score common formative assessments, discuss student achievement data, and plan student interventions. By grouping special classes such as library, physical education, music, technology, and art, teacher teams have common planning times to collaborate. As a result, parent requests

for specific teachers have disappeared as it becomes apparent that all students have equal access to high-quality, equitable education, with test score variations among individual teachers narrowing.

Monte Vista’s culture supports collaboration. As Maricela Rincon, a 3rd-grade teacher, notes, “We are a community of learners who are constantly learning from each other. We take time to observe each other at all grade levels or watch videos of each other’s classrooms to learn how we are implementing instructional strategies and how they impact student learning. As professionals, we work together, two grade levels at a time, to discuss certain focus areas in depth with our principal and learning coach.”

Ricardo Rincon, a 4th-grade teacher, reports: “We always take time to learn new things that will help us grow as teachers and help us to better meet the needs of our students. We generate knowledge together. Our learning coach puts in a lot of time to research new ideas and helps guide our learning journey. We study together, decide on strategies, implement them in our classrooms with our students, and come back to share our successes with our teams.”

This school has a culture of collective trust, high expectations for all — teachers, staff, and students — as well as structures and resources to continue to learn and achieve. Actions taken in the school are strategic and purposeful, with the central goal to improve teaching and leadership practices to support student achievement outcomes. One example of this level of trust and collective commitment can be found in the school’s observation process. School administrators, as well as the school’s learning coach, conduct classroom walk-throughs around identified area of focus. When the staff was asked whether these focus areas

Monte Vista Elementary School
Las Cruces, N.M.

Grades: **K-5**
Enrollment: **450**
Staff: **32 teachers**
Racial/ethnic mix:

White:	19%
Black:	4%
Hispanic:	75%
Asian/Pacific Islander:	0%
Native American:	1%
Other:	1%

Limited English proficient: **17%**
Languages spoken: **English, Spanish**
Free/reduced lunch: **68%**
Special education: **14%**
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HOW MONTE VISTA COMPARES TO OTHER SCHOOLS

The table below shows how Monte Vista ranks with other schools that have similar demographics in the student subgroups: English language learners, students with disabilities, ethnicity, economically disadvantaged, and mobility. A composite score incorporates all categories into a general measure of at-risk students.

	SCHOOL RANK (OUT OF 50 SCHOOLS)					
	English language learners	Students with disabilities	Ethnicity	Economically disadvantaged	Mobility	Composite
Current standing	1	7	1	2	3	1
School growth	1	1	1	1	2	1
Student growth, highest 75%	1	1	1	1	1	1
Student growth, lowest 25%	2	1	5	1	2	1
Opportunity to learn	9	3	5	6	8	9

Source: New Mexico Public Education Department.

should be announced ahead of time, the answer was a resounding “No!” The staff agreed that the walk-through data would be more relevant and useful if staff remained unaware of what administrators were looking for on these walk-throughs. These unannounced observation cycles have become a vital source of information for the school in determining areas of strength and areas for improvement.

“As we work together, all participants have a voice and are actively engaged in the learning as well as in the teaching,” says Ricardo Rincon. “We all have adopted a philosophy of being active leaders and learners, and we approach learning understanding that our individual input is essential to maintain the diversity of opinion needed to be an effective school. Our voice matters, and we collaborate to move beyond our personal agendas to a shared consensus focused on student learning.”

Leadership is not limited to the principal at Monte Vista. Everyone at the school is expected to be a leader: students, families, teachers, and administrators. Structures and processes at the school, such as teacher collaboration, parent involvement, rules for learning and behavior, and shared leadership, are determined by and through the collective wisdom of teachers and students.

Staff- and student-led committees illustrate this shared leadership. Using the school’s Educational Plan for Student Success, these committees have ownership and responsibility for meeting school goals. Committees create SMART goals (specific, measurable, attainable, results-based, and time-bound) to plan assemblies and family nights, make decisions on effective

instruction and methods to monitor it, determine ways to ensure the safety of students on campus, and study student achievement data to look for ways to improve student learning. All committees determine their own agendas, based on the educational plan, distribute meeting minutes to inform staff of decisions made and upcoming events, and monitor their committee’s effectiveness.

Students at Monte Vista are expected to take an active role in their own learning outcomes in the classroom. Students maintain their own data notebooks, set their own goals for learning and leading, track progress towards those goals, and celebrate their success at reaching these outcomes. Students use their data notebooks during student-led parent conferences to explain their strengths and areas for improvement as well as set new learning and leading goals.

USING DATA

Using data to improve instruction and student learning is part of the culture at Monte Vista. Monte Vista’s teachers recognize that data conversations must go deeper, enabling them to understand student thinking and revise instructional strategies to increase learning. Conversations focus on explicit next action steps to support continued student achievement. Gathering and analyzing data, then using results to determine next steps give Monte Vista’s teachers insight into classroom learning and a way to engage in accountability dialogue.

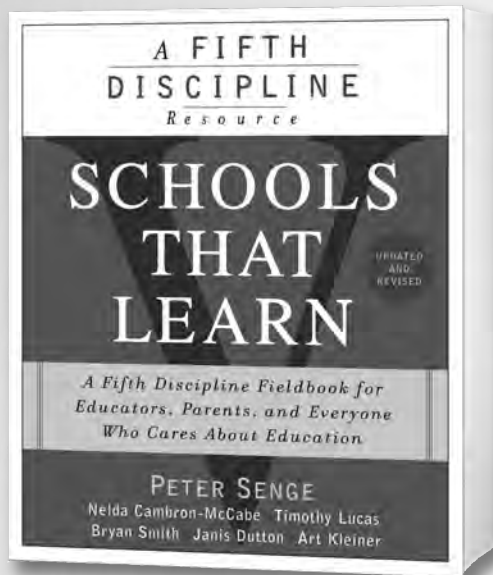
Grade-level teams of teachers use individual student achievement data to create data walls that are used to check on

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whole-school benchmarks, classroom variances, and individual student growth. By having hands-on time, teachers understand these data and have a buy-in not often found when schools prepare data for the teams.

As part of their professional learning, teachers share student achievement data. Nothing is hidden, and they ask one another tough questions: “Why do you think students scored lower/higher on this standard than in the other two classrooms? What was done differently?” Teachers reflect on their practices and compare student results with those of other teachers. Each classroom has students with unique needs, which provides opportunities to strengthen instruction.

Teachers understand how to make data useful and move it from quantitative or qualitative information to actions within each classroom. “Our learning communities can start with different openings,” says Maricela Rincon. “We may present on a topic from our book study, we may watch a video of one of our colleagues integrating innovative strategies during regular instruction, or our learning coach may share results from data collected during classroom walk-through observations.”

Administrators and teachers at Monte Vista determine what instructional areas they will observe during classroom walk-throughs based on learning community discussions. Staff may request that classroom walk-through data be collected on areas such as the percentage of teacher talk vs. student talk time, the effectiveness of posted and discussed student objectives, or the implementation of a high-priority schoolwide strategy. Data from these two-week observation cycles is then shared with all staff during learning community meetings.

EVIDENCE OF SUPPORT FOR LEARNING

- Monte Vista has an infrastructure that supports professional and student learning.
- Purposeful, ongoing collaboration is vital and a central priority in the schedule (i.e. when students are attending library, physical education, technology, and literacy/numeracy support).
- Because of the culture of collaboration, teachers see time working together as desirable and essential as professionals sharing their practices.
- Teachers develop grade-level team lesson plans together, and all teachers in a grade level teach using the same lesson plans with the same content standards and student learning objectives on a daily basis. Teams submit one weekly lesson plan together. What they all teach is the same, but how they teach it varies based on individual teacher strengths and styles. However, if one teacher has outstanding results in student learning or high levels of success with a particular style or using a certain resource, this is shared with colleagues because — regardless of personal preferences or styles — everything is based on student learning results.

MONTE VISTA’S CULTURE OF COLLABORATION

- The principal, learning coach, and teachers monitor progress toward shared commitments and academic goals.
- Professional learning uses a variety of data to understand student thinking and then determine next steps.
- Educators are accountable to students and to each other as teachers.
- Studying and sharing practices through a professional learning and teaching cycle connects the learning community to the classroom and provides a process to improve teaching and learning.

The learning communities’ central goal is to support student learning. Several sources of data measure progress toward student learning based on the Common Core State Standards. All curriculum and grading at Monte Vista is standards-based. Teams use backward planning, standards, and common formative assessments to plan instruction and measure student learning outcomes. Learning communities analyze evidence of student learning, including assessment data analysis, implementation of evidence-based instructional strategies, and administrative and peer observations to study teaching and determine the support necessary for individual student success.

Teachers study each student’s strengths and areas for improvement in their academic and social development, as well as fellow teachers’ instructional strengths in order to learn from one another’s successes. Ricardo Rincon says, “In today’s learning community, we started by analyzing data from one of the classroom walk-through observations, and we were pleased to see that 100% of the staff had been implementing comprehensible input techniques through the month of January. Comprehensible input has been our current subject of study during our schoolwide online course to support English language learners.”

ALIGNMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Professionals hold one another accountable for developing teaching expertise that supports student learning. Consistent structures with dedicated times for collaborative professional study are critical to improve teaching. At Monte Vista, teachers study, refine, rehearse, and develop practices to further student learning. “We work together as grade-level professionals to use backward planning for upcoming literacy and numeracy units,” says Maricela Rincon. “This work includes a study of our standards, learning objectives, and creating assessments. This helps us to collaboratively develop our common weekly lesson plans.”

Kindergarten teacher Melissa Gilbert says, “We also review, compile, and reflect on student data. We bring our common

formative assessments to analyze student thinking and score them together to clear up any confusion and make sure we are consistent as a team and compile our grade-level results to think about the next steps for our students. We have crucial conversations about the student learning that has taken place or in what areas the learning was weak and needs improvement. We can then share strategies we have used that have proven to be successful in our classrooms with our peers.

“Videos of our classrooms or peer observations provide avenues for studying our teaching. The focus is on how our instruction supported learning, not on us as individuals, but on our instructional strategies in relation to student learning,” Gilbert says. “We study and improve our teaching. We are learning how to learn together as professionals, and our focus on instruction can make a difference for our students. We share collective responsibility for our students and collaboratively reshape the learning opportunities to meet our students’ needs.”

One of the outcomes of collaboration is belief in continuous improvement through collective responsibility and learning how to meet student learning needs. Monte Vista’s staff members share successes and areas to be strengthened so they can learn from one another how to improve student learning.

Every example of individual strength and teaching style is seen as action research. The improvement process is based on finding individual examples of success in classrooms. Teachers share and study these examples of success to build the professional knowledge needed to support student learning.

At Monte Vista, teachers and administrators are learners along with their students. The school makes purposeful changes based on student results, using a variety of data to improve teacher practice and support student learning. By aligning its changes in teacher practice to student learning needs, the school is using professional learning to focus on outcomes that make a difference for all students.

REFERENCE

Learning Forward. (2011). *Standards for Professional Learning.* Oxford, OH: Author.

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