

Sanger High School, Sanger, California Little Hoover Commission Testimony

Our journey towards academic improvement began in August of 2001 when Sanger High School was identified as an Underperforming School. According to the State's new accountability system, the Academic Performance Index (API), Sanger High was performing marginally in regards to academic achievement. Over the next six years Sanger High would embark upon a change of school culture that would cause a positive change in student achievement. Sanger High's API would increase from 574 to 725, earning the honor of being named a California State Distinguished School in 2005.

In August of 2002, I informed my faculty that we had been identified as an underperforming school and that we were voluntarily agreeing to participate in the Governor's Immediate Intervention for Underperforming Schools Program (II/USP). Keep in mind, I was only in my second year as principal of Sanger High School, and in 1996 Sanger High School had been recognized as a California State Distinguished School. As a result, many people were leery of my leadership and of the new state criteria used to rank schools. I still remember the silence in the room and the looks of disgust on the faces of faculty members. I was immediately challenged as to the validity of the underperforming school status and the accuracy of the state's assessment. Some members of the faculty were in denial and felt that the state's accountability system was just another fad in education that would soon be replaced. However, the Sanger Unified School District, the Sanger Community, and many staff members felt otherwise and insisted on improved test scores.

The II/USP provided Sanger High School with \$400,000 each year for three years. (Unfortunately, the third year of funding was contingent upon the school not making any improvement in student achievement. Since we demonstrated improvement in student achievement after 2 years, the third year of funding was forfeited.) During the beginning phase of the II/USP program, an external evaluator had to be hired to facilitate the planning process. In addition, the School Community Team (or governing board) of the II/USP plan had to be comprised of a majority of parents and/or community members. Therefore the decision-making body was made up of 15 non-teaching members, 13 teachers, and the principal. This form of governance helped to overcome any resistance to change. Sometimes when teachers control their own destiny, they may be inclined to do what is best for the adults rather than what is best for the students.

One key change that the committee decided upon was the practice of providing all students with a college preparatory (CP) education. Prior to 2002, most students, primarily Hispanic and socio-economically disadvantaged students, were **not** enrolled in CP classes. The students were not challenged academically, textbooks to take home were not available for these students, and homework was not assigned because teachers felt the students would not complete the assignments. The philosophical belief for these students was that they were not going to go to college and therefore did not warrant a college preparatory education. At the time, Sanger High was recognized for its school-to-career vocational education programs and non-college prep students were served in these

courses. After many heated discussions in the School Community Team meetings, we decided to enroll all students in CP courses.

Many students had difficulty in these CP classes because of a lack of literacy. Approximately 400+ entering freshmen possessed a fifth or sixth grade reading level. Since they could not read or comprehend the textbook, they had been barred from the CP courses. Therefore, our next step was to implement an intervention reading program for those 450 students, to support them in these more rigorous courses.

It is important to understand that another big reason for the tracking of students in college prep and non-college prep courses was because of expectations. Very little was expected of those students that were funneled into the non-college prep classes, while teachers maintained high expectations for those students in college prep classes. As a result, the students performed at that level of expectation on state tests. However, when expectations changed to include high expectations for all students, Sanger's API scores began to improve.

The funds from the II/USP program made it possible to hire the additional English teachers necessary to implement the reading intervention program. These funds also paid for the Curriculum Support Provider (CSP) position, which was responsible for the oversight of the reading intervention program and the proper placement of students. A math CSP was also hired to focus on instructional improvement and curriculum development in mathematics.

In the area of school communication, a parent liaison was hired to help improve parent communication. The parent liaison focused on English Learner families and made a positive impact upon communication with those families.

These few changes exhausted most of the funds provided by the II/USP grant. However, as the API data indicates, we made marked, steady improvement in student achievement. After two years of the IIUSP funding, we faced the challenge of sustaining these additional positions and programs without the IISUP money.

To help finance the additional support we turned to federal Title One funds. In 2003 we completed the application and qualified for Title One funds school wide, receiving approximately \$400,000 in funding. This helped maintain the programs that had begun with the II/USP funds.

Once the financial challenges were met, we turned to the human challenges, which were much more difficult. Perhaps the most stressful time in my life was during this process of change. Teachers are members of a proud profession, and to associate them with the label of "underperforming" automatically raises defense mechanisms. From denial to defiance to resistance and finally to accepting change, many unpleasant emotions were displayed and caused much grief in the workplace.

As we moved forward with the reading intervention plan, I received strong resistance from the elective teachers. With 450 students enrolled in reading courses, the enrollment in the shop classes decreased dramatically. To meet this demand, I did not replace some retiring shop teachers due to lack of enrollment and hired more English teachers to accommodate the number of students in the reading classes. Situations such as this caused some teachers to experience low morale and some teachers to second-guess the reform process. Although we had not seen any improvement in student achievement at this point, I had to encourage everyone to maintain faith in our academic plan and be a positive influence upon the students. At this time there was much dissension amongst the staff and many felt Sanger High was headed in the wrong direction.

By strictly adhering to the School Accountability Process and implementing the changes necessary to improve student achievement, we may have caused many teachers to retire early. This opinion is based upon the conversations I had with the 34 retiring teachers from Sanger High over the past eight years. Many of the retirees informed me that they could possibly continue teaching several more years, if the stress from the accountability system placed upon them could be removed. In their opinion, the new accountability system caused too much stress and restricted teachers' autonomy. Along with replacing those retiring teachers, I have hired 80 of the 116 teachers who are now at Sanger High School. The opportunity to hire 80 new teachers was priceless. It allowed me to hire the best possible teachers who believed in our educational philosophy.

In addition to the funds provided by the II/USP and Title One, we received a grant from the Riverside County Office of Education. This Riverside County Achievement Team (RCAT) grant was comprised of state funds from the Department of Special Education targeted to improve student achievement for special education students.

During the Sanger High reform process the leadership team, consisting of department chairs, curriculum support providers, and other administrators, invested many hours visiting exemplary programs and attending professional development conferences. Perhaps one of the most significant factors in this process was the leadership team training provided by RCAT. The leadership team spent four days at a time in Riverside engaged in interpersonal training, team building, and learning skills to foster productive relationships with all staff members. The opportunity for my staff to be trained and to interact with each other in four-day segments was very beneficial. Over a two-year period we trained for sixteen days at the Riverside County Office of Education. The trust we built and discovered among the group during that time was the most beneficial.

I would be remiss if I did not mention the amount of attention we invested in school safety. When I arrived at Sanger High School there was problem with gang activity and overall school disruptions. To overcome the gang culture at the school, my administrative team took a "zero tolerance" approach towards this behavior. We strictly enforced the dress code and emphasized the expectation that we would not allow any type of gang behavior at school.

At first there was some objection from the parents of suspended students. This opposition subsided over time when parents understood the expectations of student behavior. To briefly sum it up, we changed the culture of gang behavior by investing many hours of administrative time supervising students and providing other opportunities for these students.

All administrators at Sanger High School continue to spend every lunch period as well as time before and after school supervising students. Although one may think a principal has better things to do with his time than yard duty, there is nothing more important than school safety, which I feel is the foundation for student achievement.

In summary, there were many key factors in our success at Sanger High School:

- The continuity and consistency of the site and district leadership.
- Expectations of the State Accountability System for student achievement.
- The participation and involvement of parents in SCT.
- The establishment of “*higher expectations*” for all students.
- Additional funds to implement the reading program and CSP positions.
- Providing reading intervention classes.
- Aligning core curriculum to state standards.
- All classes to follow curriculum maps.
- Increased graduation requirements.
- Strong focus on school safety.
- RCAT team building.
- Professional Development
- Special Education Inclusion Model
- Encouraging student to get involved in student athletics and activities