

# High Schools That Work: How Improving High Schools Can Use Data to Guide Their Progress

In our book, The Power of Focus, we encourage all governmental, non-profit, and for-profit groups that are working with school improvement to take frequent opportunities to share what they are learning about assisting schools in increasing student learning, thus improving practice and impact for all groups. This newsletter is our attempt to share what we at Targeted Leadership have been learning about supporting improvements in High Schools.

Dropout rates, the percentage of students who do not complete high school in the typical 3 to 4 year pattern, have reached alarming levels across North America, with large urban centers such as New York or Chicago nearing the 50% mark – meaning that half of the students attending high school in those cities do not graduate. Comprehensive High Schools are very complex organizations, and many current efforts to improve them through changes in structure have not proven particularly successful. We are finding, however, that high schools can be very effective at raising performance and increasing high school completion rates when they implement structured processes and protocols for helping teachers, departments, and school leaders use data to guide instructional decisions.

In our experience, there are several common strategies employed by these successful schools that can provide the reader with a reflection opportunity when considering the practices of the high schools with whom the reader works or is connected.

These schools:

1. Set rigorous academic expectations
2. Have created processes for monitoring a range of student performance data
3. Have implemented protocols for analyzing data at multiple levels throughout the school
4. Closely connect data on student performance with tangible adjustments in quality instructional practice
5. Have shifted from the language of excuses to the language of results.

## **These schools have set rigorous academic expectations.**

At these schools, the focus is on preparing students for life beyond high school; academic expectations are high, including college-prep

curriculum or its equivalent for all students - and consistently communicated to parents and students. These schools emphasize academic programs and expectations in all communications to students and parents. Many of these schools have identified a particular academic focus, such as *writing across the curriculum*, that helps in establishing clear expectations and demonstrating success for a large number of students quickly.

**These schools have created processes for monitoring a range of student performance data.** ? Data collected by these schools includes annual standardized measures, local interim assessments, teacher tests, course completion rates, and report card grades. In some cases, these schools or their districts had to learn how to collect and organize these types of data in order for them to be in useful formats and provided in timely fashion for use by teachers and school leaders.

**These schools have implemented protocols for analyzing data at multiple levels throughout the school.** ? The principal at these schools is very attentive to the data on student performance and involves the expanded leadership team in regular conversation about progress and improvement. Content department heads are given time and are trained in specific protocols and structures to review the data for their departments and to develop and share strategies for improvement across departments. And perhaps most importantly, all teachers and instructional staff are regularly engaged in collaborative processes to review student data and student work to identify patterns and challenges that may need to be addressed through instructional adjustments.

**These schools closely connect data on student performance with tangible adjustments in quality instructional practice.** ? It is widely accepted at these schools that quality instructional practice is essential for students to meet the high expectations set for them. Data is used to identify specific needs, and teachers and staff are engaged in continuous cycles of targeted professional development that leads to true expertise and full implementation of specified, evidence-based practices throughout the school designed to address those needs. The discussion among teachers is not about how to "fix" the low performing students, but rather about how to adjust instructional practice to better support their learning needs. Adjustments range from practices in regular classrooms, to structural changes like extra reading support classes and individualized after-school / summer tutoring.

**These schools have shifted from the language of excuses to the language of results.**? Comprehensive high schools are very complex organizations. The students who attend them are dealing with very complex adolescent development issues. The breadth and depth of knowledge and skills that students must master to achieve high standards represents a very complex curriculum. There are many reasons why our high schools are not more successful, and it can be tempting to settle for just working really hard and blaming outside influences for our lack of results. These schools, however, have been willing to “face the brutal facts” that their data shows them about the difference between their high expectations and their current reality, and to work together to adjust instructional practices and programs to meet the challenges identified from their data. They recognize that they have not “arrived” – that they will need to continue to learn and improve and often discuss ways to do that. Rather than dwelling on past failures and fiscal and other limitations, their future goals become the focus of their time and talk – more and more students graduating and being successful in college and work.

Following is just one school's story from the many high schools that have shown dramatic improvement in student performance in the Edmonton School District.

*J. Percy Page High School Demographics? 1100 students? Highly diverse ethnic population? Large ESL population.? Located in SE Edmonton, Alberta, Canada? ? Principal Jean Stiles? In conversation with the Principal she feels that the following were four of the major? factors that affected the improvement in the academic results in the school:*

1. The leadership team that was built has been critical to the improvements that have been made. This team includes all the department chairs, the administration team, the business manager and the librarian. ( This meant that all teachers, support staff and the research aspect could be represented). The following expectations were put in place:?
  - Everyone on the team got the same training (no hierarchy, no surprises)
  - Everyone on this leadership team is considered a teacher and leader of their own team. Regular meetings were scheduled every two weeks --- one of these meetings was with the CRITICAL FRIENDS and the second meeting of the month was to discuss the practical application of the data presented at the first meeting and the questions raised by

the critical friends.

2. CRITICAL FRIENDS -- the principal invited three people to be their critical friends: the associate superintendent responsible for this high school, the director of assessment and a professor of curriculum who was external to the school district. The role of these critical friends was to ask questions, to participate in discussions and to have an equal voice at the table. It was at the meetings that they attended that new data was introduced. ? Each of the three critical friends had a different role.

- The Associate Superintendent -- to be the voice of the district and to be aware of what was being attempted in this school.
- The director of assessment brought the data and played a crucial role in unpacking this data and assisting members of the team to accept the data and use it to improve achievement.
- The outside professor provided examples from research and provided the external perspective.

3. Getting the teachers to buy in --- When this principal arrived at this school the satisfaction survey results were very low, staff morale was very low, discipline was poor, teachers did not feel that their efforts were recognized and there were no clear expectations of what was required of them. Setting clear expectations for students was the first step with high administrative visibility and support to help students achieve these expectations. This was really appreciated by the staff. Monthly assemblies were held to recognize both staff and students. Staff meeting became discussions of educational importance ( ie a no zero policy, second chances for students, tutorials in every subject --- teachers traded supervision for tutorials and talked about how wonderful it was to trade babysitting for instruction.) ? ? The teachers said that students did not seem to know how they were doing so? ALL students had access to their marks on a daily basis-- there was no student in the school who could not access their progress on a daily basis. ? ? It was the teachers who decided the monthly report cards should go out to parents that detailed all assignments, all the marks for each assignment and test scores. These reports also provided detailed information about tutorial assistance for students. These monthly report cards have to be signed by parents. They have been very important in changing attitudes of both students and parents

towards the school and learning.?

4. The use of data school wide played a big role. Data was posted outside every classroom providing information about tests and improvement in a variety of areas (eg how many students handed each assignment in on time, students passing courses, etc). Data was posted in key areas in the school and the staff observed students high-fiving each other when they saw the course completion data and saying "THAT'S US ---- WAY TO GO!"

In summary, J. Percy Page High School set high expectations for students and staff through the development and empowerment of a true instructional leadership team. They worked with their central assessment services to create processes for monitoring a range of student performance data and set regularly scheduled times to implement protocols for analyzing data at multiple levels throughout the school. This led teachers to develop the strategy of the monthly report cards as a way to closely connect data on student performance with tangible adjustments in quality instructional practice. All of this focus on data and instruction shifted the language not only of teachers and staff, but also the language of the students from excuses to the language of results. This is only one example of many improving high schools. The question we try to pose to high school leaders as we begin working with them in new situations is, "If it could happen there, then why not here?"

**Sample Data on High School Improvement:**

J. Percy Page ? Successful Course Completion Percentages	2003	2006
English	60%	86%
Math	71%	84%
Edmonton Public Schools – Average of all district high schools	2000	2006
3-Year High School Completion Percentages	51%	68%
1,300+ MORE STUDENTS graduate each year than before		