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Just for the Kids – California
High School Study, 2004-05

Selma High School, Selma Unified School District

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CALIFORNIA BEST PRACTICES STUDY

SUMMER 2005

SELMA HIGH SCHOOL

SELMA UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

*Presented by Springboard Schools under contract with
NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY AND JUST FOR THE KIDS - CALIFORNIA*

California Best Practices Study

Springboard Schools is conducting the California Best Practices Study under contract with the National Center for Educational Accountability (NCEA) and Just for the Kids-California (JFTK-CA). Spanning three years (2004-2006), this research initiative spotlights effective practices of elementary schools (Year 1), high schools (Year 2) and middle schools (Year 3) that show high levels of student achievement, with particular focus on high achievement among their English learners, ethnic minorities and students living in poverty. The study also includes a comparison group of “average performers.”

The following high school case study is the product of the second year of research during 2004-2005. High schools across the nation are in need of improvement, and this year more than ever is an important time for change. The California Department of Education put the spotlight on improving high schools with the State Superintendent’s High Performing High School Initiative. In addition, recent research points to the importance of compiling a richer portrait of “best practices” to guide practitioners’ work.

While most agree that high school reform is urgently needed, the path to reform is uncertain. School and district leaders are often frustrated by competing waves of reforms, and high schools in particular have found themselves pulled in contradictory directions.

The California Best Practices Study is responding by documenting in an accessible format the work of real schools getting better-than-expected results. The case studies are intended to provide rich descriptions that teachers, administrators, and those working alongside them can use.

The case studies identify strategies that may be useful in similar schools and districts across the state and the nation. Each case study includes promising strategies at the district, school, and classroom level as well as tools actually in use in high-performing school settings. Of course, schools are complex systems, and particular practices and strategies often depend on others, so readers are encouraged to think of these case studies as portraits of high-performing *systems* rather than as a list of disconnected “best practices.”

Two complementary questions have guided this study:

- *What school and district strategies appear to foster high performance?*
- *What is the context for these strategies and how do they work together to contribute to high performance?*

Following the NCEA framework, this study examines best practices in several key areas:

- Curriculum and Academic Goals
- Staff Selection, Leadership and Capacity Building
- Instructional Programs, Practices and Arrangements
- Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis and Use of Data
- Recognition, Intervention and Adjustment

A California Best Practice Framework, which summarizes cross-cutting themes from high performing schools and districts, is posted under “Best Practices” on the Just for the Kids-California website at www.jftk-ca.org.

In addition to those identified in the NCEA Framework, this study focuses on the following areas:

- Support to English language learners
- Support to students of color
- Student preparedness for college and career

Selection Criteria

The selection process for schools in both the high and average performance categories provides important background for this case study. This section includes an outline of the selection criteria established by NCEA/JF'TK-CA used for this study. Anyone interested in more technical information about selection should visit the Springboard Schools website.

California high schools were identified as high performing through an analysis of their performance on the California Standards Test (CST) and the California High School Exit Examination (CAHSEE)¹, a state exam that California public high school students, beginning with the class of 2006, must pass in order to graduate. Three years of performance data were used in the analysis of CST Language Arts performance and two years of data were used from Mathematics performance, while two years of data were available for the analysis of English and Mathematics Exit Exams.

The percentage of students scoring “proficient” or higher on the CST was used to calculate each school’s performance rank. Performance ranks, which had to be at the 50th percentile or higher, were calculated for each tested grade, subject and year. Overall performance rank, which had to be at the 66.6th percentile or higher, was calculated by aggregating individual performance ranks across one tested subject. Schools could be designated as high performing in a specific

subject or overall across all tested subjects. Each school selected also met Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) targets in 2003 and 2004. AYP is the annual target for improvement that states, school districts, and schools must achieve each year, according to the federal [No Child Left Behind Act \(NCLB\)](#). As such, it is a measure of progress toward the goal of all students meeting state academic standards.

Three factors were used to compare a school’s performance relative to its demographically similar peers:

1. Free- and Reduced-Price Lunch Program (FRLP) enrollment percentages,
2. English language learner (ELL) enrollment percentages, and
3. Ethnic minority group enrollment percentages.

Selected schools had to meet or exceed the California average enrollment of either Hispanic/Latino students or African American students and meet or exceed the State average in both the percentage of students from low-income families and the percentage of students classified as English language learners.

In addition, high performing schools in this study had to meet one of the following criteria:

1. Achievement distribution among enrollment in “good courses” is above statewide median for all 4 courses in 2 of the last 3 years;
2. Percentage of graduates meeting A-G requirements, which is the set of 15 one-year college prep courses high school students must take to be eligible to enter either the California State University (CSU) or University of California (UC) systems, is above

¹ More detailed explanations of California education terminology can be found at <http://www.edsource.org/glo.cfm>

- expectations when controlling for poverty in 2002 and 2003; or
3. Percentage of students reaching “proficient” or above on CA Standards Tests in math is above expectations when controlling for poverty in 2 of the last 3 years.

The selection process for “average performers” included the same measures, with lower expectations for performance. Overall performance rank for these schools was between the 40th and 55th percentiles, and Adequate Yearly Progress was not considered. For additional information on the selection process, please go to www.just4kids.org

Selma High School: A Case Study

State Characteristics

Student Enrollment:	6,298,413
Free/Reduced Lunch Percentage	49%
English Language Learner Percentage:	25%
Percentage of Parents who did not Complete High School:	18% ²
Percentage of Parents Completed College and Above:	31%
Percentage of Teachers w/ Full Credentials:	89%
Average Number of Years Teaching:	13
Average Class Size	27

² California State has parental education data on 48% of the students enrolled in grades 9-12. Eighteen percent refers to the state average of parents who did not complete high school for students enrolled in grades 9-12.

District Characteristics

Student Enrollment.....	6,082
Free/Reduced Lunch Percentage.....	79%
English Learner Percentage.....	34%
District Characterization.....	Rural

Located just south of Fresno, Selma Unified School District serves slightly more than 6,000 students in 12 schools, eight of which are elementary, one is a middle school and one is a traditional comprehensive high school. In addition, two are non-traditional high schools. The student demographic is primarily composed of Latino students who make up 80 percent of the total population, while the rest of the student population consists of 12 percent whites and 5 percent Asian Americans.

Seventy-nine percent of the students in the district are eligible for the Free- or Reduced-price Lunch Program (FRLP), compared to the state average of 49 percent, while 34 percent of the students in the district are

identified as English Language Learners, compared to the state average of 25 percent.

District Enrollment

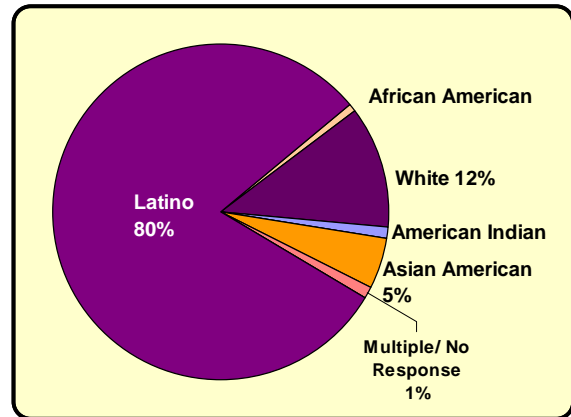


Fig. 1: District Student Enrollment Percentages by Race/Ethnicity.³

There are just over 300 full time teachers at Selma Unified, of which 98 percent are fully credentialed, compared to the state average of 89 percent. Seventy-one percent of the

³ Unless otherwise referenced, all quantitative data in this study is draw from the California Department of Education website: www.ed-data.k12.ca.us

teachers in the district are white, compared to the state average of 74 percent; 4 percent are Asian American, compared to the state average of 4 percent; and 22 percent are Latino, compared to the state average of 14 percent. Average class size at Selma Unified is 26 students, compared to the state average of 27, while its pupil-teacher ratio of 21 to 1 is the same as the state average.

School Characteristics

Student Enrollment	1,473
Free/Reduced Lunch Percentage...	64%
English Language Learner Percentage...	21%
Percentage of Parents who did not Complete High School	30%
Percentage of Parents Completed College/Above.	17%
Percentage of Teachers w/ Full Credentials	95%
Average Number of Years Teaching	15
Average Class Size	27

Selma High is the only traditional comprehensive high school in the district, serving students in grades 9-12. The student demographic consists of 76 percent Latinos, 15 percent whites and 6 percent Asian Americans. Twenty-one percent of the students are identified as English Language Learners, compared to the district average of 34 percent and the state average of 25 percent. Sixty-four percent of the students qualify for FRLP, which is slightly below the district average of 79 percent but well above the state average of 49 percent.

Eighty-five percent of the teachers at Selma High are white, higher than the district average of 71 percent and the state average of 74 percent. Ten percent of the teachers are Latino, lower than the district average of 22 percent and the state average of 14 percent. The school's pupil-teacher ratio is 22 to 1,

compared to the district's and the state's average of 21 to 1.

Average class size at Selma is 27 students, which is comparable to the state average and just slightly higher than the district average of 26. Ninety-four percent of the school's 68 teachers are fully credentialed, compared to the district average of 98 percent and state average of 89 percent.

School Enrollment

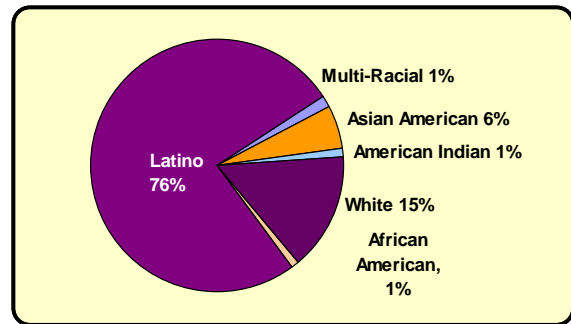


Fig. 2: School Student Enrollment Percentages by Race/Ethnicity.

Why Selma High School?

In addition to overall achievement gains, Selma's Latino and Economically Disadvantaged students are raising their scores and subsequently closing the achievement gap with their white peers.

California Standards Test results show advancement in narrowing the achievement gap from years 2003 to 2004. The percentage scoring proficient has made, if not dramatic, steady progress.

CST Language Arts 2002-04

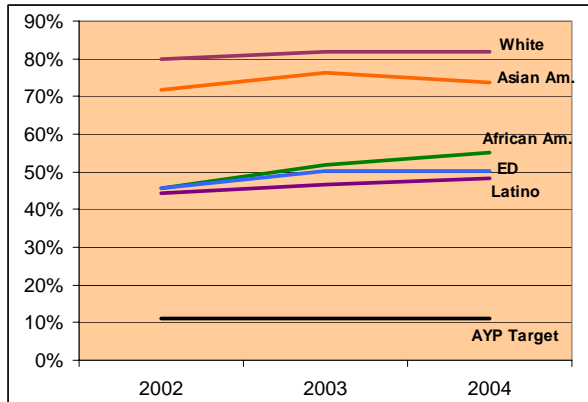


Fig. 4: 2002-2004 Selma High Language Arts CST Proficiency by Subgroup. Data referenced is from on <http://www.jftk-ca.org>.

CST Math 2002-04

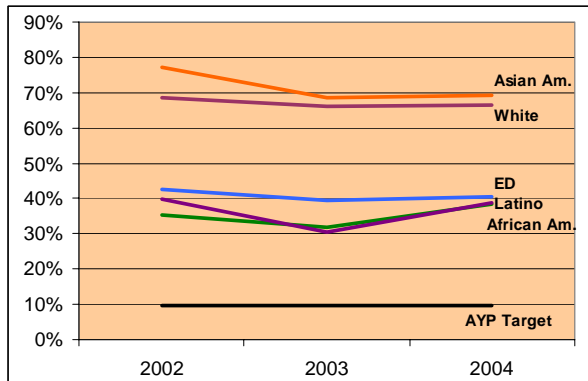


Fig. 4: 2002-2004 Selma High Math CST Proficiency by Subgroup. Data referenced is from on <http://www.jftk-ca.org>.

The California High School Exit Exam results also show steady progress in the percent passing for both language arts and math. In language arts, the number of Latino students passing has increased by over 20 percentage points from year 2002-03 to 2003-04. Math results show improvement in all subgroups. Economically Disadvantaged and Latino students have gained 20 percentage points over the previous academic year. English Learners too have made significant increases in percentage passing.

CAHSEE Language Arts 2002-03 & 2003-04

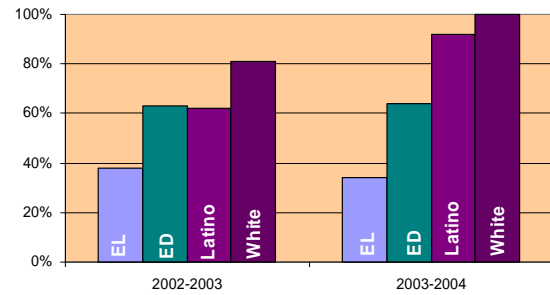


Fig. 5: Percentage of Selma High Students Passing CAHSEE, Language Arts.

CAHSEE Math 2002-03 & 2003-04

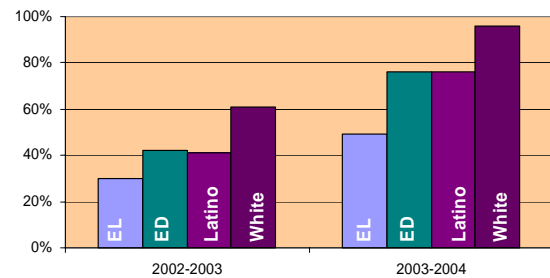


Fig. 6: Percentage of Selma High Students Passing CAHSEE, Math.

While students at Selma are performing above the state average, their performance is also impressive when the school is compared to peers with similar demographics. The two figures below show the school's performance relative to schools that share similar student demographics. For each grade and subject listed, the bar on the left shows Selma's performance and the bar on the right shows the average of the top ten comparable schools in the state.

Selma students were more likely in 2004 to score "proficient" or above in 10th and 11th grade in language arts. Students at the school were also less likely to have scored "below basic" in the same area. Student performance in math shows a similar picture. Selma students were far more likely than students in similar schools to score "proficient" or above and far less likely to score "below basic" on

geometry and Algebra I. For Algebra II, there was insufficient data for analysis.

Multi-Grade Math Comparisons 2004

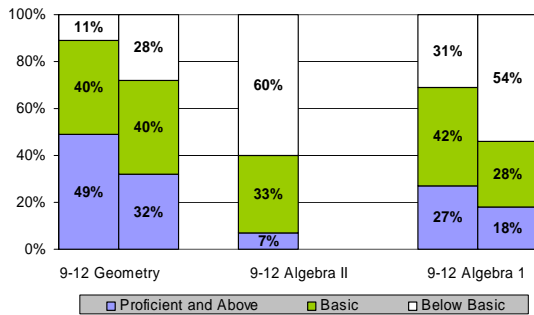


Fig. #7 Multi-Grade Results for Selma and Top 10 Comparable Schools, 2004, Math. Data referenced is from on <http://www.jftk-ca.org>.

Multi-grade Language Arts Comparisons 2004

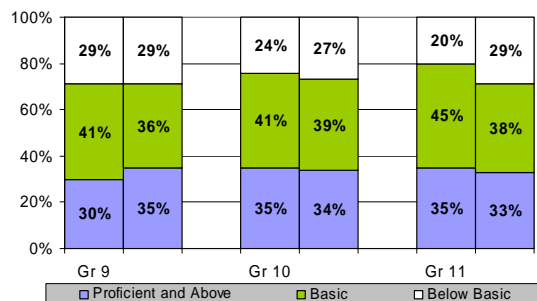


Fig. 7: Multi-Grade Results for Selma and Top 10 Comparable Schools, 2004, Language Arts. Data referenced is from on <http://www.jftk-ca.org>.

Data-proven performance places Selma High among the top ten schools in the state when compared to schools with similar demographics. This study uncovers their distinctive strategies for securing such gains and how they often outperform their peers.

Findings

Selma High School exhibits a combination of practices, strategies and attitudes that this study found to be distinctively characteristic of high-performing schools when compared to demographically similar yet average-performing sites. The following practices found in this study were particularly well

developed at Selma High School and/or within Selma Unified School District:

- District administrators attribute Selma High’s success to “High expectations for all students,” which is not just an empty phrase at Selma. Teachers and administrators elaborate on all of the activities that go into making “high expectations for kids” meaningful. Four things have to come together.
 - Yes, it is about high expectations for all students.
 - It is not only expectations held by the adults for the students. It is expectations for the students, plus expectations the adults place on themselves to offer the right support to help students meet those goals. Expectations, as English teacher Forest Castle points out, have to come with a lot of support. “That’s the point of the ‘Focus Lessons’,” he reflects. These lessons aim to develop of a set of basic skills and knowledge so that teachers can better scaffold instruction to help students reach standards. Expectations and accountability have to come with the same dosage of support, the Dean of Instruction, Gina Mechigian, reflects.

Focus Lesson

The Focus Lesson curricula were designed by the Fontana Educational Institute.

A Focus Lesson is a mini language arts/math lesson that addresses an agreed upon focus standard. The Focus Lesson is delivered to all students in one of their classes. At the end of the lesson, an assessment is given. The student achievement data is then brought back to the Focus Lesson meeting and discussed.

- “The big goal is that the students build high expectations for themselves,” notes Mechigian. Reports from students and graduates suggest that these expectations are standard for many students. *The Clarion*, the school’s newspaper, runs a regular column where former *Clarion* journalists and Selma alumni are asked to share their perspectives. Looking back, graduate Patrick Ota, class of 2002, writes: “[I]hat is the key, to succeed we cannot dwell on [disappointments] but only set new goals at greater heights to achieve in the future.”
- Finally, there is a palpable atmosphere of high expectations peer-to-peer when one sets foot on campus. Once a gang infested school, the friendly and respectful exchange amidst the students is a particular feast for the eye given the campus’ rich diversity. One voice gives a flavor of the general considered campus climate. Writes “Senior Column” journalist Derrick Dominguez in an April 29, 2005 issue of *The Clarion* under the header “The Dynamics of a ‘diverse city’:”

Japanese, German, Italian, Native American, African American, Indian. Any given day on this campus a person will undoubtedly encounter another person of one of the ethnicities. The guarantee can be taken even further. Catholic. Buddhist. Sikh. Baptist. Jehovah’s Witness. Mormon. Along with the wide array of ethnicities come an equally numerous group of religions to which student claim alliance. Then, on an even more personal note, there’s sexual preference. Straight. Gay. Bisexual. Although a more limited set of voices, they exist nonetheless. Of course we are conscious of these many identities. However, it is not nearly enough to just note that these differences exist among us. Appreciation is key. How many times have you noticed the skin tone of your friend or asked about what their religious practices entailed?...Diversity. Divers-City. We live in a Diverse City [Selma]. There’s not choice as to whether we allow it nor not. This city has no limits and there will never be a cap on the population. Embrace and enhance the beauty of this every growing and ever changing nature...”

- The responsibility for high expectations peer-to-peer does not stop at the student level. There are also high common expectations among adults. It is clear that student achievement does not rest with just one teacher, one department, or one school. That responsibility has to be distributed among district and school staff members who recognize that high achievement requires investment, commitment, alignment and continuous improvement. As one district administrator points out, the effort is multifaceted: “Expectations are set; staff development is tied to the expectations. We’re looking at assessments to tell us if the intervention piece is working for us or not; we’re redefining that based on the data we’re accumulating, and we’re defining leaders and letting them know what the expectation is for them...”

By site report, the warning bell tolled when the district’s middle school, Lincoln Middle School, was placed on the state’s improvement list in 1999. At that juncture,

the high school – with strong district support – got to work at staying off the list. It undertook a series of steps to prove to its own community, and the world, that at Selma all students would excel with proper support and that, in the words of one school banner, on these grounds walk Selma’s finest.

Curriculum and Academic Goals

- District and school leaders share a common vision of success and knowledge about a set of key strategies for closing the achievement gap and improving student achievement overall. The practices are implemented consistently across programs and from the classroom to the district.

Staff Selection, Leadership and Capacity Building

- District and school leaders share tested strategies with colleagues. School leaders ensure that the appropriate structures such as collaboration time, flow of information/data and culture allow for meaningful sharing.

Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements

- District, school and teacher leaders use research-based programs and support, hold each other accountable for using research-based practices, and foster school structures and arrangements that focus on meeting areas of identified need.
- All students have access to a rigorous and engaging curriculum.

Monitoring: Gathering, Analysis and Use of Data

- School leadership use and supplement the district-wide assessment system to provide teachers with useful information about student progress relative to standards.

Recognition, Intervention and Adjustment

- The district and school have formal and informal systems in place to recognize school, teacher and student progress toward individual goals as well as toward district and school goals.

Curriculum and Academic Goals

District and school leaders share a common vision of success and knowledge about a set of key strategies for closing the achievement gap and improving student achievement overall. The vision and practices are implemented consistently across programs and from the classroom to the district.

When faced with the need for improvement, districts commonly struggle with identifying which of several competing challenges and goals to focus on. Selma has worked to confront that problem at every level of the system. In 1999, the steering committee re-evaluated the goals and mission of the district and the schools and worked to align the school’s goals with a clear district vision and set of goals. Selma High School publicly displays the goals in classrooms and the principal’s office. The superintendent has the goals up in the district office. This consistency reinforces the alignment. The school has outlined three school-wide goals and six key student, teacher and parent performance goals that are aligned with the district goals.

Data based goals

Selma Unified School District’s steering committee is comprised of school staff, parents, students and district administrators. When asked about how they developed their goals, school leaders point to the district steering committee as a key strategy for developing goals and planning strategies to achieve them. The committee examines data and research in order to articulate needs, set

goals and plan for professional development around instructional strategies.

“We spent hours looking at data. We looked at where we want our school to go. We looked at prioritizing, and then the teachers that were involved in that could see we were going forward to achieve the goal. Once we did that, then we put another one in place. We had a vision from the superintendent, and the steering committee drove a lot of what has happened.”

-Assistant Principal

A focus on the whole student

A common struggle with standardized testing is making the district and school’s goals, as related to student achievement on the STAR tests, meaningful to students. Selma has found a way to tie students’ personal academic goals to success on STAR testing that, according to a SUSD administrator, “provides something that many schools and districts don’t have with the STAR testing – and that’s motivation.” On one level, the link was straightforward. On another, it was complex and ambitious, because it was out of step with what schools usually do and what students, parents and teachers have learned to expect. To date a junior had to score “Basic” or above on the CST in Language Arts and Math to advance to senior status and graduate from Selma. By next year, juniors will be required to score “Proficient” or “Advanced” for promotion. Critics might raise the question: Wouldn’t raising the bar for graduation like this push students out of the system, increasing the drop out rate? Remarkably, applying the Urban Institute’s Cumulative Promotion Index, with a 76 percent on-time graduation rate for 2005, Selma High School outperforms the state (71% for 2005) by 5 percentage points. It should be duly noted that the state average does not control for poverty.

Linking performance on the CST to student graduation requirements is an important way to align state, district, school and student goals. Actions taken for students at risk of not passing this bar are not just interventions for individual students. These steps clearly tie into state and district goals. If a student does not pass by his/her junior year, the assistant principal steps in and requires the student to take an intervention course that helps support the student in mastering the STAR tests. Selma is also taking steps towards aligning students’ grades with mastery of California State Standards, further highlighting their relevance for students. Selma’s goals are for the students to pass the STAR tests, and to master the state standards for each subject.

While placing value on STAR testing and mastery of the state standards is important as deemed by the state, the school has put structures in place to ensure that they do not only measure student achievement by a standardized test. In addition to tying student grades to CST performance, all Selma students have to meet the state’s Civic Education Standards for high school. Those include being able to reflect on questions such as “what is civic life,” and “what are the foundations of American government.” Additionally, the district and school have acted on research that has shown that students perform better when they participate in extracurricular activities and have opportunities to engage with faculty outside of the classroom. Following this research, every student is required to participate in at least one extra curricular activity.

Student Leadership

Student leadership is also a very important goal for both staff and students at Selma High. By being accountable for their own academic goals with the creation of their *personalized four-year plan*, students foster responsibility toward their own education.

When speaking with students, they quickly identified classes that let them develop their leadership skills as their favorite classes – such as the journalism class which allowed them to engage and be responsible for individual projects.

Staff selection, Leadership and Capacity-Building

District and school leaders share tested strategies with colleagues. School leaders ensure that the appropriate structures such as collaboration time, flow of information/ data and culture allow for meaningful sharing.

A critical component of Selma’s reform journey was the decision to establish regular collaboration time. The policy originated at the middle school, which, due to logistics and need, the district chose to implement district wide.

District support was crucial from the outset. The district offers:

- Professional growth days at the beginning of the year and in October;
- AB 75 and AB 466 training as needed – state-approved professional development for administrators and teachers on standards-based instruction in language arts;
- Beginning Teacher support; and
- Funding to each school site for conferences.

These opportunities for off-site learning are important. However, they would not have brought the rewards, by site report, were it not for the regular, standards-aligned, teacher led on-site collaboration time. At the same time, teachers learn together, align and deepen what new knowledge they have acquired, and share questions and learning from within.

All too often, collaboration time at high schools is time faculty spend absentmindedly grading their students’ work or passing notes

to each other because the meetings do not hold value for them. Selma collaboration time offers another picture. It stays focused and scaffolded from one meeting to the next. Each faculty gets a turn to lead and model a lesson each of them has to teach that coming week: the “Focus Lesson” part of the class, when all will be teaching one standard.

The roots of the Focus Lesson curriculum

In 2001, Selma purchased—and is now adapting—the “Focus Lesson” curricula from the Fontana-based curriculum design and professional development company, Fontana Educational Institute. Yet, the roots of this curricular strategy lie further back than 2001 and further away than Los Angeles. In 1991, in Brazosport, Texas, a new superintendent of the Brazosport Independent School District was charged with closing the achievement gap between the district’s affluent and poor schools.

Through a quality training opportunity at Dow Chemical Co., the district’s leadership team learned some of the tools they needed to improve student learning. Part of what they learned was how to look for individuals who were already succeeding with poor children in spite of the obstacles they faced. In their search, assistant superintendent Pat Davenport soon found Velasco Elementary School teacher Mary Dunbar Barksdale, a 3rd-grade teacher who was achieving amazing results with her students. Although 94% of her students lived in poverty, all of her students mastered the objectives on the TAAS, then the statewide measure of learning.

Davenport went to Barksdale to study her strategies. She closely examined the results of her students’ tests, identified their problem areas, re-taught, and re-tested them until they achieved the desired level. Davenport realized that Barksdale’s process could be replicated easily by other teachers. The most logical group to learn the process would be teachers at Velasco, so Barksdale began there. Over the next several years, all of Velasco’s teachers began to experience the same high results with their children. After Velasco had demonstrated that the strategy could be taught and used successfully, Davenport wanted to spread the process to other teachers in her district.

"We're an overnight success that took seven years," said Davenport in a 1998 interview with *Results*.

(Joan Richardson, Results, NSDC)

The Focus Lesson is a mini language arts or math lesson. For thirty minutes each week, across departments, teachers learn how to teach the standard of choice for the upcoming week. Then, they break into department meetings for the coming hour. When asked what the critical ingredients are for fruitful collaboration, faculty point to the accountability to participate, the regular frequency of the meetings (every week), and the common focus of the “Focus Meeting.”

Regarding accountability, attendance is taken at each Focus Meeting. Preparation time for faculty is not provided during this time. Athletic coaches schedule practices after 4pm, when the meeting time is over. Department chairs submit minutes of meetings, and these minutes are required for stipends and used in evaluations.

Collaboration Time

- Every Tuesday 2:30-4:00
 - Cross-Curricular Focus Lesson Meeting 2:30-3:00
 - Department Meeting 3:00-4:00
- District Support of Staff Development Time

Teachers at Selma High expressed their desire to the district for collaboration time to work in curricular and cross-curricular teams. Due to teacher-expressed need throughout the district, collaboration time was implemented district-wide. The district has made a deep financial and practical commitment to staff collaboration. Two and a half hours on Tuesday afternoon are dedicated collaboration time.

Staff collaboration consists of inter-departmental collaboration during the Focus Lesson meetings, which are attended by school administrators as well as departments. The Science, Math and Physical Education/Health Departments and a school

administrator attend the Math Focus Lesson meetings. Likewise, the English, Social Science and Art Departments and a school administrator attend the English/Language Arts Focus Lessons. Selma has used this partnership to build and strengthen their strong professional learning community and build common focus and community among teachers.

This professional learning community fosters data-based discussion and leadership both within and across departments. In order to achieve this, Selma High has used one instructional strategy to build leadership and capacity in their staff around data-based instruction. The school-wide “Focus Lessons” are key instructional strategies that have been adopted from research-based professional development, and foster school-wide focus and collaboration around data-based instruction.

In order to build buy-in for the collaboration time and strengthen its quality, the dean of instruction and the teacher coach play significant roles. An important implementation step was taken when the school and district together chose to create the positions of “dean of instruction,” occupied by one veteran and respected teacher; and “teacher coach,” all three highly regarded by peers, by colleague reports. “The object of creating these positions and of having collaboration time is linked together closely: both aim to acknowledge and build teacher leadership,” says the dean of instruction. “And we all know, teachers learn best from teachers; we all learn best from our peers.”

The Focus Lessons are the key venue for peer-to-peer learning around standards-based strategies. During the Focus Lessons, the dean of instruction and the teacher coach, together with the teachers from the two groups of departments, meet in two separate rooms. For these weekly meetings, there are roughly

thirty-five faculty in each room. In these gatherings, a staff member will model the Focus Lesson of the upcoming week to their colleagues. The staff then discusses strategies for focus instruction and share cross-curricular ideas on how best to teach the standard of focus. At that time teachers from different departments will also share what other subject specific standards they will be linking to the standard that all of them will be teaching in the Focus Lesson portion of their class.

For example, in one Focus Lesson for the language arts team (English, Social Science and Art Departments and a school administrator) the focus was on the 11th and 12th grade Language Arts Standard “know how to make sense of figurative language,” and related eighth grade standards to avoid redundancies in speech. The coach opened: “We know about redundancies; we have to get rid of, abolish and do way with all that.” He then handed out a story, About Bob McGill, from the school Focus Lesson binder. It was at an eighth grade reading level: “I’ve chosen this story so you can all use parts of it if you want, even if you’re teaching the lower grades” he shared, and then directed: “Read the piece and with a partner identify all the redundancies you can find in the text.”

In the share out that followed, amongst laughter and giggles, faculty pairs traded what they had found. Some examples were quickly shared, and then trickier ones followed, such as “empty space” and “hot water heater.” “You see,” the coach concluded, “how you can conduct this Focus Lesson in your class at whatever grade level and explore ways to make it grade appropriate.” Afterwards, the faculty moved to convene in their department meetings for the following hour to discuss the data from the last benchmark test and formulate strategies for future instruction.

Department meetings occur after the cross-curricular Focus Lesson meetings for departments to share teaching strategies and materials. In addition, each department engages in a data-based discussion based on their common benchmark assessments, writing assessments and focus assessments to strategize for future instruction. The results of the assessments are broken down by classroom and therefore engage the teachers in discussion of the effect of their instructional methods on student achievement.

➤ Capacity building: Data-based instruction

“Building this kind of openness takes time. High school teachers are supposed to know everything. High school teachers are supposed to know everything in one subject.”
– Math Department Chair

The Focus Lessons were first introduced to teachers as part of a mandatory staff development initiative and sustained by being a mandatory part of teacher and department collaboration time. The Focus Lessons are a vehicle for a school-wide move to a culture of data based instruction. They function as a small and tangible way to build teacher skills and desire to engage publicly and privately in data based instruction. The result is a school-wide cultural shift and building of capacity in data-based instruction and de-privatized teacher practice. Having something that the whole school can rally around is a key starting point for further learning, collaboration and accountability. The principal notes:

“You need to start to garner staff, teacher, employee-wide support, and I think you need to have something which the entire staff can focus on, and the thing that took that vehicle here at Selma High School was the Focus Lessons.”

In order to sustain this change and incorporate data based instruction in the culture of Selma High School, school administrators have made a conscious effort to stick with this reform and imbed it in mandatory teacher collaboration time.

“A big focus for me was to make a concerted effort to continue the effort of focused lessons and individual student achievement, staying the course of continuing...that doesn’t mean you don’t change. Obviously, we have to adjust and evolve through the process, which I think we are doing, but I also think consistency is critical.” – Assistant Principal

➤ Instructional Leadership

As noted above, Selma’s shift towards data-based instruction is seen as a shared responsibility. Various teachers present and teach the Focus Lesson for fellow teachers, setting up a culture of shared instructional leadership among teachers. Furthermore, the administrator who works with the Focus Lesson team equally invests their time and input into data-based instruction.

The instructional leadership of school administrators has been a huge support and reason for teacher buy-in at Selma. School administrators are active participants at Focus Lesson meetings each Tuesday, and they acknowledge that part of their job description is to be a support resource for teachers. By regularly attending focus meetings and completing 15 required formal classroom visitations each month, school administrators are showing teachers that they are there to support them.

“We see the focus meetings, so when we do our teacher observations and if they are struggling with those the counselors can model teach. We are here to support the teachers. Because we are doing that, there is a

better relationship with administration. I used to be a teacher so there is trust there,” says the Learning Director.

Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements

District, School and Teacher leaders use research-based programs; support and hold each other accountable for using research-based practices; and foster school structures and arrangements that are focused on meeting areas of identified need.

➤ Research Based Strategies

Selma Unified School District and Selma High School are active consumers of outside research. The district is running its own best practices study: “I constantly look to see who is performing higher (based on state test scores), then I pick up the phone: ‘What are you doing?’” says the assistant superintendent.

For an example of their consumption of best practices, they look to other districts in California who are showing gains in their student data. For instance, they have turned to Escondido Union Elementary School District, a district that is making strong gains in their CELDT scores, for their English Learner strategies.

The school-wide adoption of Focus Lessons at Selma High follows this pattern as well. These lessons were developed at Brazosport Independent School District in Texas, whose success in narrowing the achievement gap between their white students and students of color commanded a lot of attention. Selma Unified School District and Selma High School invited them to come and speak, and as a result, they have adopted their Focus Lesson model as a strategy to make sure all students have access to and are mastering key standards.

Teachers are distributed in such a way that all levels of students have access to the most experienced teachers, and all teachers have experience teaching struggling students.

➤ Focus Lessons

One concern about the “Focus Lesson” strategy has been that it overemphasizes basic skills. At Selma, however, teacher leaders and administration work hard to leverage the “Focus Lesson” as a portal to rigorous and appropriately supported curriculum for all.

Focus Lessons drill down on key English Language Arts and Mathematics standards in preparation for basic skills tests such as the CAHSEE. The Focus Lessons have assessments, and teachers are able to compare/articulate scores within each grade level. The Focus Lessons are based only on Mathematics and English Language Arts standards; however, they are used as cross-departmental articulation strategies.

“The biggest telling thing is when they leave the high school exit exam areas, and they say ‘Those Focus Lessons really helped.’” – Math Department Chair

Focus Lessons are much more than a daily ten-minute lesson. They have become part of the instructional fabric at Selma. The idea is that teachers and students must constantly drill down on basic skills with the Focus Lesson while also engaging in high level thinking with their A-G aligned curriculum. In addition, they are a baseline for starting discussions on modifying instructional strategies and making sure that all students are mastering the standards.

➤ Exposing all students to college preparatory curriculum

Access to the A-G curriculum is often a critical equity point, as it defines whether a

student is eligible to apply for admission into the California State University (CSU) or University of California (UC) Systems.

In line with Selma’s high standards for all students, Selma has aligned all of their courses with A-G requirements and removed any courses that did not align. This does not mean that all students graduate with all the courses under their belt to apply to a CSU or UC school, but it does mean that no one is placed in a math or English class that is not recognized by the CSU or UC system. Therefore, a student must then choose if he/she would like to take all of the required classes necessary in order to apply to a CSU or UC.

Selma is also working to align their Regional Occupational Program (ROP) classes with the A-G curriculum. Selma has already managed to get a slate of its ROP classes, including nursing, UC/CSU certified. They are working with the local ROP office to further alignment.

Critics often argue that offering A-G college preparatory curriculum to all students encourages watering down of the curriculum and/or an increase of the dropout rate. The district and the school have acknowledged this; however, they have not backed down from their insistence that all students must be held to high standards and equal access, and if this means moving at a slower pace for some students or trying different instructional strategies, then this is what they will do. With enough support and motivation, Selma believes that all of their students can achieve in rigorous courses.

“We made a conscious decision with our steering committee that all kids should be exposed to college prep curriculum... basically we just took our high-achieving standards and no excuses and said: ‘You can all do it. This is the focus.’ The teachers did not dummy down the curriculum. What they did was they

moved at a little slower pace for some but they all were exposed to college prep material.” – District Administrator

- Highly qualified teachers teach students with greatest need

A common practice in high schools is that veteran and/or highly qualified teachers teach the higher-level courses. Selma believes there is a substantive and strategic value to placing the most qualified teachers (strength in content, integrity and instructional skills) into the classrooms with lower achieving students. School administrators acknowledged that getting teachers out of their comfort zone is a difficult task but an essential one to closing the achievement gap.

“We feel it would benefit our students more if the highly qualified teachers were teaching the lower achieving students. We are transitioning into that. We meet with teachers during master scheduling. We were able to get the Calculus teacher to teach Algebra I. Algebra I grades have gone up.” – Learning Director

- Combined ELA and ELD standards

Selma does not use a student’s native language as an excuse for their students not reaching high academic standards. One of Selma’s five performance goals is that all English Learner (EL) students will become proficient in English and reach high academic standards, meaning, at a minimum, attaining proficiency or better in English Language Arts and Mathematics. Selma is addressing this goal by beginning to combine ELA standards with ELD standards.

EL students who are at Beginning or Early Intermediate levels, based on their CELDT scores, are placed in English Development classes. Three levels of English Development classes are offered: EL1, EL2 and EL3.

All EL students at the Intermediate, Early Advanced and Advanced levels are either mainstreamed or placed in sheltered classes (with language support provided by a bilingual paraprofessional). A variety of sheltered classes are offered: English 1 EL, English 2 EL, English 3 EL, World History EL, US History EL, Biology EL, Pre-Algebra EL and Algebra I EL. These classes are rigorous content level classes that are equipped with language support when needed. The focus is on content, but EL support is available when needed. This strategy avoids Intermediate and Advanced EL students being placed in EL classes that only focus on language and do not focus on rigorous content. Selma makes sure that once a student develops sufficient language skills they are immersed in rigorous content.

Furthermore, scoring well on the CELDT test is not enough for Selma students to graduate. All Selma students must demonstrate their ability to participate in a rigorous curriculum. Students can score at the Advanced level on the CELDT test but not be re-designated because they do not have the required grade point average (min. 2.0), a “C” or better in their last English class, or their STAR scores for English Language Arts are not high enough to meet district criteria for graduation. If students fail to meet standards, they work with their counselor to build a curriculum that will ensure they do improve and make the grade.

- Support to Students with Disabilities

As noted above, all classes are, with a few exceptions, college preparatory at Selma. A current goal is to make all courses college prep, to every extent possible. In the English Department, all classes are already college prep with only one exception. For the severely learning disabled there is a Basic English course. Aids come into the mainstream

classrooms to support those students, and extra tutorials are available.

Support to students with disabilities is particularly pronounced in the intensive focus on in-school alternative pathways to success. Through the range of A-G certified vocational education classes, a number of students struggling in traditional classrooms have the opportunity and support to become college and career ready. (For more on special education services including tutorials and CAHSEE intervention classes, see Theme Five: Recognition, Intervention and Adjustment below.)

Monitoring: Gathering, Analysis and Use of Data

There are tested and recognized systems and structures in place by which school leaders, district leaders, teachers and students share learning about what works. These lessons inform instructional decision-making.

School leadership use and supplement the district-wide assessment system to provide teachers with useful information about student progress relative to standards.

Selma is a living example that a sophisticated data system is not a necessary condition for a culture of data based inquiry. Though their data program is currently out of commission, nonetheless, data collected through Focus Lessons and department assessments have been able to drive their discussions and decisions.

- Common Assessments for the entire department: Teacher Coaches (department chair report and site plan)

Selma High has developed a Teacher/Coach position for the English and Math departments. Their role is to lead in the

development of common departmental assessments. At Selma, there are three Teacher Coaches, two in the English department and one in the Math. Teacher coaches are full time teachers who are given an extra prep period in order to develop common departmental assessments. When asked why they did not bring in an outside coach to help them develop the assessments, the assistant principal responded: “We didn’t want an outsider or someone who is already in a leadership position. There just isn’t buy-in there.”

Originally, the tests were administered at the end of the semester but the goal is to have all departments using common assessments for the end of each unit. There would be multiple assessments each semester to periodically monitor the students and adjust instruction.

- Student Self Monitoring

While this is not a school-wide practice, there are early signs of innovative strategies to encourage students’ self-monitoring of mastery of California content standards. The strategy was developed in an Algebra class but was actually taken from an elementary school strategy. Students in the class are listed on a large chart along with all of the standards that they are expected to learn. Once they have mastered a particular standard, they place a sticker next to the standard they have completed. This allows students to take responsibility for mastering standards while allowing the teacher to see which standards need to be re-taught. In this particular class, 30 percent of each student’s grade is based on mastery of the standards.

School leaders monitor teacher performance, both formally and informally, using district-adopted evaluation tools and classroom observation tools that reflect shared understandings about the school’s expectations for classroom practice. Principals review

student achievement data regularly with individual teachers.

➤ Classroom Observations (Class Visit Tool)

Selma administrators monitor classroom instruction frequently, and in a way that is constructive and not just evaluative. They are able to achieve this through strong instructional leadership and frequent classroom visits.

Counselors, as well as the rest of the administrators, feel comfortable modeling teaching if they see a teacher struggling. “The evaluation forms go to the principal. There are no secrets at Selma High School!” said a Learning Director.

Both administrators and teachers noted the strength of the administration as instructional leaders. Because the administrators are instructional leaders, teachers feel comfortable going to them for instructional support and, likewise, administrators feel comfortable offering advice or constructive criticism. This relationship is very important in maintaining a culture of peer support and openness in the school.

Recognition, Intervention and Adjustment

Systems are created at all levels to recognize students’ progress toward individual learning goals as well as toward department, school and district goals.

One of Selma’s goals is to make sure that all students have access to a rigorous curriculum. In order to ensure this, teachers and administrators have a variety of strategies to recognize student progress and difficulties.

➤ Most qualified teachers teach students with most need

“We’ve been working on that; we’re taking teachers teaching higher level courses and

putting themselves out of their comfort zone...One master teacher always taught AP Calculus; now he is teaching Algebra I and student success is already improving.” – Learning Director

Selma recognizes that the most experienced teachers with the deepest knowledge of the subject often teach high-level courses. A difficult but extremely valuable technique that allows all students access to a rigorous curriculum and quality teaching is placing these teachers in lower level courses.

This is a change in culture. Teaching the students most in need is no longer a punishment but recognition of a teacher’s skill and knowledge.

➤ Special Education

In order to make sure that all of its students have access to a rigorous curriculum, Selma monitors and supports its students so they thrive in an academically rigorous environment. One example of this strategy is providing access for students with special needs to the mainstream curriculum. Teachers and administrators do not leave students to “sink or swim” in a high-level class. Selma provides them with extra support through a special transitions class, which offers academic support as well as information on career and job opportunities. Mainstream teachers and Special Education teachers have a strong relationship and collaborate around the needs of their students.

➤ Tutorial Services

All ninth and tenth graders performing below a 2.0 grade point average must attend a mandatory after school tutorial for an entire grading period. Tutorial is recommended for eleventh and twelfth graders. Saturday School is offered for students who may be above a

2.0, but need additional assistance outside of the traditional school week.

➤ CAHSEE Intervention Classes

Teachers and administrators closely monitor students through STAR and CAHSEE test results, as well as through benchmark testing and classroom grades. When a teacher or administrator identifies a student who needs educational support in order to pass the CAHSEE, they are placed in an intervention class, which supports them in gaining the skills they need to pass.

Conclusion

Data-proven performance places Selma High among the top ten schools in the state when compared to schools with similar demographics. This study uncovered some of their distinctive strategies that helped them secure such gains and often outperform their peers.

“When you look at our data [particularly comparing between schools] it tells you that what you’re doing is . . . you’re on the right track. One thing that has gotten better, and I think it is because we have examples of success in the district, there was a perception at one time that not all kids could learn – and I think that is changing dramatically. No excuses; all kids can learn. That is really targeting the staff to challenge pre-conceived notions of who could and couldn’t learn.” - Assistant Superintendent