

Freeport Intermediate School: Doing “Whatever It Takes” to Close Achievement Gaps

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Introduction

Freeport Intermediate School, one of 19 schools that make up the Brazosport Independent School District, is located on the Gulf Coast in Freeport, Texas. One of a number of small communities in Brazoria County, the birthplace of the great state of Texas, Freeport is situated approximately 60 miles south of Houston. The neighboring community of Jones Creek is the site where Stephen F. Austin first brought his band of 300 to settle in Texas very near the site of old Fort Velasco. Freeport has the distinction of being the “shrimp capitol” of Texas, which draws a large migrant population. This also translates into a high student mobility rate for Freeport Intermediate School. The 617 7th and 8th grade students attend school here in a beautiful building that opened in August 1998, less than a mile from the site of the 60-year-old school building it replaced. In addition to its own rich historical background, the area also boasts of the rich and proud heritage of the Texas Gulf Coast, the home for many international corporations such as Dole Banana, American Rice, BASF, Shintech, Rhodia, Hoffman-LaRouche, Schenectady International, and Dow Chemical.

Freeport Intermediate School is a success story that very few people would have thought possible in 1991–92 when it was designated a low-performing school. By some 10 years later, the school had risen to the top and was recognized that year as a 5-Star School in *Texas Monthly* (2002). The students and their academic success are the living proof that validates Freeport Intermediate School’s current motto, “The place where great things happen.” The vision statement of Freeport Intermediate School is “Success for all,” which supports our mission, “Whatever it takes.” Posted throughout the school, it serves as a constant reminder of the incredible journey that has unfolded over the past 13 years.

With a new administration and a staff of believers, this school has transitioned from a low-performing and low-morale school to one of four schools in the nation chosen by the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform as a National School to Watch and a National Blue Ribbon School. Through the years, Freeport Intermediate School has received numerous awards and recognition for academic, extracurricular, and athletic success. It was selected to participate in the National Association of Secondary School Principals national study of highly successful schools (NASSP, 2004). In October 2000, Freeport Intermediate School was featured in *Middle Ground*, the magazine of middle level education published by the National Middle School Association, and in *Education Week Special Report*. NASSP highlighted Freeport Intermediate in *Creating a Culture of Literacy: A Guide for Middle and High School Principals* (NASSP, 2005) and also in the most recent publication on middle level reform, *Breaking Ranks in the Middle* (NASSP, 2006). These honors affirm the staff’s inherent belief that all students can be successful when educated in a supportive environment that promotes academic excellence, social equity, and a rigorous curriculum with programs that are responsive to young adolescents and their unique needs.

In addition to being a state and national award-winning school, Freeport Intermediate was one of 64 Texas Mentor Schools. Areas of expertise include creating high-performing student achievement with children of poverty and diversity while maintaining a safe, orderly, and enjoyable climate that promotes outstanding attendance and self-discipline. Student successes and accomplishments are celebrated with a tremendous amount of parental and community involvement. FIS exemplifies the definition of an “effective” school. With high levels of mastery and no discernible difference in any student group, this school can serve as a ray of hope for all schools across the state and the nation.

Demographics

Our student population consists of 617 7th and 8th grade students, with approximately 57% Hispanic, 13% African American, and 29% White. Approximately 75% of our students meet the criteria for being economically disadvantaged. A large sector of our population is comprised of single-parent households that receive public housing assistance, and the mobility rate is 20.5%. Because shrimping is a major seasonal industry in Freeport, 7% of our students are identified as migrant. Four percent of our students are identified as limited English proficient (LEP). In addition, we also serve 102 students in the area of special education (SE), 10 of whom are served in self-contained classes for students with severe disabilities.

Meeting the Needs of All Students

The goal for Freeport Intermediate School is to have no significant achievement gaps among student groups. The Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) is the driving force that creates for each teacher, student, and parent a pervasive sense of personal accountability for student learning and success. Academic success for each student is the foremost goal at Freeport, and the TAKS, which is key to promotion and graduation, underlines the need for schools to focus on instruction. Freeport has embraced accountability when it comes to students passing the state standardized test, but test results are not the only measure of success. The staff takes the written curriculum—Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS)—to a much higher level by incorporating creative methodology that enhances the delivery of instruction and keeps students on the edge of their seats engaged in real-world connections. Students are not only armed with tools for passing the test but also gain confidence for the transition to high school.

At Freeport, data drives the instruction provided, including to whom, when, and how. We analyze the results from the state tests for weaknesses to make sure we cover the required skills and tailor future instructional time so that the proper amount of time is spent in each area. To evaluate how well the curriculum is being addressed, teachers conduct ongoing student assessments and share results with colleagues. Often these assessments allow teams to see who has been particularly effective in teaching a skill, which in turn may prompt the team as a whole to adopt or replicate that successful practice.

To provide additional time to students who need tutorials and to allow enrichment or extensions for those who have mastered the core curriculum as measured by the regular assessments, we have created a “Team Time” hour in the master schedule. The academic teams group and regroup students according to individual needs and assessment results. These Team Time groups are ever changing, so students benefit from receiving instruction from a variety of “voices” with various areas of expertise.

Students who are still unable to demonstrate mastery are offered a “pyramid of interventions.” During the spring semester, we offer an extended day program for all students who are in danger of failing or who still need additional time for mastery. Rather than penalize a student for doing poorly during the school year by requiring his or her attendance at summer school, this is a proactive approach to help students before they fail. As a check on progress, team teachers, assisted by the counselors, track students who are not demonstrating success. They determine whether the problems are academic or social/emotional. Working collaboratively has proven to be successful in creating high performance on TAKS and has caused a dramatic decrease in failure rates. On average, only two students have been retained each year over the past 5 years (usually due to truancy or failure to attend summer school). Summer school is offered for students who fail two or more core courses; enrollment has declined as a result of the successful intervention offered by the extended day program. In the summer 2000, we served 65 students; in 2001, 39 students; and in 2005, 16 students—all but two successfully completing the summer school program. Another measure of our success is that enrollment in the high school math prep program has reduced the need from 10 classes to 2.

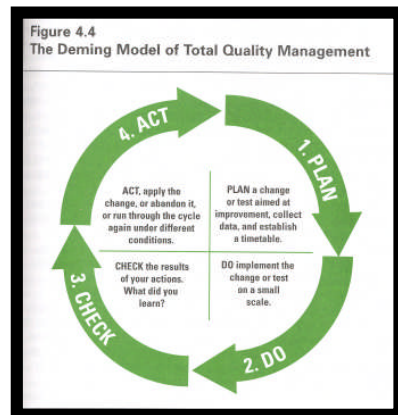
Over the summer, members of our Math Department carefully analyze every test item to determine the direction we need to take in creating the instructional calendars. We have become concerned with the fact that scores in math have dropped below the 90th percentile. Our challenge will be

closing the gap for one of our student groups that showed a decline in math. In this student group, we found a direct correlation between low performance and students being sent to an alternative setting (boot camp) after committing a felony. Now we must decide where to build the pyramid of intervention in order to close the gap once again. We have started discussions about serving students in those alternative settings; we are not letting go, even though they are not being served in our building.

Another challenge will be the performance of special education students who have been in feeder school pull-out programs and are now merging into the mainstream. Meeting adequate yearly progress (AYP) is always a priority. We hold firm to the fact that standardized tests are not “one size fits all,” and we are grateful that are state acknowledges that fact by allowing us to give a State Developed Alternative Assessment (SDAA) that measures whether or not we have met the expectations outlined in individual education plans (IEPs). Although we believe that all students can learn, we also believe that students with disabilities should not be measured with an inappropriate standardized assessment, which is the reasoning behind individual education plans. In addition to focusing on special education performance, we will begin conversations about helping our gifted and talented students reach “commended performance”—a recognition that should boost their confidence and qualify them to enter more advanced classes in high school. Our counselors also meet with individual gifted and talented students in the spring of their 8th grade year to help them make choices for high school.

Professional Learning Communities

To involve all stakeholders in the campus improvement process, Freeport Intermediate School works in organized cadres to ensure a Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) Model, based on the Deming model of Total Quality Management and the work of Dr. Rick DuFour.



These cadres were designed to deal with issues that embrace all areas of school improvement, and each cadre is responsible for driving the school improvement plan. Every staff member is required to be on a cadre. The leaders and coleaders of each cadre make up the Campus Advisory Team (CAT). Each cadre serves as an advisory in five areas:

- Curriculum and instruction—focuses on the rigor and relevance of teaching and learning for all students (research and data based).
- Staff development—focuses on quality, relevance, certification requirements, and innovative professional development throughout the year.
- Planning—focuses on student and faculty attendance and special projects to promote relevance, rigor, and fun.
- Communication—focuses on effective communication between home and school, intraschool, and school and community.

- School climate—focuses on student and staff morale and schoolwide discipline; develops plans based on student, staff, parent, and community surveys.

The cadres have the autonomy to set up their own meeting times, but the goals established in the Campus Improvement Plan (CIP) are the driving force of their agendas. The leaders and coleaders of each cadre also work as a School Leadership Team to set the school budget and monitor the CIP. The leaders and coleaders are chosen by cadre consensus and work collaboratively with the principal to ensure that goals are being met. The Campus Advisory Team meets during a summer retreat to study schoolwide data in order to set the goals outlined in the CIP. When school in-service programs begin, it is the responsibility of the leaders to report back to their cadres the information shared at the retreat. At that time, they present and discuss new goals, and each cadre brings its individual action plan.

These organizational structures create “focused cells” for continuous improvement in almost every critical issue. The key to the success of these cadres is providing leadership training and drawing on the strengths that everyone brings to the table. At Freeport Intermediate School, we have succeeded in ensuring that these systems are not “principal codependent”—they can be sustained when the principal is not around.

Transformational changes began to emerge as we started working not only in cadres but also as interdisciplinary teams and departments. The culture of working in isolation began to dissolve as the culture of teamwork emerged. As a direct result of this transformation, students began to benefit from more creative lessons and from seeing their teachers actually enjoy teaching! Cooperative teaching created cooperative learning, and cooperative learning created lots of risk taking.

Our collaborative work allowed us to begin to examine and reflect on what needed to be accomplished. Once our mission became clear, we created a laser-like focus on preparing students to use the state test as a tool to help them think more deeply about why and how they learn. We are often criticized for “teaching the test,” but our goal actually is to teach the standards that are clearly outlined and to work collectively to improve student achievement. Our state tests became a means of creating unity of purpose. The test challenged us to reflect intensely on how we taught. We discovered that we often used common practices instead of common sense. Among other things, this reflection prompted us to move away from clustering English language learners and special education students in pull-outs, a practice that delivered dismal results, and to move toward an inclusive model that has created a culture of serving all students, resulting in higher performance and lower failure rates.

Block Scheduling: Welcome to the Tribe!

Freeport Intermediate School implements A/B block scheduling in order to ensure that the core curriculum, consisting of language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies, receives the greatest amount of time for instruction. The implementation of A/B block scheduling has afforded students the opportunity to receive instruction in each of these subjects every day and/or every other day for one and one-half hours. Demographic information, student achievement data, and individual needs of the students became the driving force of this scheduling opportunity. We provided training in teaching in the block schedule format to ensure that the extra 45 minutes available are utilized for direct instruction and extended time opportunities rather than for homework.

As mentioned earlier, the Team Time hour that is scheduled at the end of each day provides additional real-world learning activities. Interdisciplinary teams and departments create video presentations ranging from creative instructional motivators to team building and provide the students a sense of family entertainment while learning.

A unique organizational feature afforded teachers is that the core curriculum teachers, or interdisciplinary “tribes,” share a common planning period on A days, and each department (vertical team) shares a common planning period on B days. This common planning time between interdisciplinary teams and departments facilitates a process of collaborative planning and fosters collegiality. Each tribe and department meets weekly and submits agendas to the principal. The approximately 150 students per

tribe see instructors as being their teacher, while all teachers demonstrate their expertise as instructional leaders and facilitators in a variety of academic and nonacademic settings.

The core of our effort to create a personalized environment that supports each student's intellectual, ethical, social, and physical development is our tightly knit structure of tribes. The structure allows teachers to regularly discuss their students' academic and emotional needs and ensures that each student is known by several faculty members. The school actually operates as multiple "schools-within-a-school" by dividing the students into four academic teams, or tribes: two 7th grade tribes and two 8th grade tribes. Each tribe has its own name, colors, and chant. All teachers in the tribe feel a sense of responsibility and a desire for each student's success. Elective teachers and support staff attach themselves to a tribe. Students assigned to the tribe are grouped heterogeneously, including English language learners, special education students, and migrant students. Gifted and talented students are grouped for core classes so that a differentiated gifted curriculum can be delivered. All others are mainstreamed and are a part of the inclusion team. Special education teachers and paraprofessionals travel to various classes to help provide small-group instruction and modifications. Severely mentally challenged students receive instruction in a loving life-skills classroom and are included in the mainstream as much as possible.

Tribes improve student self-esteem by providing a sense of home to students and a sense of safety, security, and belonging. Cultural differences are set aside, and students and teachers form a lasting bond. The tribe teachers attempt to extend this sense of family to the actual families of each of their students. Often when parents are unable to come to a tribe meeting because of work schedules, the tribe accommodates the parents by making a home visit after school. If it is impossible to meet, the tribe schedules a conference call and takes written minutes of the conversation. For our team, meeting outside contractual hours is not a problem if that's what it takes to make the contact. We understand our blue-collar environment often does not allow parents to take time away from work.

Creative Curriculum and Instruction

Our school's overall approach to assessment supports our vision, "Success for all." FIS uses assessments frequently to gain the data to initiate actions to help students learn. As part of the instructional process, an assessment is administered after instruction to identify proficiency, mastery, and nonmastery students. An assessment utilizes a variety of formal and informal measures. Sometimes it is a quick check administered after an objective has been taught, or it could be a formal exam covering 6 weeks. An assessment might also be a benchmark or a cumulative test. Teachers often use observation techniques or daily oral reviews to gauge learning and student progress. Experience indicates that frequent assessments are more useful.

Assessments give teachers a choice to "course-correct" their delivery of instruction based on assessment outcomes. Assessments must be aligned with the instructional focus, TEKS, and the national standards. The written assessments usually have the look and feel of accountability tests in order to provide students with experience in responding to the test items. Practice based on research is the key component of creative instruction at FIS. We analyze national standards to ensure that our curriculum goals are on target with these expectations.

After the assessment, FIS teachers collaborate to review how students fared on the tests. During these meetings, the instructional calendar—a scope and sequence timeline—is adjusted based on areas that need additional emphasis. Results are always shared with students so that they are able to set goals for improvement and celebrate their accomplishments.

The tribe philosophy of providing academic teams and focusing on relationships between students and teachers is based on the report by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, *Turning Points 2000* (Jackson & Davis, 2000). This book provided the model for the themes of teaming and creating a community of learners at FIS. In addition, the school has been deeply influenced over the last decade by the works of Dr. John Goodlad, Dr. W. E. Deming, and Dr. Richard DuFour. Their work helped create a mind-set of shared decision making and continuous improvement using the tools of TQM. TQM and

professional learning communities also stress the importance of team-based problem solving. This brings a no-excuses attitude and an acceptance of personal accountability for success of all students.

Team Time, the last hour of the day, epitomizes the philosophy of shared decision making and teamwork. It is a time “where great things happen” instructionally. Teachers collaborate and determine which areas within the core subjects need additional attention for mastery. To this end, teachers become extremely creative and use a variety of methods to engage students. During the television broadcasts, students are mesmerized as they watch teacher-made, prerecorded instructional videos. The “language arts fairies” flutter in to instruct students in test-taking strategies; the Cherokees ride by on Trigger, the horse, to motivate and inspire students; and the Mayans are sitting pretty as they sing “Passing TAKS” to “Summer Lovin’” from the Broadway musical *Grease*.

The classrooms and hallways of FIS reflect a learner-centered environment: Students sit in reading circles in the hallway; teachers clad in hospital scrubs perform experiments; and student projects are proudly displayed in the Learning Resource Center (LRC). Students are sometimes sighted in the teaching suites working on history projects or outside riding bikes to measure acceleration. Once in a while, you’ll find rockets being launched down the hallway. If this does not “rock your world,” then saunter on over to “Krakatoa,” otherwise known as science class, where you’ll see volcanoes made from Duncan Hines cake mixes erupting. Classrooms at FIS are learning laboratories where cooperative groups engage in these learner-centered projects.

Brazosport Independent School District (BISD) and FIS have dedicated themselves to educating students to excel in a 21st century’s global environment. One way this dedication manifests itself is by campus and district technology committees that strongly commit to identifying and improving instructional technology needs. There is a strong emphasis on the integration of instructional technology into every classroom. When the new FIS building was planned, wiring for Internet and network servers along with wiring for Channel One news programming was specified as part of the infrastructure. Each classroom houses a state-of-the-art multimedia teaching workstation with a projection television that is used in the instructional process. It is common to see teachers using a PowerPoint presentation instead of an overhead projector to deliver initial instruction of the TEKS curriculum. Also, teachers are able to use this workstation to import, edit, and export video footage. Each team also has a digital movie camera that they use to film teacher-produced instructional videos.

Another important use of technology is in the ability to serve all students at the same time. For example, on the day of the state standardized test administration, departments e-mailed tribe members PowerPoint reviews to share. Therefore, all students are receiving a review in that discipline from their core teacher, who is traveling from room to room to deliver personal reviews to all students.

At FIS, two classrooms are equipped with computers that have instructional software load-sets to ensure that students in computer literacy classes are proficient in the TEKS associated with their curriculum. Another lab is set up for Creative Education Institute (CEI), which is a multisensory program to help with reading acquisition. FIS also has a fourth lab for Kurzweil Education Systems, which assists students in reading their textbooks. Online test taking provides easy access for all students to take the Accelerated Reader book tests through the Learning Resource Center and in every language teacher’s classroom. With these additions, language teachers have the capability to instantly see the students’ results and analyze their progress. Also, the science and history teachers have computer capability to use for their Science Fair and History Day research projects. New next year, all teachers will have LCD projector machines and document cameras that were funded in part by a grant from our community business partner, Dow Chemical USA.

Academic Achievement: It’s All About Relationships

“If relationships are wrong between teachers and students, for whatever reason, you can restructure until the cows come home, but transformation won’t take place.” —Macguire in Rothman (1992)

This quote is often recited by veteran teachers as they mentor new teachers. Relationships between teachers and students are cultivated, promoted, nourished, and maintained at Freeport

Intermediate School. Relationships manifest themselves in learner-centered hallways full of student work, staff participation at sports events, faculty-student basketball games, yearbook parties, music concerts, lock-ins, drama events, school dances, and the academic pep rallies that take place every 6 weeks to recognize and encourage academic excellence.

We stretch the limits to fill in the gaps in students' lives so their essential needs are met, and they can focus on learning. Everyone takes on the role of social worker, addressing fundamental issues such as food, shelter, clothing, medicine, and personal hygiene. In addition, the district employs one social worker, and our school nurse helps numerous families in the community to navigate social service agencies, health insurance companies, and medical offices. Coaches and staff supervise the locker rooms in the morning so students who are unable to wash at home can shower before classes. Students who need clean clothes can find them at school, along with a washer and dryer for their dirty clothes. We understand the harsh realities of children living in poverty. We urgently are teaching them that a good education is their ticket to success and a way to break out of the poverty cycle. By filling in the gaps related to personal needs, we have filled in the academic gaps, eliminating disparities in achievement among student groups, improving attendance, and dramatically decreasing discipline referrals.

Another way we are looking to break cycles and create opportunities is by starting conversations about completing high school and going on to college—goals that have never been a vision for many of our students. We also solicit volunteers from our business partners, BASF and Dow Chemical Company, to join our staff in mentoring and providing after school enrichment programs. For the past several years, Dow Chemical has sponsored the Comeback Kid Award, which honors a student who has overcome tremendous adversity to become academically successful. Other ways in which our community has helped provide opportunities for students include Dow Chemical's funding participation in state and national academic competitions for our students and the Veterans of Foreign Wars sponsoring annual essay competitions providing recognition and monetary prizes.

We are constantly seeking innovative ways to increase parental involvement, especially for the hard to reach parent. The largest parent turnouts happen when children perform (e.g., sports events and band concerts), so we make it a point to be there and to schedule PTA meetings before the concert begins. The majority of our parents work, many doing shift work in our plants on the "chemical coast." The stay-at-home mom is rare in our area, and many of our children are raised by single parents or grandparents or live in the Brazoria County Youth Home. Rather than use the lack of substantial parental volunteering and involvement as an excuse for low student performance, we build on the strengths of our Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and the community patrons.

Our bilingual staff members have opened many doors and made connections with our Spanish-speaking parents and community members. Two years ago, we replaced our switchboard operator/receptionist with a bilingual staff member, and 3 years ago we hired a bilingual counselor. We have had numerous successes in encouraging parental participation: Our sign-in logs indicate that we have had more parental participation in special education meetings than ever before, and our academic pep rallies, held every 6 weeks, attract more than 80 parents for each rally. During the summer, we let everyone know the dates so parents can plan to attend.

Our communications to parents include these:

- *Tee Pee Talk*, our school newsletter, which is created and disseminated by the Communication Cadre, mailed to all PTA members, posted on the Web site, and given to each student to take home. It includes a letter from the Princi-PAL, news from each tribe, a schedule of upcoming events, and a school lunch menu.
- Welcoming brochures that each tribe sends out at the beginning of the school year. The brochures contain a picture of the tribe members and important information (supply list, bell schedule, tribe conference times, e-mail addresses, and phone numbers).

- Positive postcards and e-mails that each teacher sends home on a regular basis to let parents hear good news from school. In this way, we begin to build a level of trust, and parents are always delighted to hear something positive about their children.

We work closely with our PTA Executive Board to ensure that we hear the voices of our customers and share with them our mission and vision. The PTA offers parenting programs as part of many general meetings, and teachers often send requests for volunteers to compliment the core team of volunteers that assists our teachers with copying, field trips, and hall monitoring during testing week. We are so grateful when a parent offers to help us. Thank-you notes are sent and morale is lifted.

Leadership: United for Excellence

Freeport Intermediate School is the training ground for aspiring principals and the model for teacher empowerment. The principal describes herself as the “keeper of dreams,” and every decision made is based on collective input from all stakeholders. The final decision is based strongly on what is best for the kids at Freeport Intermediate. The most important stakeholders are the students, and the principal ensures that their voices are heard and spread among the teaching staff, superintendent, and school board members. Every 6 weeks, she meets with students from each tribe and utilizes the TQM tools to create problem solvers. She asks questions such as, “If you could wave a magic wand over the school, what would you want to change?” The students at FIS know that they have a voice in the decisions being made. The word spreads around when students begin to see the effects of their discussion. For example, monitors were assigned to locker rooms in the boys’ dressing room to avoid any and all types of bullying. Pizza slices went to a uniform size after complaints about selling the “runt” piece for the same price. In addition to this forum, the principal teaches a leadership class (Leadership 101) daily to provide an enrichment opportunity for students that do not need tutorials during Team Time. This class emphasizes effective leadership practices and prerequisites of choosing careers based upon their interests and passions. If the school board becomes involved in dress code issues or hiring a school resource officer, the members of the class write their opinions to the decision makers, demonstrating that the “power of the pen” has more influence than walk-outs or demonstrations. Meeting with this class poses a challenge, but she tries her best to meet with them regardless of her busy schedule and the many meetings that she must attend. The Student Council is another student group that assists with campus decisions. The Student Council and sponsors are responsible for sharing their concerns and issues with the administrative team. The principals at FIS frequently roam the hallways and classrooms interacting with the staff and students, and their doors are always open. The comfort quotient and trust are evidenced by the constant flow of communication and the invitations principals receive to participate in class activities.

Every action and decision involves two things: (1) an instructional focus and (2) motivation to do your best. The philosophy is that all students can learn, and all students can behave. Each year the administrative team hosts “Tribal Powwows” to discuss the FIS Discipline Plan to ensure that students understand that instruction will not be interrupted by misbehavior. The importance of relationships is evident in the leadership style and the teaching styles. Enthusiasm permeates the building, and there exists an instructional purpose in all campus happenings. Teachers are empowered to assist in the instructional improvement process by sharing best practices, observing one another, and providing feedback to each other. The teams are actively involved in the interviewing and hiring process and work collaboratively to assist the principal with decision making. The schedule is conducive to collaboration, with the interdisciplinary team meeting on A days and the departments meeting on B days. The tribes, departments, cadres, and Campus Advisory Team ensure that the goals, objectives, and activities are accomplished and evaluated continuously. The ongoing communication has a direct effect on student learning. Teachers, principals, parents, and students model a spirit of cooperation and travel the journey together in a quest for excellence through the leadership of all involved.

Sharing Best Practices

We believe that all ideas are stolen, modified to look like they are not stolen, and shared among thieves! Here are just a few ideas—or best practices—that could be easily stolen and replicated by other middle schools.

Academic Pep Rallies

Members from the Freeport Intermediate Campus Renewal Team visited a campus that hosted academic celebrations and brought these ideas to our staff. Once the school stakeholders bought in and the events were organized, the creativity began to flow. Each pep rally is a new experience. At the end of every reporting period, the faculty and staff host an academic “pep rally.” Each academic team takes a turn hosting these events and encourages parents and students to take an active roll in the preparation. Local businesses and community patrons are invited to take part, along with the central office personnel. Students receive encouragement and inspiration through these academic pep rallies and take an active role. The academic teams chant songs and inspirational rhymes that they have written for the occasion. Each pep rally embraces a theme that permeates the entire school through interdisciplinary lessons. The entire community comes together to celebrate and encourage student achievement.

We decided to implement this best practice because often schools are judged by student demographics and by adversity that occurs in the surrounding community. The staff grew weary of negative public perceptions and decided to take a proactive role in highlighting the positive achievements that are taking place at a school that serves a low socioeconomic and diverse population. The staff wanted to create an environment that supported each student’s intellectual, ethical, and social development. We hoped the event would encourage family and community involvement and support. The media coverage has been outstanding. Most important, we turned around the perception of our school. Parents and students were given a “climate” survey in which they were asked, “What are the things you like most about your school?” We had an overwhelming response in support of academic pep rallies.

Vertical/Interdisciplinary Teaming

Teachers share a common planning period within their “tribe” and content area to integrate curricula across subjects and to work collaboratively to enhance both intellectual and social development of students. Vertical alignment is maintained as a result of block scheduling, which enables all departments to meet on B days and interdisciplinary teams to meet on A days. A built-in Team Time hour at the end of each day groups and regroups students for tutorials and enrichment activities. As a result of this tribe and department collaboration, a set of analytical tools has been developed to provide students with common strategies that are taught schoolwide. The teachers and staff have time to plan, select, and engage in a professional development that is aligned with state-recognized and nationally recognized standards. Teachers and staff collaborate in making decisions about rigorous instruction and effective curriculum.

To achieve academic excellence, the teachers and staff felt that we needed to share proven and effective best practices. This has created a unity of purpose in regard to teaching and learning. In the past, students were exposed to an array of instructional strategies that changed from year to year and from teacher to teacher. Collaboration became the key to implement, enhance, and monitor best practices among the teaching staff and teach students learning strategies—especially in reading, writing, and math—to use schoolwide. This results in common core material being mastered at a faster rate in order to move deeper into rigorous curriculum.

Effective instruction begins with the knowledge of what students need to learn and what teachers need to teach, so that all students can move to mastery and beyond. Based on effective school research and *Turning Points*, every student in the middle grades should learn to think critically through mastery of an appropriate body of knowledge. Douglas Reeves (2005), author of *Making Standards Work*, recommends that teachers should identify standards-based assessments that will be used for accountability

purposes, identify the best practices in teaching and learning in their areas of expertise, conduct weekly reflective evaluations of classroom practices, and share successes with colleagues.

In addition to higher student performance, there is mutual collaboration, which not only increases teacher morale but also increases student achievement. Consistent expectations between grade levels have not only resulted in higher academic performance as measured by our state standardized test (TAKS) and cumulative tests but have dramatically improved discipline schoolwide.

Adolescent Forum

Each year, the Planning Cadre plans and organizes the Adolescent Forum for all 8th graders to address the development of social skills. The Cadre designs one program for boys and one for girls. The programs occur on the same day and culminate in a semiformal catered luncheon. The focus of the Adolescent Forum is self-esteem. The program includes discussions about self-confidence, respect, personal hygiene, and appearance. Several of the students are chosen to model clothes from a local department store, and others demonstrate how to use make-up properly or how to style hair in the latest styles. Students from the high school are invited to come and share high school experiences and to discuss expectations for the year to come. Community patrons are invited to participate, and motivational speakers are hired to speak on responsibilities and respect. Three years ago, Miss Texas, Stephanie Guerrero, came to speak with the girls about her experiences and encouraged the students to follow their dreams. She set herself up as an example of what each of them could accomplish if they work hard for what they want out of life.

After disaggregating discipline data, it was determined that many referrals dealt with noncompliance to the dress code. Many students were noncompliant because they were trying to “fit in.” Taking this into consideration—and the fact that young people today must deal with such problems as eating disorders, depression, self-mutilation, and low self-esteem due to social pressures—the guidance department and the Planning Cadre began to plan the Adolescent Forum. This special day was planned in order to teach acceptable ways to “be cool while being in school.”

The Adolescent Forum has contributed to a decrease in discipline referrals, and the gang-related behaviors have been minimal. We continue to track students throughout their high school career, and there is evidence that the high school dropout rate is less than 1%.

Ensuring Excellence and Equity in Student Performance

The effective school philosophies of Dr. Larry Lezotte and the late Dr. Ron Edmonds suggest that given the time, resources, and opportunity, all children can and will learn. This belief and the practice of disaggregating student data to make quality decisions are paramount at Freeport Intermediate School.

We adhere to an eight-step instructional process to ensure mastery and proficiency in the areas of reading and mathematics:

1. Disaggregate assessment data to determine areas of improvement.
2. Develop an instructional timeline.
3. Deliver a schoolwide instructional focus.
4. Implement ongoing assessments to track proficiency.
5. Provide tutorials and enrichment opportunities.
6. Provide extended day.
7. Provide ongoing maintenance and reteaching.
8. Provide a monitoring system of student progress and teacher instruction.

Student performance on the state standardized test has enabled Freeport Intermediate School to serve as a national model school for high performances by high-poverty students.

Extended Day Program

If standards are to be successfully implemented, many traditional ways of doing things must cease. In *Making Standards Work*, Douglas Reeves (2005) emphasizes that students need multiple opportunities to demonstrate proficiency and that we should not expect students to work at the same pace. The differentiated instruction in place in the Extended Day program engages students with a wide range of instructional strategies to meet their individual needs.

After careful analysis of midyear benchmarks, students are grouped in Team Time classes for remediation and enrichment based on performance and mastery of objectives. Students report to the “experts,” depending on their area of deficiency. When the bell rings for dismissal, the selected students (by invitation only), remain in the classroom for an extra one and one-half hours of extended learning. Differentiated instruction is used by selected teachers to ensure mastery of target objectives. Snacks are provided for students who stay for extended day, as well as transportation for those who ride a bus.

As a result of extended day, proficiency levels on the state standardized test for students who attend extended day sessions have improved. There is a decrease in the failure rate as reported each 6 weeks, and there has been a decrease in the number of retentions.

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Web Sites

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- www.greatschools.net/
- www.nsdcc.org/library/publications/results/res2-04rich.cfm
- www.just4kids.org
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Appendix

