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## WA: Granger high school grapples with the basics—and wins



Granger HS Principal Richard Esparza consults with students in his daily advisory class, one of the high school's most successful innovations.

**Summary:** A no-holds-barred principal who doesn't accept excuses for poor student performance holds his staff and students accountable for learning improvements. Using data to meet standards, individual learning plans for each student, tracking students' grades and attendance, and a resource management team for especially high-risk students have turned this once failing school into one that raises the bar for all students, keeps them motivated to learn, and narrows the achievement gap.

In 2001, failure had a chokehold on Granger High School. Only 20 percent of its students met state reading standards; 10.8 percent writing standards, and four percent mathematics standards. A mere 50 percent of students graduated.

Enter Principal Richard Esparza, a no-nonsense former wrestling coach and experienced teacher. With his highly personal and disciplined approach to education, Granger began to tap into its students' potential as high achievers.

Now, the future looks bright for Granger students, many of whom come from low-income, Latino families who make their living as permanent or migrant agricultural workers in Washington State's lush Yakima Valley. Standardized test scores have risen significantly. College, military service, and jobs are viable and attainable options for the 90 percent who now graduate.

### Raising the bar

"When I first arrived," explains Esparza, "I heard all sorts of excuses for failing performance: 'The kids are poor and can't learn', 'the parents aren't educated and can't help the kids', and 'it's always been this way'. I don't accept these excuses. As the son of migrant workers, I'm living proof that poor, minority kids can learn and succeed. All kids can learn if you set standards, expectations, and goals, make their education relevant to their lives, and build personal relationships with them."

Armed with this philosophy of rigor, relevance, and relationship, drawn from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Granger began a no-holds-barred assault on failure. With the district's assistance, it implemented a research-based school improvement plan targeted first at reading and writing and then at mathematics. The school changed its instruction methods, revamped its advisement system, and drew caregivers into the educational process. Most important, as students made progress, belief in their ability to succeed replaced the widely-held belief that they could not.

District characteristics
Name: Granger HS
State: Washington
Type: Suburban
Grades: 9–12
Enrollment: 333
Students per teacher: 15

Enrollment characteristics
Economically disadvantaged: 83.8%
English language learners: 19.9%
Students with disabilities: 7.4%
White: 12%
Black: 0.3%
Hispanic: 81.4%
Asian/Pacific Islander: 0.7%
American Indian/Alaska Native: 5.7%
Other: n.a.
Source: <a href="#">SchoolMatters.com</a>

### Tackling the basics

"Many of our students arrive well below grade level in all subject areas. One of the first things we learned is that for students to succeed you have to start where the students are, not where their grade level says they should be," says English instructor, Joyce Golob whose 10th grade English class had 50 percent of the students failing when Esparza first arrived. "Trying to teach students to interpret symbolism and write an essay is pretty close to impossible if they don't know how to read."

Now all students who come to Granger with below average reading scores enter the Second Shot Reading Program and start with

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material as basic as The Little Engine That Could if necessary.

Students who arrive with little or no English (some come directly from Mexico and other Spanish-speaking countries) receive extra assistance from bilingual paraprofessionals and spend additional time on English language skills. By integrating reading throughout all subjects, constantly testing students' skills to measure improvement, and focusing on topics of interest to students, the percentage of sophomore students passing the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) has steadily improved each year. In 2006, 80 percent met or exceeded state reading standards, and 74 percent met or exceeded state writing standards.

A new mathematics program makes math come alive for students. "Yesterday's Food is Walking and Talking Today" (the food module), for example, focuses on calories and food intake. "Burning nuts in the science lab to see how many calories are released really brings home the meaning of a calorie. Students start to understand just how much energy you expend, whether you're sitting still or doing martial arts. We also relate this information to diet and health issues that concern students, which makes it relevant to their daily life," says Mathematics Instructor Tony Barcenas.

Every Monday through Thursday, in the first, second, and fourth periods, all students spend ten minutes tackling "The Problem of the Period," a mathematics problem in the WASL format. Classroom teachers relay the students' solutions to the mathematics teachers who review the problems again in mathematics class. Students who are falling behind or who did not pass the WASL in math the first time enroll in a six-week summer mathematics program. Recently, 39 percent of the 10th graders passed the WASL in mathematics and the school anticipates higher results on the next round.

## No sliding by

Accountability is a key operating principle at Granger High School. Esparza says, "We're preparing students for the real world where people are held accountable. Internally- and externally-set standards like those of WASL and No Child Left Behind help hold schools and students accountable. To meet standards, however, you always have to know whether you're winning or losing. Students can be successful academically if you track their attendance, track their grades, and help them establish a career goal."

To this end, each student has an individual learning plan developed as a freshman plus a portfolio with course grades, credits earned, credits needed to graduate, career goals, and materials illustrating their accomplishments. All students also know their WASL reading, writing, and mathematics scores. Students in all subject areas are given the opportunity to test and re-test until they pass an examination. There is, however, no social promotion to the next grade, and no one graduates without meeting the credit and grade requirements. Students with an unexcused absence must make up the time before or after school, usually in study sessions.

Jessica Carpenter, a junior, says, "Everyone knows that if you get below a 'C' in any subject that you'll need to come in early or stay late to work on raising your grade. I play volleyball and basketball. I know if I get an "F," I won't be able to participate in the sports I enjoy. It's a tough, but good, system for keeping you focused on what's important." Jessica admits that the \$420,000 in fake \$20 bills that Esparza keeps by his desk to show students how much more money they will earn over their lifetime with a high school diploma also keeps her and other students motivated.

## Adding the personal touch

Granger also revamped its advisement system to make a more personal connection among staff, students, and caregivers. "No coach would ever say, 'I can coach 400 kids at one time' so why do we expect one school counselor to be able to handle that many students? Teachers can't give that much individual attention to the 150-180 students in their weekly classes. But every professional staff member, including myself, can effectively advise 18-20 students," maintains Esparza.

The system operates on a four-year cycle so that teacher/advisors who are mentoring graduating seniors assume responsibility for a new group of 20 entering freshman at the end of the spring semester. Joyce Golob, English instructor, says, "We meet with our new advisees—eighth graders from the Granger Middle School—and their caregivers so that our expectations and requirements won't be a surprise to them. As advisors, we act like a second set of parents. We keep students on course academically and reach out to caregivers and other instructors when there's progress or a problem."

According to parent and Central School District administrator, Margarita Lopez, the personal approach makes a difference: "Before my son entered the ninth grade, he received a special welcome to the high school via postcard from his teacher/advisor who was spending the summer in Japan. My son's whole attitude about attending high school changed from one of lukewarm interest to eagerness to start his freshman year because he felt the teacher/advisor was personally interested in him."

Advisement is an integral part of the curriculum with advising classes on Monday, Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays. Each one focuses on a particular content: Reading, mathematics, homework, portfolio development, or a special subject matter, such as effective study skills. Experience shows that the classes work best when they are balanced by gender and with students ranging from low to high reading ability so those who are succeeding can motivate and help others.

Jessica Carpenter, who plans to be a lawyer, says: "The advising classes are one of the best parts of school. We get reinforcement in WASL subjects. We can do homework and get help from other students or our teachers. We also have time to work on our portfolio. When we're ready to apply to college, we have examples of our work on hand."

## Creating a safety net

Many Granger students are also wrestling with the social, family, and health issues associated with poverty.

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When expertise beyond the advisement system is needed, Jerry Castilleja, the intervention and student assistance specialist, steps in. On any given day, he may counsel a student about girlfriend or boyfriend problems, resolve a problem with the police, or facilitate a difficult conversation between a caregiver and a student.

Castilleja says: "If students have problems at home or with mental health, drug or alcohol abuse, or legal problems, they can't focus or do well in school. I find professional help for students in trouble, try to get the problem resolved, and help them get them back on track academically. We do everything possible to help our students succeed."

To keep especially high-risk students from falling between the cracks, the Granger Resource Management team—the school intervention specialist, academic counselor, a teacher/advisor, the migrant home visitor, the alternative high school principal (for students who have credit deficits or special issues) and often the principal—meets weekly to assess students' problems and see what types of additional academic and non-academic interventions are needed to help them.

## Reinforcing the student-caregiver-teacher connection

Granger High School believes that all parents or caregivers, whether or not they are formally educated, need to participate in the educational system. Twice a year, students lead conferences with parents/caregivers and teachers about their grades, credits, requirements for graduation, portfolio, career goals, and similar topics. Golob notes that the conferences are much more meaningful and productive now that the previously missing ingredient—the student—has been added to the conversation.

Although the conferences are mandatory, students place a high value on them and ensure that their caregivers participate. The conferences are also great motivators for students. As Carpenter notes, "You want to do well and keep your grades up. No one wants to explain why they aren't doing well."

Because many parents or caregivers work long hours, teacher/advisors make themselves available during an extended day at school on conference days. They meet with students and caregivers wherever and whenever possible—even during intermission at football games. For the third year in a row, there has been 100 percent attendance by caregivers, a far cry from the 10 percent participation rate in 2001.

## Looking to the future

Granger High School isn't resting on its laurels. It has just introduced a job shadowing program with the Yakima Chamber of Commerce to help students explore possible careers and to set their sights on what Esparza calls the high road in life—excellent jobs with full benefits.

As far as meeting standards goes, Esparza aims high: "We're making good progress, although we have a way to go in math and science. We won't be happy until 100 percent of our students are able to meet the WASL standards and graduate. Our biggest challenge then will be to maintain that 100 percent level of success."

### Lessons learned

- Identify key problems, but don't try to tackle everything at once. When a system is in crisis, it is tempting to try to solve all problems simultaneously. Charting a course of action that focuses on the most basic issues first works better than a shot-gun approach that scatters your attention.
- Develop your vision and stick to it, but understand that your plan is a work in progress. Strive for better academic results each year and keep searching for what methods and strategies work best for students, parents or caregivers, and staff.
- Build accountability into the system at all levels—students, parents or caregivers, staff—so that everyone has responsibility for and a role in students' success.
- Develop and hire staff members who share the same positive vision for the students. Finding the right staff to implement the vision and goals can take time, but it is essential that teachers believe that students can be high achievers. "Poor minority students have been told so often that they are failures that everyone begins to believe it—students, parents or caregivers, staff, the community. You have to believe in students in order for them to believe in themselves," says Esparza.
- Invest in your staff and reward them for their time. When the role of teacher/adviser and advisement classes was introduced, Granger hired an instructional facilitator to help teachers with the advisement class preparation. Teachers regularly attend professional development conferences to hone their skills and are compensated for hours worked beyond regular school hours.
- Celebrate all successes. "When you are replacing a cycle of failure with success, it's important to celebrate every time you move forward, no matter how small the step forward," says Esparza. "You can tell students constantly that they can succeed, but first they need to experience it and also learn how to take joy in it."

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