CREATING PATHWAYS TO GRADUATION WHAT’S WORKING

Examining high-performing middle grades schools in Los Angeles County.

United Way
CREATING PATHWAYS OUT OF POVERTY
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Moreover, ensuring that every one of our young people has the education they need is our moral obligation. And it’s critical to fighting poverty in our region. In 2008, we published the *Seizing the Middle Ground* report, which lifted up the importance of middle school education and its proven connection to a student’s successful graduation from high school. The report profiled the dire state of our middle schools as a result of lack of funding, overcrowded classrooms, and a shortage of credentialed teachers.

Based on the report findings, we worked to pass an LAUSD resolution to create smaller classes and schools. In partnership with parents, teachers, students, elected officials and community organizations, we successfully advocated for college prep classes (A-G) at two major school districts, benefiting almost 800,000 students.

Two years later, our graduation rate remains stuck at 60%, where it’s been for years. And if you are a student at LAUSD that number drops to 52%.

But we are seeing improvement and models that are showing great promise. In our own work, we are focusing on implementing these best practices. Working with the California League of Middle Schools, we’re piloting our Leadership Matters professional development program. We collaborated with LAUSD on the creation of a school level report card, and are now mobilizing parents to use the report card to improve their schools. And we are holding community convenings to inform students, parents and community leaders about LAUSD’s Public School Choice Resolution.

The four Los Angeles schools profiled in this report have been selected out of over 300 middle grades schools studied across California. They provide a look at what is working to help us begin to talk about how to replicate these models across our region. Two of our success stories are LAUSD schools, one is a charter school. They all have slightly different characteristics. But what these schools have in common is a passionate commitment to their students and their future potential. This passion is shared by teachers, principals, school leaders, parents and the community in which they live.

We must take immediate and bold action to improve the quality of our young peoples’ education. This is a solvable problem if we have a common vision, a common path and a long-term focused commitment.

Elise Buik
President & CEO
United Way of Greater Los Angeles
Getting a good education is important for many reasons. Individuals who are well educated tend to contribute more positively to society and the economy, and are better able to get the kinds of jobs or build the kinds of careers that will enable them to support themselves and their families.

For children who live below the poverty line, or come from troubled families or neighborhoods, it can be a great challenge just to graduate from high school, much less to go on and get a community college credential or a four-year college degree. But for students who do, it can change their lives, their opportunities, and the course of their family trajectory into the future.

A Good Education is the Best Pathway Out of Poverty

EdSource agrees with the United Way of Greater Los Angeles that improving educational practices and student outcomes in the middle grades is essential to keeping more low-income students on that path. The middle grades are the first step in the secondary to post-secondary pipeline—and the last, best chance to get students on track for a high school curriculum that will make them “college and work ready.”

An analysis by EdSource shows there is great variation in middle grades student performance among California schools serving high numbers of minority, English learner, and/or low-income students. These schools vary widely on the Academic Performance Index and in their student outcomes on standards-based exams.

Put simply, the practice and policy choices of middle grades principals, school leadership teams, and classroom teachers do make a difference in the academic success of their students.

In February 2010, EdSource released a large-scale study—Gaining Ground in the Middle Grades—designed to identify school and district practices and policies that set apart higher-performing schools from lower-performing ones serving similar middle grades students, as measured by standards-based tests in English language arts and mathematics. The study yielded a wealth of actionable practices that were associated with improved student outcomes.

At the request of the United Way of Greater Los Angeles, EdSource selected six schools from the study to profile, four of which appear in this report. These schools are improving the academic outcomes of middle grades students from predominantly low-income families. Our goal: to show what higher-performing middle grades schools look like in practice, and how these public schools have organized themselves explicitly to produce the academic improvement that is essential for more young people—in Los Angeles and statewide—to be college and career-ready.
The Study—Gaining Ground in the Middle Grades: Why Some Schools Do Better

During the 2008–09 school year, EdSource and our partners from Stanford University and the American Institutes for Research, surveyed the principals of 303 middle grades schools in California, 3,752 English language arts and mathematics teachers in grades 6–8 in these schools, and 157 district superintendents and charter management organization (CMO) leaders who oversee them.

We asked these educators about concrete, actionable practices and policies in place in their schools, based on extensive review of middle grades research and policy literature. We then analyzed the schools’ reported practices against their achievement on the California Standards Tests in English language arts and mathematics in grades 6, 7 and 8 during that year. The analysis controlled for student background differences.

The study’s findings provide a coherent and compelling picture of what distinguishes higher-performing schools in the middle grades:

• **An intense, schoolwide focus on improving academic outcomes.**
  Educators set measurable goals and are accountable for improved student outcomes, and they share a mission to prepare students academically for the future. Students and parents share in these responsibilities.

• **Curricula and instruction are closely aligned with state academic standards.**
  Educators emphasize key standards from one grade to the next in each subject area, use standards-based curricula frequently, and collaborate around pacing and benchmarks.

• **Assessment and other student data are used extensively to improve student learning and teacher practice.**
  Districts play a strong leadership role in providing student assessment data and the technology for accessing and using it. Principals and teachers, in turn, use data extensively to evaluate instruction and identify problems.

• **Emphasis on early identification and proactive intervention to meet students’ academic needs.**
  Educators review the records of entering students thoroughly for warning signs of academic vulnerability and the need for support, and employ a range of required and voluntary strategies to intervene with students when needed.

• **Districts and principals are vital to orchestrating school improvement, with principals being the linchpin between the district and teachers.**
  They also ensure a clean, safe, and disciplined school environment. Teachers work both individually and collectively to improve student outcomes, supported by substantive evaluations of their practice and adequate common planning time and resources to improve instruction.

“All these schools have made this improvement their top priority, with student outcomes as their measuring stick. They understand that successes or failures at this grade level have the potential to make or break what happens for students as they enter high school.”

All over California and in Los Angeles, some schools are doing much better than their peers at raising the academic success of middle grades students. These schools have made this improvement their top priority, with student outcomes as the measuring stick. They understand that successes or failures at this grade level have the potential to make or break what happens for students as they enter high school.

Private and public investments in strengthening the middle grades can pay off—in future outcomes and as a pathway out of poverty for students, and in benefits to California.
We are seeing modest gains and some pockets of excellence.

But modest gains and pockets of excellence aren’t good enough.

We are not seeing improvement fast enough.

And solutions are not scaled quickly enough.

Only 60% of our students are graduating on time. And for LAUSD students, the number drops to 52%.

- Half of our students are dropping out. And if you are a low-income student, it’s even worse because the chronically failing schools are in your neighborhood.

L.A. COUNTY HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATE

- 1/3 of low-performing middle schools in L.A. County are in the areas with the highest rates of poverty.

L.A. COUNTY PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT MIDDLE SCHOOLS

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L.A. County

LAUSD

English Language Arts proficiency for 8th graders has improved. And 8th grade Algebra 1 proficiency, for those taking the course, is trending up. But the numbers are still low, which means that many of our students still do not have the gateway course proficiency they need to secure jobs with career paths.

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• Since 2000, we are seeing a decrease in the number of lower performing schools and an increase in the number of higher performing schools. But only one-third of the schools in L.A. County have API scores over 800, and that number drops to 24% for LAUSD schools.

Hundreds of thousands of students, because of their economic status and where they live, rely on their neighborhood schools. And many of these schools have been underperforming for years. If half of our young people don’t complete high school, they won’t be able to go on to college or have access to jobs with career ladders. They will never reach their full potential.

Demand accountability and transparency and putting our children first.

We cannot wait another day.
We wanted to learn more about what these higher-performing middle grades schools look like in practice, and how educators in these public schools have embraced the mission of continuously improving student achievement.

Four of the schools are included in this report. They come from a range of L.A. County school districts including Los Angeles, Montebello and Palmdale. One is an L.A. charter school. Some have distinctive features such as a dual language curriculum. They vary both in size and the grade levels they serve.

“The schools profiled also share a “future oriented” mission and instructional program, geared towards preparing students for a rigorous high school curriculum.”

But these schools share a great deal in common in their efforts to put on a “full court press” to raise the academic achievement of all their middle grades students.

The schools leverage a common, standards-based infrastructure. State academic content standards enable middle grades educators to intently analyze lessons, aided by district or CMO-wide resources such as pacing guides that keep principals, teachers, students, and parents on the same page. In addition, these schools depend on student data generated by assessments aligned with these standards—including regular assignments, unit assessments, district benchmark tests, and statewide tests. Enabled by training and technology provided by the district, these data form the basis for critical conversations about how best to serve different students and for decisions about how to intervene when necessary.

The schools we profiled also share a “future oriented” mission and instructional program, geared toward preparing students for a rigorous high school curriculum. They explicitly work hard to make clear to students and parents the connection between middle grades academics and students’ futures. This future orienta-
tion is exemplified in countless ways, whether through everyday conversations, college-oriented rallies, encouraging students to set their own goals, or explaining to students and parents how achievement and test scores in the middle grades will later be used to inform high school interventions and course placements (including in California’s A-G college preparatory curriculum).

But the profiles make clear that standards, assessments, data and a strong future orientation cannot improve student outcomes without a professional culture at the school. In this environment, teachers have adequate common planning time to collaboratively discuss what is working and what is not, have the resources to try out and debrief new approaches, and trust that this collective work will be undertaken in a spirit of shared and continuous improvement. For example, decisions about student interventions may involve data-informed conversations about which teachers are best positioned to provide the extra support students need relative to a particular academic standard, and what kinds of collaboration will ensure that teachers who are seeing better results can share their expertise with others.

“Standards, assessments, data, and a strong future orientation cannot improve student outcomes without a professional culture at the school.”

These cultures took time and strong, committed district/CMO and principal leadership to develop. They are, by definition, “works in progress” that the schools continue to refine in response to student outcomes. The profiles make clear that public middle grades schools—in California more broadly, and in Los Angeles and its surrounding areas—can build these environments provided they have the tools, time, resources, and other standards-based support they need to do so.

“This school profiles and the Gaining Ground study show that it can be done, provided schools have the tools, the commitment, and the public and private support required.”

This lesson is particularly important in a time when California’s public schools are under both unprecedented financial strain and unprecedented pressure to demonstrate academic results. Indeed, the principals we interviewed report struggling this year to keep the programs they have created as they face budget cuts that are forcing some difficult trade-offs.

Just as the findings of the Gaining Ground in the Middle Grades study help us see more clearly the hard work being done by educators in higher-performing middle grades schools, so too do these schools’ stories help us see more clearly what it means to intently pursue not just improvements in student achievement but in students’ future prospects. These school profiles and the Gaining Ground study show that it can be done, provided schools have the tools, the commitment, and the public and private support required.
Although he likes to have fun and is open to criticism, Principal James Noble also has some non-negotiables when it comes to how the 1,822 students at Stephen M. White Middle School are taught. In fact, he has five of them: five things he expects to see in every classroom, for each lesson.

The first three non-negotiables—an agenda, an objective, and a standard—provide evidence that the lesson being taught is focused around the state’s academic content standards and is consistent with what the school’s teachers have developed together. Each teacher is required to post an agenda for each lesson in his or her classroom. The agenda communicates to students the objective of the lesson and what the class will cover that day. It also outlines the activities that will help students meet the objective and learn the standard. When Noble visits a classroom, that’s what he wants to see. He also looks for the fourth non-negotiable—word walls.

“I know that almost all testing is a matter of kids being able to decipher the printed code on the page,” he says. These word walls must be dynamic, with specific vocabulary that teachers use with students on an ongoing basis, he adds. Every discipline has its unique set of terms, such as “quotient” in math or “metaphor” in English language arts. “When kids see those terms on a standardized test, if they’re unfamiliar, they are dead in the water,” Noble says. “I don’t believe in spelling tests. That’s kind of old hat,” he adds laughing. “But I do believe in conceptual tests. Do you have the concept? Kids need to be able to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate.”

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—Principal James Noble

Providing Students with a Road Map

And the fifth non-negotiable item? He wants to see authentic student work posted in the classroom that represents the highest order task in a lesson. Alongside that work should be the standard and a rubric that was given to all students ahead of time. The rubric lists the criteria students must meet to turn in quality work.

“I just cringe whenever I ask students, ‘How do you know your work is good?’ and they respond, ‘If the teacher likes it.’ I could just crawl under my desk and cry,” he says. “I want kids to have some road map of
how to get the best possible grade, how to get the best possible learning. I’ve found that a rubric gives a step-by-step checklist so students know ahead of time when they hand in a paper that it’s quality.”

Lesson Study Approach
To attain these five non-negotiables, teachers participate in the Japanese educational practice of Lesson Study, which Noble says “was pretty much mandated” by Los Angeles Unified School District. Teachers take apart and examine all the elements of a lesson, then put it back together. They then implement the lesson, come back and debrief, and then tweak the lesson based on their experience with it as a group. Although this is difficult work, the teachers were open to the new approach, he says.

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—PRINCIPAL JAMES NOBLE

“It’s a laborious process, but it has paid dividends for kids,” says Noble, who for six years has been principal at the District 8 school, which has seen steady gains in student achievement. Noble says the math teachers, in particular, have embraced this approach. They met diligently, he says, and developed common end-of-unit tasks, assessments, and agendas. That way, “any student at any given week can talk with any other student at the same grade level and discipline, and they are all on the same page.”
Using Data Proactively

Besides preparing the lesson well through the Lesson Study approach, teachers at Stephen M. White rely on district benchmark data and their own assessments to find out if students understand the standards. If most students do not assess well, then the teacher will re-teach the standard. If only a few students are lagging behind, they will give them special tutoring help.

Noble uses data to spot trends. “Is there a trend in a particular teacher’s class that tells me they aren’t teaching the standard, or a trend in another class that shows me a teacher is teaching the standard particularly well?” he explains. “Then I’ll try to get those two teachers in a peer relationship, some direct intervention. Maybe those two can form a partnership and get to where we’re hitting all the standards with all the kids all the time.”

Noble also uses data to uncover risk factors for specific students, such as if they have failed classes or had low achievement on a regular basis in the past. By reviewing the students’ histories, he can discover the holes in their education and intervene.

The middle school also relies on summer packets in English and math—sent home with all returning students and incoming 6th graders—to help determine students’ academic strengths and weaknesses.

Teachers take apart and examine all the elements of a lesson, then put it back together. They then implement the lesson, come back and debrief, and then tweak the lesson based on their experience with it as a group.

One of the primary purposes for the packets is to prevent “slippage that always happens when kids are on vacation,” Noble says. But they can also reveal which kids need help and which ones would benefit from enrichment activities.

For example, in English, students are asked to read a book and respond in writing to some questions about it. Based on the student’s response, teachers and administrators can determine if they are literate and set them up for enrichment opportunities; they can place them in a core class and add some extra support; or if they are very weak, provide some intervention.

An Emphasis on Math

The summer packets also help school staff place students in the appropriate math classes. However, all 8th graders enroll in Algebra I, even though some may not be quite ready. Noble strongly believes that this is the best approach. He points out that to be eligible to go to the University of California (UC) and California State University (CSU), students must take a minimum of three years of college preparatory math: Algebra I, Geometry, and Algebra II.

“If a kid enters 9th grade and they’re taking Algebra I and they’re not successful, then they have just enough years left to get UC eligible,” he says. “But if I give it to them in the middle grades and they pass it, then they don’t have to take Algebra I again in high school. It provides a cushion.”
To support the 8th graders who are likely to struggle in Algebra I, the school offers a second simultaneous course with the same teacher. Students are identified for this class based on their math performance in 7th grade, including their test scores. The class has fewer students, and the teacher goes over what was taught a second time more slowly, making sure the students understand it. Students can choose to leave the second class after they are scoring well on the school's periodic assessments, but many want to stay because they feel they are really learning the subject, Noble says. And he lets them. “I won’t take them out because what the kids are saying is true. If I take them out, they might go right back down.”

“Middle school is about finding your interests, determining what you’re going to pursue in life, setting goals for yourself, and following through,” he says. “I want to do anything I can to prepare kids, pique their interest.”

—PRINCIPAL JAMES NOBLE

Not only 8th graders get support in math. Sixth graders who are behind when they enter Stephen M. White are assigned to an extra class in math and/or English language arts. “We call it academic workout,” Noble says.

Noble also encourages academic prowess by holding jousts (“we’re the home of the Knights”). A joust at Stephen M. White is an academic contest between classes. Each class will have a team. One team of students will be asked a math question, for example; if they can’t answer it correctly, the opposing team gets a chance. “I’ll go to the joust as a spectator, and the kids are showing off. Oh, it’s fun!”

**Finding Out Who You Are**

Noble introduces fun in other ways, including obtaining a grant (formerly given only to high schools) for a robotics class. He believes that middle school is the time when students start to develop their life interests, and he wants to give them as many opportunities as possible.

“Middle school is about finding your interests, determining what you’re going to pursue in life, setting goals for yourself, and following through,” he says. “I want to do anything I can to prepare kids, pique their interest.”

And that caring approach, perhaps, is also non-negotiable for Noble.
At La Merced Intermediate, everyone aims to be on the same page. That’s why this school in Montebello has developed common systems and structures to support student achievement among its 1,391 6th, 7th, and 8th graders, and facilitate professional learning among its staff. These systems are designed to make sure routine and open conversations about teaching and learning occur among administrators, teachers, counselors, and parents.

Weekly Meetings Focused on Data and Instruction

Principal Eugene Kerr points to the school’s weekly teacher meetings as a key part of this communications strategy. Every Monday, students are dismissed at 12:38 p.m. so all teachers can participate. They meet in teams based on the grade levels and subject areas they teach. Each team has a leader with the school’s administrators and counselors rotating through the sessions.

“We’re not guessing at what we should be doing. It’s all defined by data.”

—PRINCIPAL EUGENE C. KERR

Each team discusses the curriculum and methodology. Then they agree on their goals and plan how to achieve them. The teams rely on benchmark tests that are aligned with curriculum and pacing guides which determine what teachers are supposed to teach and when. The district has provided training to teachers so they can make the best use of student data to inform their instruction, which is targeted for each student. The test results are compared with tests taken earlier. “We’re not guessing at what we should be doing,” Kerr emphasizes. “It’s all defined by data.”

Once a month, the principal meets with the Advisory Council, which is made of certificated lead teachers, the dean of discipline, counselors, and the principal’s secretary. They discuss a number of issues, including student progress and where help is needed.
The Professional Culture

What is exciting about La Merced’s team approach, Kerr says, is that Monday afternoons are spent with teachers conversing with each other, sharing strategies that have worked as well as approaches that have not worked so well, based on data.

“Everything is out in the open,” Kerr says. “In the old days, it used to be: ‘I’m doing great, but I’m not going to share with anybody because I want to be the shining star.’ That’s a cultural change we’ve been able to implement.”

The change was intentional and took effort. Kerr and his assistant principal met with teachers to encourage the team approach. In addition, the school benefited from having an English learner facilitator and a Title I facilitator provided by the district. The school also receives extra funds from the State’s Quality Education Investment Act (QEIA) that allows it to have smaller class sizes.

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—Principal Eugene C. Kerr

Today, Kerr says, the teachers at La Merced take personal pride in their common approach to teaching, and many put in extra hours each week to reach the agreed-upon benchmarks. “We have teachers who arrive really early to school and stay really late. Some-times I have to kick ‘em out, they’re here so long.”

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We can improve the quality of our schools if we have a common vision and a commitment to long-term change.

**Use data to construct early warning systems to target students who are at risk of dropping out.**

Warning signs such as infrequent attendance, behavior infractions and course failure is predictive of high school dropout as early as the start of middle school. State, district and school officials need to harness the power of data to construct early warning and intervention systems.

**Create a stronger professional learning culture in schools.**

Give teachers the resources they need to do a great job. Ensure that they have the time they need to work collaboratively to understand what works and what doesn’t. Incorporate leadership training for teachers and administrators and provide the necessary resources for professional development and support.

**Implement a better system to measure teacher and school leader effectiveness.**

Data shows that a truly effective teacher can have a critical impact on a student. Teachers and principals must have the tools they need to be their most effective. That includes regular evaluations, not just based on test scores but also reviews by other teachers and school leaders, as well as feedback from parents and students. And based on data, high performers should be rewarded and chronically low performers should be let go.
Hold school district leadership accountable for implementation.

Use public policy to advocate for increased funding tied to student performance outcomes.

Mobilize parents to get involved.

Work together to create a multi-sector and community based effort.

Create an annual district level report card to track the progress of school reform efforts, and provide ratings on key action items that impact student academic achievement.

Our state is currently ranked 44th in per-pupil funding and 50th in student-to-teacher ratios. Passing good school legislation and funding at the necessary levels, with appropriate accountability measures, is the only way that every one of our students will get the education they deserve.

Parents are the most important partner, ally and advocate that an educator can have. Data shows that an engaged parent is a critical predictor of a student’s academic success. Tools like The School Report Card provide the data to help parents understand how their school is doing, and what they can do to advocate for change in their school.

Commit to working together in cross-sector alliances with labor and business bringing solutions to the table. States and school districts that have made the most progress have built alliances that include governors, labor leaders, mayors, legislators, non-profits and community organizers and businesses. We can, and we must, now do the same in Los Angeles County.
Informing Parents About Academic Goals and Progress

The school relies on common pacing guides to not only help teachers coordinate with one another, but to also keep parents informed of their child’s progress, Kerr says. The Montebello School District has provided a software system that the administration and teachers use to ensure that parents receive schoolwide information, such as events and activities, by telephone.

But the phone system also serves another purpose, Kerr explains. “Teachers can specifically send messages to the homes of our students saying your son or daughter didn’t do their homework, or they’re struggling in this particular area, or can you give me a phone call so we can meet and discuss further?” The school uses district-provided software that makes student achievement data available to parents online. That way when students bring home their report cards, there are no surprises.

Through this ongoing interaction with parents, teachers build trust with the family. Kerr explained that they are aided in their efforts by counselors, who attend the team meetings and also interact with parents regularly.

Teachers and counselors together identify individual students who need additional help. Often, through these conversations, teachers discover that a student’s difficulty in other subject areas, such as math, is ultimately a literacy issue.

Interventions Based on Individual Student Needs

The school has redefined the counselor role in support of academic achievement, Kerr says. Discipline is handled by an administrator so that counselors can focus on supporting students and their families. Counselors are assigned a group of students that they stay with through their entire three years at La Merced. That way, counselors get to know their students and their families, and build on that relationship from year to year.

Teachers and counselors together identify individual students who need additional help. Often, through these conversations, teachers discover that a student’s difficulty in other subject areas such as math, is ultimately a literacy issue. For example, at a grade-level meeting, a math teacher might recognize that a student is struggling in math because of literacy issues and can then get other teachers involved. The staff discusses what kinds of strategies—including after-school tutoring, Saturday school, and other interventions—can be employed to help the student. These strategies may include math teachers modeling academic language and tailoring their instruction so it is comprehensible to students still struggling with academic English.

In a school with more than 20% of its students identified as English learners, language skills are often a focus. For these students, the school emphasizes oral language and transitioning from oral language to academic language—learning how to decode words.
Although La Merced also wants its students to be ready for the next big transition—to high school—the school does not put its focus there, Kerr says. Instead, it seeks to set students’ goals higher.

“In the 6th grade, high school is very seldom mentioned,” he says. “We talk about college. It’s assumed students will graduate from high school. We have college night for parents starting in the 6th grade. It’s almost like a pep rally.” Teachers put college banners in their classrooms, and former students now in college come back to talk to the middle schoolers. Kerr says the school also understands that some students may choose to attend a tech or trade school and not go to college. But students need to focus on higher-level skills either way, he says.

“If our students cannot read at grade level, it really slows us down,” Kerr says. In an effort to help teachers focus on student needs, core classes are organized in part based on students’ literacy levels.

## Transitions

The school also works to meet its students’ emotional needs by easing the transition from a smaller, more intimate elementary school to the much larger middle school. Elementary teachers fill out information sheets for each student giving their academic history. Teachers also share challenges that students may face, special needs they may have, and interests, such as drama or music. These sheets are used to inform teachers and counselors, and to recruit students for the middle school drama and music classes. Feeder elementary school teachers accompany their students on a visit to the school. During the visit, students learn the layout of the campus so they will feel confident on their first day of school. La Merced also hosts a 6th grade parents’ night prior to the first day of school so the parents are able to meet their child’s teachers.

“We talk about college. It’s assumed students will graduate from high school. We have college night for parents starting in the 6th grade. It’s almost like a pep rally.”

—PRINCIPAL EUGENE C. KERR

### Student Characteristics 2008–2009

#### ETHNICITIES
- Hispanic - 93%
- White - 5%
- African American - 1%
- Asian/Filipino - 1%

#### STUDENT LEARNERS
- Low-income Students - 77%
- English Learners - 21%
- Special Education - 9%

#### PARENT EDUCATION
- High School Graduates - 35%
- Not High School Graduates - 27%
- Some College - 28%
- College Graduate or Above - 11%
If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, then Los Amigos School in East Palmdale should feel flattered. In September 2011, the Palmdale Elementary School District plans to open a second school based on the same K–8 Spanish/English immersion model that has been so successful at Los Amigos. A former principal of Los Amigos is spearheading that effort.

That new school is likely to fill up quickly. Los Amigos has a waiting list, and its 897 students, who are mostly from Hispanic families, either walk or take one of 11 buses that service the school. And once there, they stay. Unlike many schools with a large percentage of low-income students, Los Amigos does not have problems with student transiency.

The Dual Immersion Program

The students are evenly split when they enter the school: half of them are English learners, and the other half are English-only speakers. The dual immersion program looks different depending on the grade level.

In grades K–3, students have a half-day in English and a half-day in Spanish. In grades 4–6, they alternate languages weekly. In grades 7–8, the language depends upon the course. Upper-grade students take language arts in both languages. But social studies and physical education are taught only in Spanish, while math and science are taught in English. Although students work in both languages, individual teachers instruct in only one language. This approach carries over to administrators.

“I speak to the students only in Spanish,” Principal Elena Esquer says. “My assistant principal speaks to them only in English.”

“We are a different kind of middle school in the sense that we don’t have traditional periods because we are a K–8,” Esquer says. At Los Amigos, all of the classrooms are next to each other, separated by a sliding door. “They go in between classrooms and the outside doors are also connected, so it’s very easy for them to switch classes,” she says. Students in the upper two grades have only two core teachers for each grade—one who teaches in Spanish and one who teaches in English. However, the two teachers break up the day into periods so students can experience that approach before high school. “But it’s a little bit different from having seven teachers,” Esquer notes.
Interventions During the Regular School Day

In addition, students who need extra help typically get that assistance during the school day instead of before and after school because so many of the students arrive and leave in buses. Each day, one period is set aside to re-teach material to flexible groupings of students who have similar needs. Based on data results, these intervention sessions are taught by the teachers who were the most successful in teaching the material initially. The school has also eliminated assemblies and other outside events so that the day is not interrupted, allowing more time for academic interventions.

Teachers also help struggling students during the lunch break. “We instituted a play-first, eat-lunch-second model for the whole school, and that kind of forces them to sit there and really try to do the work,” Esquer says. After students have had their playtime, teachers walk the struggling students to lunch. They eat their food and then come back to the classroom for a one-on-one tutoring session.

Each day, one period is set aside to re-teach material to flexible groupings of students who have similar needs.

Collaboration is Key

The different approach taken by Los Amigos requires that teachers work closely together. “Getting the right combinations of teaching partners has been huge,” Esquer says.

Why We Selected Los Amigos School

1. Los Amigos met its schoolwide and subgroup API growth targets for 2009.

2. Among the 144 schools serving low-income students that participated in Ed Source’s Gaining Ground study:
   - Los Amigos was in the top 20 for achievement on the 8th grade CST in English Language Arts, beyond what would be predicted by students’ prior test scores.
   - Scored far above average for 8th grade mean scale score on the English Language Arts CST.

To aid in this collaboration, 7th and 8th grade teachers meet together as a kind of middle school team. “They know they are all responsible for each other’s kids,” she says. “They know that it’s not just one group that has success, that everybody contributes to that success.”

“They know that they are all responsible for each other’s kids.”
—PRINCIPAL ELENA ESQUER

Los Amigos has to focus on language arts in both Spanish and English, and often standards are lacking in Spanish. This requires the Spanish teachers to see what the standard is in English and then apply it to Spanish. “A lot of the standards are very similar so they blend well together, but there are some that are very different,” Esquer explains. “For example, Spanish grammar is very different from English grammar.” Teachers from kindergarten through 8th grade work together to ensure that everyone is on the same page with the additional standards each grade is teaching in Spanish.

In order to stay aligned with more traditional schools, Los Amigos faculty have had conversations with teachers from other middle schools to determine the most essential academic content standards for their grades. This past year, the school’s faculty participated in lessons with other teachers to observe their approach to help refine their teaching.

The school also had a teacher participating in district meetings that helped define academic standards. Out of these meetings came pacing guides to let teachers know what they should be teaching and when.

Teachers Need to Keep Parents Informed

Esquer also expects teachers to keep parents informed of what is being taught in the classroom and their student’s progress. “Parents need to know when their kids are having some struggles with certain standards or just in general,” she says. Esquer also encourages parents to visit the classroom. Some English-speaking parents have only had Spanish in high school and maybe a year or so in college. After a while, they are unable to help their children with their homework. By coming to school and observing a class, they have a better understanding of what is going on, she says. “Our program is intense,” Esquer says. “Oftentimes it can be overwhelming to parents.” The teachers also share data with parents, and discuss what is expected of the 7th and 8th graders.

“Middle school is a very difficult age. They are just finding their way, learning about who they are, and it can be a very trying time. So I ask the teachers to also be cognizant of that as they’re looking at the data.”
—PRINCIPAL ELENA ESQUER

“Middle school is a very difficult age,” Esquer says. “They are just finding their way, learning about who they are, and it can be a very trying time. So I ask the teachers to also be cognizant of that as they’re looking at the data. If they know a student has a particular issue at home, then they need to be aware and be compassionate. But they also need to make sure that the student meets the standard. How can we bring them in, and what resources do we need to provide?”
Focusing on Data and the Future

Esquer also emphasizes using data to improve instruction. The data includes district benchmark tests as well as other classroom assessments. Because of the data system the school uses, the principal is able to see how often teachers access the data.

Teachers meet with all students to discuss their test scores, set goals, and talk about their future. Every time a student reaches a goal, the teacher and student together set a new one, keeping in mind a broader, overall objective.

“I’m asking them to really examine the data and look at the line items,” she says. “If a majority answered ‘a’ and the answer was ‘b,’ why did they do that? Let’s look at ‘a’ and see what it is about ‘a’ that made them all think that was the right answer, and how does that inform your teaching?” Esquer asks teachers to be reflective, and reach out to students who are struggling.

Teachers meet with all students to discuss their test scores, set goals, and talk about their future. Every time a student reaches a goal, the teacher and student together set a new one, keeping in mind a broader, overall objective. Teachers also talk with students about high school and college.

This year, to aid in this effort, Esquer is working with the principal of the high school located next door to ensure that Los Amigos’ students enter 9th grade well prepared. The high school principal is going to walk the Los Amigos campus with a couple of teachers and give them some feedback.

“Like many high-performing middle schools, Los Amigos also promotes the goal of postsecondary education. “We want them to think about college, about being the type of student who would be college bound, whether it’s Harvard, a junior college, or a trade school; whatever may be right for them,” she says.

But Los Amigos also has another goal for its students that is not so typical. “We want our students to leave here bilingual and bi-literate,” Esquer says. “That’s our mission.”
At View Park Preparatory, building relationships is key to the school’s success with its 6th, 7th and 8th graders. This small charter school in Los Angeles is part of the Inner City Education Foundation (ICEF) charter management organization and shares a campus with an ICEF high school.

Almost all of the students are African American, and more than half are from low-income families. They come from the neighborhood, and get into the school through a lottery.

“We know our kids, we know their families, I know my staff, I know what’s going on in their classrooms every single day,” says Principal Nikolas Howard. “We’re capable of doing that so effectively because we have only 342 students.”

Howard checks in biweekly with each of his 7th and 8th grade teachers. The assistant director meets one-on-one with the 6th grade staff. Altogether, 14 teachers work at View Park. In his meetings with each teacher, they “dive into the data,” and also discuss concerns and objectives. When conversations are tailored to one teacher, Howard has found, “they are much more genuine about trying to take the ideas that come out of our conversations and implement them in the classroom.”

“I think the reason it has been successful is that we included the teachers in the process of identifying those standards.”

—PRINCIPAL NIKOLAS HOWARD

Howard visits classrooms every day and makes sure to set up times to formally evaluate teachers while they are instructing. Altogether, he estimates, about 60% to 70% of his time is devoted to curriculum and instruction. Most of the rest of his time is spent on interactions with students and parents.

The Role of the Charter Management Organization

All ICEF middle schools have cadres focused on specific content, such as an English or math cadre. Together, the teachers from each subject worked to make sure that the teaching of the courses was consistent across all ICEF schools. The teachers identified what they wanted to focus on, using California Standards Test (CST) frameworks and the standards. “We all commonly planned from there, and then we created common assessments in every content area,” Howard says. Four times throughout the year, every content area in every grade level in the middle school takes a common assessment. The assessments are used to drive student interventions.

“I think the reason it has been successful is that we included the teachers in the process of identifying those standards.”
"We definitely teach our kids the standards, but we also teach beyond them as well, especially in terms of critical thinking and those types of skills."  
—PRINCIPAL NIKOLAS HOWARD

Howard also emphasizes that View Park teachers incorporate successful lesson plans they have developed. “We definitely teach our kids the standards, but we also teach beyond them as well, especially in terms of critical thinking and those types of skills. The content itself is not as important to us as their ability to read and write and think critically and show that.”

Beyond the cadre approach, ICEF also plays a crucial role in providing data programs to support the school staff. Data, such as test scores, are automatically loaded into the system in the summer. For example, when school starts Howard can say to his math teachers, “here are all the kids who are weak in fractions.” Another program allows staff to keep notes or ideas about specific students.

Why We Selected View Park Preparatory

1 View Park’s API has been above 800.

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<th>ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE INDEX</th>
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2 Among the 144 schools serving low-income students that participated in Ed Source’s Gaining Ground study:
- View Park was in the top 20 for 8th grade achievement, beyond what would be predicted by students’ prior test scores, on the General Math and Algebra 1 CSTs.
- It scored far above average for 8th grade mean scale scores on:
  > English Language Arts
  > General Mathematics
  > Algebra 1 CSTs

3 View Park increased its Statewide ranking and maintained its Similar Schools ranking between 2008-2009.

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Model Study Halls

Students’ academic achievement is carefully monitored. The school relies on study halls to keep students on track. Students have a study hall period every day, but it is very different from the stereotypical study hall.

When Howard first came to the school, he realized that study hall “was a missed opportunity to have an impact on kids because you’re spending an hour every day with them. It’s great if they can work and keep themselves on task, but what we didn’t know was how productive the kids are being in study hall.” Perhaps, he thought, study hall could be used to get students thinking about what it takes to be a good student and why that was important.

One of the primary goals of middle school is to develop good academic habits that will allow students to be successful in high school and college.

Howard began tracking kids’ productivity and setting goals. “Our school model for study hall has become that you’ve got to complete two assignments in 60 minutes.” Study hall teachers track student productivity with a spreadsheet. As students finish an assignment, they check it off.

One of the primary goals of middle school is to develop good academic habits that will allow students to be successful in high school and college.

The study hall teacher checks on student grades, whether homework assignments are completed, and whether they have written down their assignments and due dates in their student planners. They then have the students talk to their teachers about make-ups, or they contact parents to ensure that kids are doing their homework. The effect of these efforts, Howard says, is that “kids become more involved in how they are doing at school. They become the ones who are driving it.”

Focus on High School and College

Besides teaching key academic skills, teachers and administrators at View Park also talk about college all the time with the students.

Howard makes an effort to talk with students one-on-one about setting goals. He asks students what colleges they are considering. Then he asks them to go on that college’s website to find out what is the average GPA for acceptance. Then he has another conversation and says, “Let’s start shooting for that kind of a GPA right now. This is what that would mean.”

View Park uses a school information system that is web-based, so Howard carries his laptop into study halls,
When students are really struggling, View Park creates a student study team that involves an administrator and a member of the student's family. The team drafts a plan with objectives and steps toward those goals. After all, at View Park, it all boils down to relationships.

“What's nice, Howard says, is that he is not the only one doing that. Their study hall teachers also have access to that information.

Students also learn from their high school counterparts who are on the same campus. They talk to the older students about how hard high school is and what their homework load is like. Sharing a campus also makes it easier for students to accelerate in courses. For example, some middle school students are taking a geometry class in the high school.

**Determining Algebra Readiness**

In 2006–07, all 8th graders at View Park took Algebra I, except for those accelerated students ready for geometry. But, Howard says, it became apparent that some were not ready for Algebra I, and that their lack of success in the subject hurt their progress in math. Now the school determines which students are not ready based on a diagnostic test at the beginning of 8th grade and their 7th grade CST scores in math. The students who are not ready—about a quarter of 8th graders this year—review 7th grade pre-algebra skills and also begin Algebra I at a slower pace. The middle school then coordinates their placement in the charter high school.

**Differentiated, Data-driven Learning**

The school relies on a breakdown of data into specific math, English, or other subject skills to intervene with struggling students through a process called workshops.

View Park relies on common ICEF assessments and end-of-unit tests. “There is a constant stream of data on the kids coming in,” Howard says. Based on that data, the school holds workshops—typically during study hall period—that cater to smaller groups of 10 to 15 students who have common deficits in one standard. They usually last three to five weeks.
JOIN US as we work with educators, leaders from the public, private and non-profit sectors, parents and youth to improve our schools. Together we can create and implement the solutions that will improve the middle school experience for all students in Los Angeles County.
WHAT YOU CAN DO RIGHT NOW

Connect with Students

**Volunteer at one of United Way’s Leadership Matters middle schools.**

We can identify kids at risk of dropping out by middle school. It’s their last chance and they need your help. Get a group from your company together and make a commitment to spend a few hours each week volunteering with students.

**Organize a career day at your workplace or college day at your local college or university.**

All students should graduate from high school ready for college and a career. Help organize a tour of your workplace and create job shadowing or career guidance programs for middle school students from United Way’s Leadership Matters program. Or chaperone a tour of your local college or university. Use this important learning opportunity to coach students on the types of classes they need to take to be college and career-ready.

**Organize a school supply drive in a Leadership Matters Middle School.**

Our schools are now so under-funded that parents and teachers must supply their schools with critical school supplies. Organize a drive to package essential school supplies for one of our Leadership Matters middle schools.

**Provide on-site services to Leadership Matters Middle School students and their families.**

If your organization provides vital services such as medical or legal services, organize a group of colleagues to volunteer their time and expertise.

Help Reform our School System

**Meet with school district officials or other school board members.**

Your voice is critically important in the conversation about improving our schools. Join a United Way representative in a conversation with our local school board members about how we can work together to improve our schools.

**Join a Public School Choice Oversight Board.**

Make sure our Public School Choice schools are showing improvements and provide strategic guidance to those school leaders.

**Support an analysis of the California laws that affect teachers.**

Advocate for the development of data we need to determine which policies are outdated, ineffective or hamstring local leaders.

**Support greater transparency and better use of data to inform policy and practice.**

Push to make school and district data easy to understand and available to parents, educators and policy makers in a timely manner.

**Advocate for change across the region with our elected officials.**

Vote in your local elections for the people who can help us improve our schools and encourage your representative to push for the urgent change we need. Write letters to your state and federal representatives to increase funding for K-12 education. Invite your colleagues, friends and neighbors to do the same.

Log on to unitedwayla.org to find out how you can help.

GIVE. ADVOCATE. VOLUNTEER.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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PAGES 4 AND 5 SOURCES

L.A. County High School Graduation Rates
High school graduation rates were calculated using raw data from the California Dept. of Education. Calculations were made using a formula known as the cumulative promotion index. For more information on this methodology please see Who Graduates? Who Doesn’t? A Statistical Portrait of Public High School Graduation, Class of 2001 by the Urban Institute.

L.A. County Program Improvement Middle Schools
School Program Improvement data is from the California Dept. of Education for school year 2009. The poverty data is from a special tabulation by the American Community Survey, the U.S. Census Bureau for the year 2006.

8th Grade Algebra 1 CST Proficiency
8th Grade English Language Arts CST Proficiency
Percentage of Schools with API 650 and Under
Percentage of Schools with API 651 and Above
Raw data is from the California Dept. of Education.
Deloitte.

Bank of America

Enterprise

UPS

Wells Fargo

the James Irvine foundation

Farmers

Mattel

Target

LIVE UNITED To create pathways out of poverty