

Testimony for Little Hoover Commission

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My name is Willetta Fritz, and I am presently the English Department Chairperson and English/Language Arts (ELA) Curriculum Support Provider (CSP) at Sanger High School (SHS) in Sanger, California. I have been teaching for 36 years at Sanger High School, have been English Department Chairperson for 22 years, and have been CSP for six years. I was born and reared in Newberg, Oregon, just 24 miles west of Portland, Oregon. I attended Oregon College of Education in Monmouth, Oregon for two years before moving to California. I graduated from Fresno State College with a BA in English in 1970 and earned both a Teaching Credential in English and Masters in English in 1972.

I began teaching English in Sanger, California in 1972, and I have taught every English course in the department since then. I am presently teaching only one class, Advanced Placement (AP) English Literature, which maintains my knowledge of the teaching experience and cultivates my love of teaching. In 1995 I realized that I needed more knowledge about the act of reading itself because so many of our students had difficulty reading. Thus, I completed a Masters in Education with a Reading and Language Arts option in 1998. I regard myself as a committed, indefatigable, and passionate English teacher, qualities I have applied to my roles as English Department Chair and CSP.

“Always with Pride” has been Sanger High School’s motto for more than a century. Sanger High School is the single comprehensive high school in the Sanger Unified School district, a district serving approximately 9,500 students. Sanger Unified School District, covering 180 square miles in eastern Fresno County from the city of

Fresno to the foothills, includes the city of Sanger, the communities of Del Rey and Centerville, and suburban and rural areas. Sanger Unified adjoins Fresno, Clovis, Fowler, Selma, Kings Canyon, Parlier, and Sierra Unified School Districts. The district is rich in agriculture to the east and south while the north and west are a combination of agriculture and suburban areas. Sanger is a small close-knit community with a median income of \$32,000 per household. The district enrollment has experienced a building boom with an increase of 500 new students at Sanger High School in the last two years.

Sanger High School built a new campus and moved in January 2000. The beautiful school is spread over 60 acres and is comprised of 17 buildings, including a state-of-the-art library with a multimedia center, a multi-purpose building, and several computer labs providing students with internet resources and long-distance learning. The present enrollment is 2,650 with a diverse student population of 70% Hispanic, 21% white, 7% Asian, and 2% other. The number of students qualifying for free and reduced lunches is 62%. The high school is the jewel of the Sanger community. Sanger High School has won the California Distinguished School award in 1996 and 2005. These awards have represented the pride visible in the school and community.

In 2001 our school and community received quite a shock when it was announced that we were an “Under-performing School.” We all possess much pride in our school, and while some people were in denial, most of us decided that it was time to make some serious changes in our curriculum and to raise our expectations for all students. We applied for and received an II:USP, **Immediate Intervention for Under-performing Schools Program**, grant to help us implement a major school change. An

external evaluator was hired to assess the school's strengths and weaknesses, and a group of concerned members of our community, teachers, and administrators came together to plan and adopt a three-year plan for reforming our school.

Open public meetings were held, baby-sitting services were provided, translators were present, and all members of our community were invited to provide input and commentary. The committee ascertained that SHS students were weak in ELA and math and that parent communication and involvement were minimal. Recognizing that English and math would provide the foundation for improving the academic environment, the parents, the majority of the committee, believed an important component would be the creation of positions in English and math to support teachers, which would result in improving student learning. These positions of Curriculum Support Providers in English and math, in addition to a Parent Liaison, augmented a support system that aided teachers in lesson design, maintaining classroom discipline, teaching delivery, professional development, and numerous other areas where all teachers, both new and veteran, often seek advice and assistance.

Another crucial element of the plan was to seek the assistance of a consulting group that would assist our leadership team in planning a school that would change the learning environment for our Sanger students. We initially contracted with HSTW, **High Schools That Work**, to guide us in our search for a school transformation. We focused on student literacy, higher-level math requirements, parent communication, and rigorous curriculum in both college-preparatory classes and elective courses. The leadership team attended several HSTW conferences throughout the country, including Louisville, Kentucky and Atlanta, Georgia. These conferences confirmed the path we were taking

with our major areas of focus: literacy, math, parent involvement, and rigorous curriculum. Moreover, the leadership team agreed that we must raise expectations for our students. Because we were teaching at a “Below Basic” level, the students were performing at a “Below Basic” level. We became focused on significantly changing the culture of Sanger High School.

Sanger High School’s vision began focusing on standards-based education for **ALL** students, student literacy, benchmark assessments for monitoring student progress and improving instruction, quality professional development, and effective communication with faculty and parents. During this first year of change, the leadership was learning about successful schools and discussing extensively what would work at Sanger High School.

A primary focus was a standards-based curriculum. Representatives of each discipline attended a Curriculum Mapping Workshop and what was learned there was applied to our entire curriculum. Major changes were made to insure that all our courses met the requirements and standards established by the CDE. By utilizing Curriculum Mapping we demonstrated that all state standards were covered in depth. We identified where and when each standard was covered, and teachers possessed a “living” document that guided them in their instruction. Because all teachers of one course were following the Curriculum Map, **ALL** students in that course had the opportunity to receive an equal education. New teachers were most enthusiastic about the Curriculum Maps as they found security in knowing what to teach and when to teach it. Additionally, the use of Curriculum Maps promoted collaboration, one of the most effective sources of improving effective teaching practices. The release days for

teachers to collaborate was funded with II:USP money, and this excellent use of financial resources is vital to changing a school's culture and vision.

During the first year of II:USP as the new Curriculum Support Provider for English Language Arts, I concentrated on two areas of focus: student literacy and teacher support.

A major part of my job as Curriculum Support Provider was to improve student literacy. The Corrective Reading program, purchased from SRA, was already in existence; however, no organization and supervision of the program existed. Students were not tested and placed in the correct level utilizing the Corrective Reading placement test. There was one reading teacher, who had no relationship with the other English teachers or Sanger High School, and students were in levels that were too difficult for them, which actually decreases existing reading levels. The spring before I began this new position, the principal, Dan Chacon, provided me with several release days. I generated a list of eighth-grade students in the district who were testing at low levels on the CAT 6 reading test. I then went to those schools and tested the reading levels of these students on a one-to-one basis. I quickly discovered that I had a tremendous job before me. That first year I identified 25% of the eighth-grade students who read at low levels, with many at the fourth-grade reading level. I had to reduce the number of students that we would be able to service the next year because of the high number of students who were so far below reading level. I focused on the lowest readers. I organized the students into levels based on their reading abilities; we had separate classes for students reading at the third-grade reading level, fourth-grade reading level, and fifth and sixth-grade reading levels. All of these classes were at the decoding levels: we

were not able to focus on comprehension in the initial stage. Reading mastery requires three skills: **phonics (decoding), vocabulary, and comprehension**. Because I had tested these eighth-grade students in March and I had a concrete number of students requiring an additional reading period and the specific number of classes needed, we were able to build the Corrective Reading classes into the master schedule for the next year. This also enabled me to institute a professional development plan that would insure the success of the Corrective Reading classes for the next year.

Just as research has proven that teacher performance is the highest indicator of a student's academic success, I knew that the success of improving student literacy depended on teachers who believed in the reading program. I did not want designated reading teachers who would solely teach reading because it would be boring for the teacher to instruct reading classes all day. Instead, at an English Department meeting where teachers selected the classes they wanted to teach the following year, I opened up the reading classes to the teachers and encouraged them to take one or two reading classes. This proved highly effective. In the beginning there were several teachers who were skeptical of the reading program and did not want to participate. This was agreeable to me as I did not want teachers who did not believe in the reading program to teach the classes. The instructors who volunteered to teach the classes were excited and passionate, which are characteristics necessary to teach struggling readers.

During the summer SRA provided a two-day professional in-service for the new reading teachers, and they were paid for their time. The next year teachers were more excited about the reading program. Over the next few years more teachers volunteered to teach these classes because they wanted to become a part of the reading success.

Today, we have 12 teachers out of 27 English teachers teaching one or more periods of Corrective Reading and three teachers from other departments with a Multiple-Subject credential teaching one or two classes of Corrective Reading. The teachers who are teaching Corrective Reading are supporters of the program and are extremely cooperative with me as I move students in and out of classes. Every year before school begins, we have a Corrective Reading in-service to train new teachers and to review practices for veteran teachers. The reading teachers are well supported through the training they receive and through the existence of my position as the head of the reading program.

Today we have 25 reading classes with about 550 students participating. We only have about 100 students in the decoding classes while the rest of the students are in the comprehension classes, which we have gradually added. The district has supported this program by continuing to allow small reading classes. The average size of these classes ranges from **Corrective Reading 1**, which is comprised of students reading at the **third-grade reading level**, at 15 students in a class to **Corrective Reading 5**, which is comprised of students at the **seventh and eighth-grade reading levels**, at 25 students in a class. I am frequently found testing students who have been referred to me by teachers, counselors, and school psychologists. As a Reading Specialist, I am able to provide staff with valuable information about a student. Moreover, I have created pacing calendars so that the teachers will know on what lesson they should be, and I regularly visit the classes to check on the progress. I am the first source to consult or the bottom of the "Pyramid of Intervention." If a student is experiencing difficulty, I am usually the first person to consult to determine if the

students has a reading difficulty. My role as the head of the reading program is just one of many responsibilities as a Curriculum Support Provider, a position created by the II:USP program.

The other part of my job is to lead and support English teachers. This was difficult the first year because teachers were not accustomed to having another teacher in their classroom so often giving feedback on the lesson. I adjusted my approach, and the teachers became acclimated to my presence. Moreover, because I had been teaching for thirty years and was a respected teacher, my existence was more palatable. The support of my principal, Dan Chacon, was valuable during this first year. The second year was significantly better as teachers sought me for ideas and suggestions. Part of my job became just listening to teachers “vent” as the demands of teaching often overwhelmed them. Because I was in the classroom and was knowledgeable about what was occurring, I was able to identify areas of concern through my observations. This position of Curriculum Support Provider is a crucial one: I am teacher, listener, administrator, psychologist, mother, friend, arbitrator, and the list continues. My job is certainly different than being in a classroom. I must employ numerous and varied skills to communicate with my teachers and to be successful in leading them to areas that will improve instruction for **ALL** our students at Sanger High School.

The community of Sanger demonstrated loyalty and support as Sanger High School underwent this transformation. Sanger High School’s focus on raising student achievement resulted in increased academic rigor and high expectations for **ALL** students. After two years Sanger High School was no longer an under-performing

school. The API increased significantly over the next three years surpassing all targets, and CAHSEE scores exceeded state averages. API scores increased every year, and Sanger High School is now eleventh in Fresno County. Sanger High School continues to make changes necessary to meet our growth targets.

Sanger High School was presented with the opportunity to work with another educational consulting group, one that, we discovered, better met the needs of our school. Through a partnership with Riverside County Office of Education and the State Department of Education, the administration emphasized personal relationships and communication. Thus, we shifted from collaboration with HSTW to RCAT, **Riverside County Achievement Team**. We devoted time, energy, and financial resources to working with this vision of collaborative leadership.

We changed many practices at Sanger High School that promoted our vision of an equal education for **ALL** students and an education that was rigorous and challenging. We believed that **ALL** students could learn. We increased the requirements needed for graduation, including four years of English and three years for Mathematics to include Geometry. All “tracking” was eliminated and a rigorous college preparatory course of study was implemented for all students in all disciplines. A strong AP program was already in place, and AP Statistics was added to the current AP Calculus offering. An inclusion program was designed by the Special Education Department to assist students in need of additional support within the classroom setting. No student is denied access to any course of study. These were topics that had been discussed for years, but no action had previously been taken. However, once the leadership team focused on a collaborative model, we were ready for these changes.

In collaboration with RCAT and California Department of Education (CDE), SHS has refined the vision to include becoming a professional learning community. The vision focuses on three questions: What do we want our students to learn? How do we know they learned it? and What do we do when they don't learn it? Best practices have been adopted from *Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement*, *Good To Great, Built To Last* and *The Tipping Point*.

We at Sanger High School are continuing to grow and to identify areas of concern. However, the changes made during our two years as an II:USP school were crucial in making these changes happen. Without the initial influx of money, we would not have been able to allocate money for our ideas. In fact, when we did not receive funds for a third year of II:USP, the district so believed in what we had accomplished that they found the money to continue what was started. We have maintained all programs initiated during our II:USP years and have moved on to discover new ways to improve our school. Our primary vision of what is best for our students and the importance of looking at data to make decisions have become the basis of our school success.