

Principal Open-Ended Question Responses

The Similar Students, Different Results study had one open-ended question on the principal survey, which asked, “What are the three most effective things your school has done to improve student achievement?” Samplings of principals’ responses are divided into two sections in this document. The first section provides general responses to the question from principals of high-performing schools. The second section provides responses that describe innovations or creative ideas that principals from schools of all levels of achievement have used to help improve their schools.

A Sampling of Responses from Principals of High-Performing Schools

Expectations and policies

- Focusing on best practices and research-based instruction is much more credible and valid than simply doing what one believes will work.
- Build/Develop a positive school climate that promotes collaboration among instructional staff, respects the community, and communicates a clear vision of high student achievement expectations for every student.
- Created a strong sense of community within the school in which everyone supports high expectations and an emphasis on effort and perseverance.
- Genuine trust that students will meet and/or exceed grade-level standards. Hard work and commitment of all stakeholders. Parents are quite active. They take on responsibilities in an effort to improve school.
- Stop using excuses for student achievement that we have no control over. (e.g., poverty, second language).

Shared culture

- Teachers have opened themselves up to learning from each other, sharing ideas, and expressing their need for more training to teach English Learners, special education, and high-needs students. The communication is open, honest, and respectful.
- Increasing teacher collaboration opportunities has improved the consistency across grade levels of delivery of instruction. Supporting the collaboration with professional development reinforces the ability of everyone to improve equally.
- Empower teachers to develop effective systems (well articulated through the grades) of instruction—listen to their needs—facilitate the efforts—assist staff to disempower the “naysayers” (or walk them out)—celebrate success!

Curriculum coherence

- Moved to a standards-based curriculum with assessments tied to our report card. This led to pacing schedules, structured conversations about instructional strategies and student performances, and targeted achievement goals for the entire school, classrooms, and individual students.
- Develop and implement grade-level standards in reading, writing, math and English Language Development. Use research-based instructional strategies to implement grade-level standards. Scheduled formative assessments to measure student growth towards standards. Review student data in order to focus instruction. Standards for the teaching progression were also developed in revising the personal observations and evaluation process.
- Our school has developed and implemented instructional timelines in language arts and math that insure that all standards have been taught, assessed, and remediated prior to standardized

testing. Support programs such as Title I. Communicate closely with the teachers to teach those skills and concepts needed to learn grade-level standards.

- A second strategy was release time for teachers and principals to go through Language Arts and Math frameworks, standards, and curriculum. This helped us to become more familiar with standards and understand that we can't assume that standards are covered in the curriculum. Curriculum mapping has been a focus for the past 3 years.
- Calendar all standards and assessments prior to the STAR test window and tie to District Curriculum.
- Schoolwide alignment—common instructional strategies, common practices, and common academic vocabulary. We use action walks (walk through classrooms) to paint a clear picture of where we are and where we need to go.

Principal uses data personally

- Establish a student results data monitoring system. Track student achievement scores from year to year. Teachers make decisions based upon the data. District administrators look at student data to evaluate present practices and programs. Provide reading interventions based upon student results.
- Teachers have crossed the line of fear in regards to “Data.” We have trained a team of teachers how to read, disaggregate, and use data to drive instruction. They have then trained the staff to do the same.
- Quarterly Data Reviews based on student work and specific assessments shared with all staff members at a staff meeting and eventually reported to the Administrative Council and School Board.
- Analysis of state and district student achievement data has resulted in a more thorough understanding of the gaps both individually and across grade levels.
- Analyze local assessment data frequently to determine immediate and targeted interventions.

Teacher quality and teacher practice

- Hired fully credentialed teachers with a background/knowledge of state standards. Immediately release probationary teachers who lack skills.
- Hire quality teachers and release those who are not effective prior to tenure.
- Our district supported significant staff changes at our school through transfer, resignation, and retirement.
- Focus on teachers as the best resource in the classroom. Focus on good first teaching/direct instruction.

Creative Ideas for Improvement

When principals filled in the open-ended question on the survey, some offered interesting or innovative ideas for improving student achievement. Those that follow reflect comments from schools with all levels of performance.

- Support a low student-to-teacher ratio by committing discretionary funds to certificated faculty positions. We have, for example, a classroom faculty of 16 with 8 additional resource and/or specialist teachers. We have a reading specialist; an English as a second language specialist; three in special education; a technology, instrumental, and vocal music specialist; visual arts specialist teachers. And we are 75% reduced and free lunch.
- Communicate well with parents. Communicate on a daily basis.

- Focus on writing: Developed new writing curriculum across the grade levels this past summer. Each month writing prompts are given to students that are based on grade-level standards. Also journals were created to assess students in the content area through writing.
- Schoolwide math facts initiative was created to have every student learn their basic facts. Each month students schoolwide are given a basic facts test. The goal is for every student to pass the test.
- Leveling of English learners schoolwide by proficiency level. Every day, students move to different classrooms based on their English Language Development level.
- Every month all students write to a prompt. Teachers use a staff development rubric to score the papers. Papers are returned to students the next day. Teachers keep data on the number of students who score A, P, B, BB, FBB. The principal calculates the percentage of students in each category by grade level and publishes it the next day. A and P scores are displayed.
- Building extensive classroom libraries, K–5.
- Using highly skilled instructional assistants working with small groups of students in K–5.
- Focus on English Learner strategies to raise teachers’ awareness through effective inservice.
- Implementation of a daily school-based intervention for 50 mins./day in grades 4-6.
- Have an SB654 School Drop-out Prevention program which provides an Outreach Consultant who literally does anything and everything to support families and keep children connected to the school (attendance/tardy program, two after school homework clubs, provide uniforms as needed, I’m Going to College program, sports, taxi vouchers and bus tokens for transportations to meet family needs, dental van, Student Success Team meetings, parenting classes, coordinate AmeriCorps volunteers, etc.)
- Through II/USP [intervention program], we were able to have the support of an on-site instructional coach for two years.
- Schedule—coordinated schoolwide. Coordinated standards-based reading curriculum, increased effective time on task—no down time. Coordinated all pull-out services.
- Focus on rigor and precision in reading instruction.
- Data, data, data—Disaggregated data to provide feedback on student performance. The district contracted with Edusoft as a tool to continually monitor performance. However, there is still a need to have assessments and immediate results to allow for reflection of student performance while the students are still with the teacher—not results from last year’s group.
- Hire retired teachers to participate in a pull-out program targeted at our Below and Far Below Basic students.
- Focusing on best practices and research-based instruction is much more credible and valid than simply doing what one believes will work.
- Implemented a school-wide “facts” club to help students learn their basic math facts. This involves 3 times weekly timed addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division facts test and the earning of various rewards as they progress. It has been extremely effective—improved test scores.
- All grade levels are divided into 3 teacher teams. Students are “leveled” for differentiated instruction during a “sacred” 90-minute block of language arts instruction each morning. The below basic level students are instructed through the “Language!” program. Basic students receive core curriculum; and proficient and advanced receive core curriculum supplemented to meet their abilities.
- We have implemented a “Read-A-Thon” reading incentive program for the last 5 years (within a 6-week period). Students are awarded prizes for reading—highest number of books read by kindergarten–fifth grades (1 student per grade level) and everyone who read at least 20 books received a ticket to watch a magic show. A giant raffle is also conducted (for every 20 books

read, students receive a raffle ticket for the “big” drawing. This strategy has proved to be beneficial. Classes who read the most (for each grade level) also receive prizes each week.

- We have conducted parent education classes on grade-level standards-based curriculum, interpreting CST/CAT6 data and parent workshops in Reading and Math instruction. These workshops are conducted by teachers and coordinators. The parents find these workshops very valuable.
- Using our II/USP [intervention program] funds, we have been able to provide sub days for teachers to 1) meet in grade level meetings to collaborate and plan and receive professional development based on the needs to improve student achievement; 2) visit and observe other teachers/schools utilizing best practices; 3) provide after-school intervention for students who are at the basic level; 4) extend library hours after school to provide homework assistance.
- Achievement Grouping 5–6: This year we reorganized our upper grades (5th/6th) into Achievement Groups for Language and Math. This has allowed teachers to more effectively aim instruction. It will also help prepare the students for the middle school.
- School Climate. We invest a significant portion of SIP [School Improvement Program] funds for counseling—\$80,000/year and a psych. intra. While classes are invariably orderly and we have few discipline referrals and low suspension, there are 1–4% of students whose personal lives are in enough disarray to seriously disrupt classes. We invest in providing them the support that they need. We also have a community liaison and Healthy Start family support. Finally, we receive support from Contra Costa First 5 (.20 outreach worker; 7 week pre-K school; and on site-pre-K parent education classes.
- Parent/student/staff training on state standards. At Back-to-School Nights, parents were given envelopes with simplified information as to their child’s CST scores in English Language Arts and math and 4th grade writing. The effect was to really focus parents on their child’s stronger and weaker areas and the need to master standards for this new grade level.
- Separate grade level Back-to-School nights with childcare provided. Now 1.5 hours for specific grade level activities is the norm. Parents love the uninterrupted time and not having to dash from room-to-room. I offer to give 1:1 meetings to parents with children in 3 or more grade levels so they do not have to attend 3 meetings.
- First grade “sight word” assemblies (with certificates and prizes) for students who master a list of 20 sight words every month. This is very well attended and has made a great improvement in first grade reading skills. Monthly word lists are sent home. Teachers also provide daily practice. Students can get the award for previous months if they “catch up” —e.g., a child unsuccessful in September and October can earn the awards for September, October, and November if he learns all 60 words in November.
- Provide interruption-free time in the morning.
- Requiring all parents to do 20 effort hours at the school.
- Implemented a positive, proactive discipline plan with schoolwide procedures, classroom procedures, and targeted interventions for more behaviorally-challenged students.
- The school staff have a consistent discipline policy. All rooms display a set of values, which is stressed. There is a “No Put Down” policy.
- Not micro-managing teachers—ignoring district expectations to do mindless paperwork.
- Provide an extended day program for our students three days a week. This year a bus has been provided for after the extended day program [for students who take the bus].
- Increased student engagement strategies making sure all students are engaged and actively learning.
- A Spanish Bilingual Community Liaison was hired to conduct literacy classes, translate for meetings, and increase parent involvement. The Liaison encourages parents to be involved at the school. Parents often go to her for advice on how to get help, how to get their children reading,

and ideas for discipline. Parents feel a connection with her because she shares her own struggles with parenting.

- Teachers are involved in peer observation for English Language Development and English Language Arts. Teachers demonstrate lessons from colleagues to receive feedback to improve their teaching practices.
- Select an area of focus for each year so teachers become adept at implementing specific strategies. For example, one year our focus was interactive writing and interactive editing. Teachers read articles, observed demonstration lessons, and were coached in use of strategy. Other topics have been writing, guided reading, phonics, etc.
- Individual Action Plans [IAP] that identify strengths and weaknesses. Includes student data, learning styles and multiple intelligences, teacher diagnosis, and prescribe interventions. Set goals.