

Noralto Elementary School

Q&A with Brad Allen and Staff

Principal and Educators

"I heard wonderful things ... about this elementary school and I wanted to come here and just see it for myself and hear about their great success story, how well you are doing with your grades," said California's Governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger during a visit to Noralto Elementary School in Sacramento, California. Brad Allen, principal of Noralto, and the staff who have been part of the recent improvement of the school attribute the school's remarkable gains on the California Standards Test (CST) to staff development, re-teaching and enrichment and a commitment to helping their students achieve.

What are the key things that were implemented that you feel are responsible for your successes?

Brad Allen – Principal:

"Wednesday mornings are the staff's prep time – a lot of schools' teachers use that prep time as a free period, but our staff is really good about collaborating with each other and really utilizing and maximizing every free moment."

David Weichert – Grade 5:

"We're using the Galileo benchmarks and several years ago when we first started, we were PI1 (Program Improvement, year one). Back then I didn't have a good sense of where my students were, on what skill base they were, just on the basic district testing and then we started up with Galileo. The first year we used it for formatives and then benchmarks. Year after year in fifth grade we're spending more and more time not just giving the benchmarks, but we find the vital teaching tool is the review of the benchmark assessments. The *Detailed Item Analysis Report* tells you question by question, '37 percent of your class picked 'A' and the answer was 'D.' ' But it gives me a chance to come back to my class and say, 'What was the confusion?' And I help them in understanding their confusion. And that's my number one message, that year after year I've gotten more and more refined to where I can nail it pretty much on the head and start looking at the questions before I talk to the students and I'm starting to already predict, 'This is what they're going to tell me.'"

Just doing benchmarks alone, doing the test, filling in the bubbles, I don't feel is the majority of it. I think that post-teaching is 75 percent of our success."

Cathie Vail – Grade 5:

"With the benchmarks I find that it helps me to teach the students strategies to figure out where they're going with questions in connection with the benchmarks and then to use the strategies to take the CSTs and be able to use those strategies to help them and take the questions apart - 'What's important in the question? Why is 'A' right? Why is 'B' wrong?' Taking the next step using strategies to find out what the answers are."

David Weichert – Grade 5:

"I want to add to that because I work closely with Cathie and use some of the strategies that she uses. And one of them is that when there's a comprehension or a mathematical question, both she and I make our children underline the direct question. So find the question mark, back up and underline explicitly what it is being asked. And moreover, if the question says, 'What is the theme of this story when the grandmother enters the home?' I make my students circle the word 'theme' because that's one of the standards that we teach. Another strategy is when the answer is 'C,' the students write by choice 'A,' 'B,' and 'D' why each is incorrect."

Brad Allen – Principal:

"Piggybacking on what David and Cathie said, they both know where their kids are inside and out. What they've learned, what they need to learn, what they don't need to teach because they already have that skill down. But even knowing all of that, there is some incredibly great teaching going on and some very strong strategies in place. When I walk into rooms, I always see every single student on task and engaged. I see them doing tons of pair shares, lots of group work where the kids are speaking. Our school is predominantly second language speakers. The large population is minorities. It's really important that these kids are engaged and on task paying attention, especially second language learners.

We've also incorporated a lot of technology – we have smart boards, kids are using clickers so they can send their answers to teachers and have immediate feedback. There's a lot going on here."

Barbara Gebhart – Grade 2:

"I think what we're doing right is that teachers need to know what an essential standard is. And I think we have a good grasp of what standards we need to teach at our grade level. We pick one standard a week and we focus on it. As we're doing our regular material we can say, 'Look! Here's that standard.' For example, when we're reading we can point out, 'There's a multiple meaning word. That's an essential standard. Let's talk about what the different meanings are.' Or we're constantly going back to what synonyms and antonyms are, what cause and effect is, just as it pops up in our daily work. And I think knowing those essential standards has really helped us focus."

Kristina Mintzer – Grade 6:

"Training with West Ed allowed us to thoroughly analyze our grade-level standards. We were able to select the essential standards and prepare formatives that met the rigor of the California state test. Without this training, our scores would not have increased, and we would not be as effective in teaching the state standards."

Michelle Bird – Grade 6:

"The training [with WestEd] allowed for me to fully understand each standard and how it is being assessed. It helped make me a better teacher every single day."

How did you identify students needing additional instructional assistance and what are the implemented interventions?

Katie Roth – Student Learning Coach:

“What’s very interesting is that the teachers all know their essential standards for their grade levels and it’s very, very apparent. And it’s even apparent to the point that when you do interventions, which I do with students, that the students know the standards they are missing, or they know where they are lacking within their curriculum every day. So they can come in, like when I did an intervention yesterday, those children knew why they were there, what they were missing and they were able to give me a lot of these strategies that were taught in the classroom - which was very impressive. And I think it comes down to teachers knowing the standards like the backs of their hands so they are able to convey that to the students.”

Barbara Gebhart – Grade 2:

“The standards are written in kid friendly terms. And the kids know the standards because we keep going over the kid friendly terms so they can repeat the standard back to us.”

Brad Allen – Principal:

“One of the things we use heavily is the Cycle of Inquiry process. As you can imagine, for a school to be successful you have to break down the walls. We are very, very transparent with data walls in our staff lounge that teachers have taken to the student level and even have them in their rooms. There isn’t a teacher on this site who can’t tell you what’s going on in another teacher’s classroom. Within our data walls we can look at our subgroups and make sure that all of our subgroups are achieving and going where they need to be. We can see what students are struggling. If we have identified students who are basic or below, we have an intervention in place and anyone on staff can look at the data charts that are in our lounge and see what’s in place for those students. So the transparency is huge.

And we just implemented this when we came back from break. We have a half an hour during the day when grades two through six are doing what we call WIN time, What I Need, and that’s where they’re teaching their formatives based on a particular standard. What we recently incorporated is, we realized that some kids don’t always understand even with the re-teaching and we now have what we call ‘WIN-WIN’ where we keep them after school for half an hour to work on that particular standard. We’re very fortunate that this is not a ‘bussing school’ the majority of our kids walk here. We send a letter home telling the parent that their child will be staying after school on these days, working on this standard, for this amount of time.”

What is the plan for elevating the achievement of students who are already sufficient or excelling? What kinds of enrichment opportunities are there for these students?

Lindsay Barber – Grade 3:

“The *Class Development Grid* that we’re using after scanning our benchmarks – looking at the benchmark results as of this year from Benchmark 1 to 2 and seeing the progress, I am able to highlight and see all of my kids who are proficient or advanced and know that I don’t need to focus on them for specific standards, but there are holes. Some of the students who are advanced or proficient aren’t quite understanding, for example, the standard of main idea, and that’s how I can gear my focus groups for workshop time. And know that they aren’t being

successful on the benchmark, now I can make my groups specifically toward main idea or whatever standard they missed on the benchmark.”

David Weichert – Grade 5:

“We give our formatives on our standards – we teach a standard for a week and then we give the formative that Friday. We separate our students and we have the remedial that need extra teaching. We also have the group that are advanced and we put them in an enrichment group where sometimes we focus on coming standards, we focus on integrating two or three standards, not just learning what a lesson, theme or moral is, but learning to write them yourself. That’s where we get some of our enrichment time for those who passed the formative.”

Brad Allen – Principal:

“Everything is a work in progress. One of things that we got this year is a library/media technology staff member and what we’re able to do is identify students who have the standard, working with this technology person, we’re able to do some project-based learning as well.”

Any additional thoughts?

Brad Allen – Principal:

“I want to reiterate that these teachers are knowledgeable and they have the skills to do what needs to be done. They’re true professionals. They go above and beyond and in order for our school to be successful. You have to have the majority of your staff willing and wanting your school to be successful and truly caring about it. It’s very important for our students, parents and community to know that we care.”