



Case Study

Piedmont High School

Raising Rigor and Expectations

SREB

High Schools
That Work



The Setting

Piedmont High School (PHS) is a high-achieving school with a 2015 graduation rate of 99 percent. The students have typically scored well on the ACT, Oklahoma state-mandated exams (End of Instruction, EOI) and Advanced Placement (AP) exams — all commendable accomplishments. But administrators and staff realized there were still areas needing improvement, and they put in place building blocks to foster a culture of continuous improvement to ensure every student has the opportunity to succeed.

PHS is a comprehensive high school in Piedmont, a suburban bedroom community on the west side of Oklahoma City. In the 2015-16 school year, it served 936 students in grades nine through 12. Its student population is 70 percent white, 14 percent Native American, 7 percent Hispanic, 5 percent black and 4 percent Asian. The average household income is nearly \$92,300, and about 20 percent of the student body is eligible for free- or reduced-price lunches.

Piedmont Public Schools is a fast-growing school district, and challenges resulting from increased student enrollment (from 532 students in 2007 to 936 in 2016) highlighted a need for PHS to change. With more staff being added each year, administrators wanted to find a way to keep the school small in its approach to educating its students.

To maintain a nurturing small-school atmosphere, the staff worked to: create a strong advisory program to enhance the counseling department; improve expectations and rigor in the classroom; create schoolwide programs where the entire staff or individual departments maintained a single focus; and enrich professional development for teachers.

Getting Started in the HSTW Network

Piedmont High School turned to High Schools That Work (HSTW) as its model to guide reform efforts and joined the HSTW network in the 2007-08 school year. The staff spent the first year becoming familiar with the HSTW Key Practices (See Appendix A.) to determine how they would benefit Piedmont's improvement effort.

In 2008, HSTW sent a team to conduct a Technical Assistance Visit (TAV) at PHS. The purpose was to help school leaders and teachers take stock of where they are and where they want to go in school improvement. The TAV is not evaluative; rather it represents efforts by the visiting team and the school to improve student learning.

Every two years teachers and students also participated in a HSTW-administered assessment and survey that compares the achievement of students to the school's practices. The TAV, Key Practices and the HSTW assessment and survey provided the basis for establishing many reform efforts at PHS.

Key Findings

The TAV report found: Many teachers did not address multiple learning styles; textbooks and worksheets were the primary sources of instruction; staff meetings provided a district focus and did not target needed improvements or actions; some classes did not require bell-to-bell participation; and faculty members were not in the habit of collecting and organizing data to evaluate school improvement. It was apparent after the TAV that teachers could benefit from effective professional development.

Even before the TAV, the staff, based on their own experiences and data collection, pinpointed challenges in need of immediate improvement and utilized the HSTW Key Practices as a guide to help implement reform in the school. Those immediate areas were:

- Improving the guidance program
- Establishing higher expectations
- Creating a system of extra help
- Creating a culture of continuous improvement
- Enhancing professional development

Taking on the Challenges

Improving Guidance

Before becoming a HSTW site, the counseling office was made up of one full-time and one part-time counselor. Due to an increase in the student enrollment, a second full-time counselor was added and teachers and leaders felt it was imperative to establish an advisory program. Piedmont's advisory program is named "Preparing All Wildcats for Success" (PAWS). Each teacher advises a PAWS group comprising 15 students.

Counselors consider the PAWS advisory groups invaluable to the counseling staff at Piedmont. "It's our best communication tool to disseminate necessary information to our students," counselor **Marcy Eldridge** said.

"Students establish a connection with one teacher with whom they will maintain a relationship with throughout high school."

— Cathy Earnest, Counselor

During the summer, the school's administrators, counselors and a few teachers meet to organize the advisory program for the school year. The school schedules nine PAWS meetings each school year, determined by the informational needs of each grade level.

The primary goal of the PAWS meeting is to act as an extension of the counseling office and for teachers to provide students with information regarding such things as college and careers, the ACT, high school graduation requirements and college entrance requirements. The meetings also solicit

guest speakers to address such topics as financial literacy or character building.

The PAWS meetings culminate with teachers mentoring students about course choices and the following year's enrollment. At the end of the enrollment meetings, a joint meeting of individual students, their parents and their PAWS teacher takes place to review students' course choices. **Each year approximately 93 percent of the parents attend the meeting with their children.**

Sample Agenda for PAWS Meeting

Below is a sample agenda developed by the curriculum committee for two of the nine meetings. The agendas are passed on to teachers.

PAWS #1 - September

Ninth Grade:

Ways to get involved; What is PAWS?

10th Grade:

PSAT and ACT information; transcript and credit check; clubs/organizations; rules/policy review

11th Grade:

PSAT and ACT information; ACT information; transcript and credit check; rules/policy review

12th Grade:

Senior information calendar; ACT information; military information; transcript and credit check; letters of recommendation forms

PAWS #4 - November

Ninth Grade:

Oklahoma Promise (fliers); National Honor Society requirements; ACT; college requirements; absenteeism policy; and clubs/organizations

10th Grade:

'Do you have a Plan for College' pamphlet; high school requirements; ACT; money/scholarship; and semester test exemption rule

11th Grade:

Colleges/universities; and semester test exemption rule

12th Grade:

Scholarships; FAFSA, student loans; college enrollment book; and semester test exemption rule

High Expectations

Enhancing the AP Course Offerings

After reviewing the TAV report in 2008, PHS administrators and staff zeroed in on data that compared their school to other HSTW sites and realized PHS course offerings were average at best, especially at the AP and pre-AP levels. PHS immediately began to survey students to gauge their interest in upper-level courses not offered. The survey revealed students wanted AP courses in fine arts and world history and increased offerings in science and math.

In 2008, the school only offered four pre-AP courses and 13 AP courses; in the 2015-16 school year, 11 pre-AP and 17 AP courses were offered. One of the biggest changes in 2015 was the shift of AP World History from a senior-level only course to the first sophomore-level AP course. This led to an increase in course enrollment numbers from 11 to 76 in one year.

PHS AP Courses Offered 2015-16 School Year

U.S. History	World History
Biology	Physics 1
Chemistry	Physics 2
English Language	Physics C
English Literature	Statistics
Calculus AB	Psychology
Physics B	Music Theory
Spanish Language	French

Science Curriculum Upgrades

One problem revealed by the HSTW survey data concerned the alignment and course offerings in science. Although 100 percent of the students who participated in the 2008 survey completed the HSTW recommended science curriculum (three years of science courses), only 70 percent of the seniors indicated they were taking a fourth year science course. The data proved invaluable and highlighted a weakness in the science department which was quickly rectified.

The science department discovered the biggest reason seniors were not taking a fourth year of science was PHS primarily offered AP science to seniors and the majority did not want to enroll in AP.

The following school year, new course offerings were added for seniors such as a forensic, meteorology and environmental science course; the number of seniors enrolled in science increased immediately. (See Table 1.)

Table 1

Percentage of PHS Seniors Enrolled in Science	2008	2014
Students who enrolled in a science course their senior year	70%	83%

Zero Policy and Extra Help

While improving curricula and raising rigor and expectations are vital to a school's success, low-performing students cannot be left behind. They, too, need to be a focal point in reform efforts. Although the dropout and failure rates are not high, the school wanted to continue to be proactive to keep these statistics low. To help reduce the school's failure rate, the staff implemented a schoolwide zero policy and tutoring initiative.

PHS' core focus is to ensure students complete assignments. Under PHS' zero policy, when students fail to turn in an assignment on time, two things happen. First, the teacher puts a "1" in the gradebook. This raises a red flag and signals to the parents and students that the assignment was not turned in on the due date. When a "1" is entered into the spot for a grade, it shows students almost exactly how that assignment will affect their grade if a zero is ultimately entered due to a failure to turn in the assignment.

Second, when students don't turn in assignment on time, their teachers will assign them to Academic Engagement (AE). Teachers also give students a VISA (Very Important Student Appointment). This VISA allows students to go to the front of the lunch line, get their lunches more quickly, and go to the classroom that offers tutoring during that lunch period. This helps to ensure that once students complete assignments, teachers will be able to change the "1" to the credit earned. Students have until the end of each unit to complete assignments in AE for full credit, and if they do not complete the assignment that "1" turns into a zero. There's been a decrease in student failure rates as a result of AE's implementation. (See Table 2.)

Creating a Culture of Continuous Improvement

Professional Development for Teachers

Creating a cultural of continuous improvement demands that schools use student assessment and program evaluation data to continuously improve the school culture, curriculum and instruction and to advance learning. Not only does HSTW provide avenues for data collection, it provides numerous professional development opportunities at both the annual HSTW Staff Development Conference and state conferences led by the Oklahoma state director for HSTW.

Table 2: Percentage of PHS Students Failing Courses

2007	
Course	Failing
Algebra I	8%
Algebra II	14
English II	3
English III	9
2015	
Algebra I	2%
Algebra II	3
English II	0.74
English III	0.4

After PHS became a HSTW site in 2008, sending teachers to the HSTW Annual Staff Development Conference each July became a top priority. The conference is one of the most comprehensive school improvement events in the nation with presentations, panel discussions, workshops and best practices featuring K-12 practitioners from core academics, CTE, counseling, school leadership and elective courses.

Many PHS teachers tout the benefits of the conference saying the information received has made a huge difference in their teaching styles and integrating higher expectations. The school has worked to rotate teachers who go to the conference, enabling more than 30 different staff members to attend in the last nine years.

The school district has also established early release days for all teachers in the district. This allows for more professional development opportunities and teacher collaboration.

Focus Groups Driving Change

As part of its visit in 2008, the TAV team pointed out that the school had only a select group of teachers with a voice in the school's leadership or decision making, and it recommended establishing focus groups to give more teachers active input. Realizing that teachers, as a result of a collective endeavor, can raise student performance, PHS used teacher focus groups to drive change.

Every teacher is assigned to a focus group based upon his or her strengths and interests, but it's the school administrators, with input from teachers, who set the agenda and focus group topics. Each focus group works to develop new ideas and review and enhance policies or procedures. Groups meet at least once during the school year, but most concerns are handled via emails.

The focus groups have proved to be very instrumental in putting in place many programs and initiatives over the years to advance student achievement. These include: the 2,500 Pages Reading Program, Love of Literacy Month, Diploma Plus, Cross Curriculum Project and Curriculum Guides.

Literacy Improvements

The 2008 TAV team asked parents and students: "How many books are assigned for students to read outside of English class?" The answer was "zero," disappointing and alarming to staff. Another alarming statistic was that the ACT reading subscore from the previous year was below average.



Clay McDonald

After reviewing the TAV report, "it was obvious that we needed to focus more on literacy in our school outside of the English classes. We needed to spring into action and to develop ideas to increase our focus on literacy immediately," said assistant principal **Clay McDonald**. The school formed several focus groups that spent a year deciding how to implement more literacy instruction in the classrooms.

2,500 Pages Reading Program

This program was designed specifically to get more reading into content areas outside of English classes. All students are expected to read approximately 2,500 pages per school year throughout the seven courses in which they are enrolled. Approximately 1,500 of those pages will be read in English classes alone.

"We needed to focus more on literacy in our school outside of the English classes."

— Clay McDonald, Assistant Principal

Before instituting the program, the focus groups discussed what the reading goal should be and pondered a few options: 1) reading to improve students' knowledge base; 2) reading for fun and to increase students' knowledge base; 3) increasing rigor in the classroom and ensuring students are reading to grade level; or 4) giving more textbook reading assignments. The focus groups decided on option 2 — reading for fun and to increase students' knowledge base.

The next phase was how to implement the program. PHS began by purchasing a novel for each math course, then doing the same for other subject areas. Over several years the school has purchased novels for 80 percent of the courses offered. Teachers are required to assign the novels for reading and assessment at some point during the school year. Students now will read at least a novel or a separate reading assignment in most of their courses.

Love of Literacy Month

Because the literacy focus group wanted time during each school year dedicated solely to literacy, February was designated as Love of Literacy (LOL) month. Reading, writing and speaking are emphasized using such themes as Dr. Seuss, black history and Oklahoma history.

The focus group also brainstorms activities students can do for each day of the month based on the literacy focus and the theme. Throughout LOL month students do more literary lessons provided by teachers, experience focused reading time or create thematic hall or door decorations, to name a few. One of the more popular activities involves the seniors visiting elementary classrooms and reading to students.

Diploma Plus

Another initiative stemming from a focus group, which was extrapolated from the 2008 TAV report was Diploma Plus — a way for the school to recognize student's who did more than meet the requirements for a standard high school diploma. The focus group identified 25 categories that require students to make extra effort during his or her high school career.

For example, some of the initial 25 areas include: serving as the captain of a team, becoming a drum major, serving as an officer in a club, scoring 25 or higher on the ACT, having two years of success in a CTE program and having a 98 percent attendance rate over four years. The categories are modified approximately every five years.

Students must achieve success in five of the 25 categories during their four-year high school stint to obtain Diploma Plus status. They are then recognized with a certificate at the end of their senior year at the annual awards banquet; about 25 percent of the graduating class obtains a "Diploma Plus" annually.

Cross Curriculum Project

The TAV report also pointed out PHS did not have programs that enabled teachers to work as interdisciplinary teams on cross curriculum projects. Faculty members formed a focus group to establish a cross curriculum project for freshmen core classes.

The group determined the project would center on the Oklahoma City Bombing — an important piece of local and national history. Each quarter, teachers in a subject area give a lesson on the main topic. "The ninth-grade project is a way that we can integrate what we teach in biology with the history of the Oklahoma bombing," said **Zac Selph**, a biology teacher. It gives them a real-world experience and shows how one topic can be taught in several different subject areas, he added.



Curriculum Guides

Effective schools should share closely linked standards, curricula, instruction and assessments and should do this across and within grade levels and subjects. But the growth of PHS created challenges with curriculum and curriculum alignment, both horizontal and vertical.

As student enrollment climbed, the staff increased as well. As a smaller school, there was only one teacher teaching one subject, but as enrollment increased, more teachers were assigned to teach the same subject. For example, 10 years ago there was one Biology I teacher, and now there are three.

It became imperative that staff work to maintain a strong horizontal alignment within each subject. The school developed a curriculum book for each department, which is now in a working Google Doc. Each department has created a guide that strengthens the horizontal alignment as well as keeps a focus on the vertical alignment.

The guide for each subject includes a syllabus, pacing guide, grading scale, quarter exams, semester exams, state mandated exam reviews, vertical alignment and state mandated objectives. Guides could also include reading assignments, projects or labs.

These guides have helped staff centralize the curriculum specifically for their subject areas and departments. They are updated each year and are working documents for the staff. Each summer when new staff members are hired, the departments give them an updated guide to help them jump-start their year and be on the same page as others in their department.

Beyond Academics: Other Reforms

Curriculum, exam scores and increasing expectations are all important to student achievement, but some areas of school improvement are simply needed to create a better atmosphere or make working and learning more efficient and productive. Ten years ago the PHS staff completed school climate surveys. The administration acted on teacher input, which ranged from improvements in technology to community involvement.

Technology

For the past decade, the Piedmont Public School District has made it a point to put students and teachers on the cutting edge of education technology.

- Every classroom at PHS is equipped with a Smart Board and MacBook Air for teachers to use with their lessons.
- There are two computer labs outfitted with Dell computers, which provide an opportunity for students to become proficient with the Microsoft Office suite, including Word, Excel and PowerPoint. Another computer lab is equipped with Macintosh computers for students to use with graphic design, Web design and yearbook courses.
- PHS is a 1:1 school, and each student is issued a Google Chromebook and has access to Google apps and educational content. This helps students with assignments and projects and ensures they have every available tool at their fingertips.

It is possible a student will graduate from PHS proficient on three different devices as well as two of the most popular software systems used in their postsecondary careers. Many professional development days are devoted to teacher and student technology development.

“The Google platform allows me to track student progress on assignments in real time. With the ability to provide instant feedback, students are becoming more efficient in their research.”

— Erik Ford, Social Studies Teacher

According to assistant principal **Brent Antwine**, for teachers, preparation and collaboration are the biggest advantages to using the MacBook. “They can take their MacBooks home with them at night to prepare, grade, etc., and they can use them to collaborate with other teachers in one setting.”



Awards and Recognition

PHS has always rewarded students, but initially the annual awards program only recognized students receiving college scholarships. While this was important, the school was missing a perfect opportunity to recognize other students in the presence of their peers and parents.

The school increased the number of awards recipients by adding awards in individual departments, for ACT scores, state honors and athletic achievements. Since that change the number of students recognized at the awards program has increased significantly. (See Table 3.)

Table 3: Number of PHS Students Recognized at Awards Program

2005	37
2008	146
2015	162

Community Involvement

Piedmont High School’s most time-honored event is the annual charity fundraiser called DUCK (Doing Unselfish Charities for Kids) Week. It is an amazing event that includes every student at the high school. They lead the entire school system and community in a weeklong series of fundraising events, raising money through sports tournaments, talent shows and more.

“They show compassion and teach others to give to those who are less fortunate by sacrificing a bit of themselves for the sake of others,” said **Alissa Antwine**, the student council sponsor.

In 2013, the school invited Jase Robertson from the TV show “Duck Dynasty” to lend support. He gave an inspiring speech to a crowd of over 3,000 and helped raise enough money to help five families in financial need. In the last few years PHS set a goal of raising \$100,000 in one week in the small community.

Over the years, the annual DUCK fundraiser has grown to include middle grades and elementary students. During the 12 years of hosting this event, PHS has raised over \$1 million for local families in financial need due to health issues.

Results That Show Change

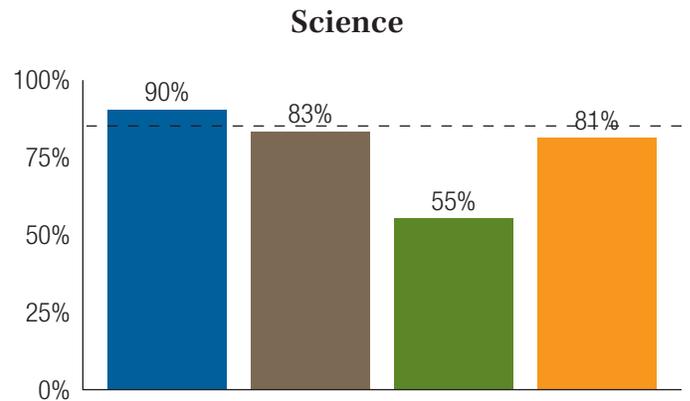
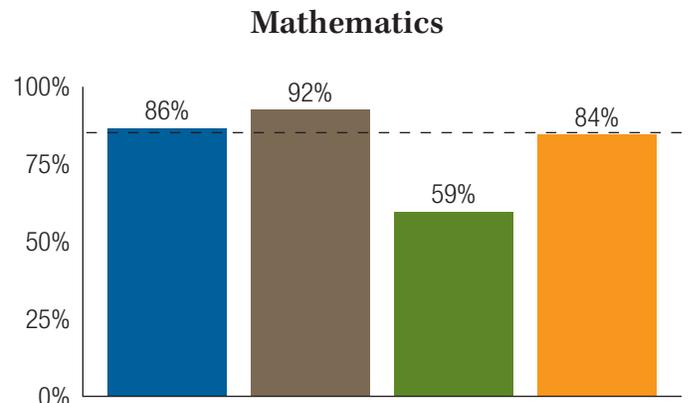
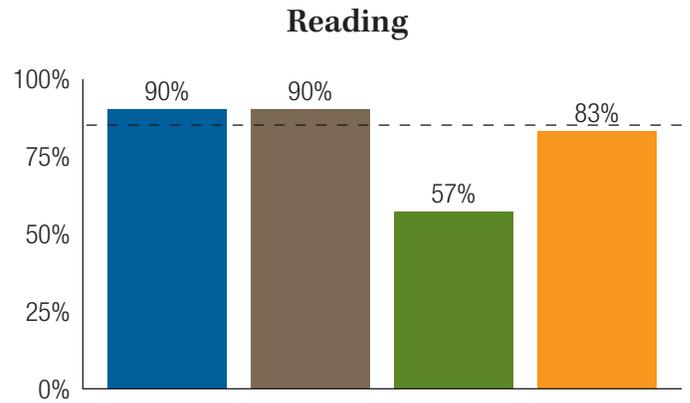
Redesign and improvement efforts at Piedmont High School have paid off in many ways. Oklahoma utilizes an A-F report card to rate its public schools. For high schools, the grade is based upon student performance on the EOIs, graduation rates, dropout rates, and growth of students from one year to the next (based on reading and math scores). Since this rating system has been in existence, **PHS has received an A- or A each year, which ranks it among the best high schools in Oklahoma.**

On the most recent HSTW Assessment, PHS students met the HSTW readiness goals in reading, math and science and enjoyed higher percentages than most other schools in the HSTW network. In 2014, 90 percent of PHS students met readiness goals in reading; 86 percent in math and 90 percent in science. Students who meet these goals are likely prepared for postsecondary studies and careers. (See Figure 1.)

PHS has put in place a number of initiatives and reform measures over the years by utilizing the HSTW Key Practices, adopting recommendations from the TAV report and staying true to an atmosphere of continuous improvement. (See Table 4.)

Table 4	
Before HSTW	After HSTW
Lack of professional development	Over 30 teachers and administrators have attended the Annual HSTW Staff Development Conference.
Decisions made by a select few staff members	Focus groups established where each teacher is a member to give a better voice and drive change in school decisions.
Need for increased college preparatory courses	Courses added include AP and Pre-AP, ACT prep and senior-level science.
Lack of a program for teachers working together	Ninth-grade cross curricula project between all four core subject areas and 2,500 pages reading program implemented.
Ineffective extra help for students	Schoolwide academic engagement tutoring program was organized, and a zero policy put in place.
Limited guidance program where students meet with a mentor	PAWS program was established with several meetings per year.
Limited technology resources for students and staff	Chromebooks are provided to each student; MacBooks to each teacher; and Smart Boards placed in each classroom.
Recognitions for students at a minimum	Close to 150+ students are publically recognized each year.

Figure 1: Percentage of Students Meeting HSTW Readiness Goals



Source: 2014 HSTW Assessment Data for Piedmont High School

Lessons Learned

Being a high-performing school has served PHS and its students well. The graduation rate is high; the dropout rate is low, but all schools are in need of constant retooling if they are to truly prepare students for the next chapter of life, whether it's college or careers. HSTW is a strong advocate of using data as a starting point for improvement.

Before becoming a HSTW site, data were not used for its intended purpose. As the school began to review existing data, create surveys to develop more data, and review results, the staff began to understand the challenges the school needed to address and began to use the data to stimulate reform efforts.

Data put a spotlight on the school's strengths and weaknesses and served as an eye-opener for needed reforms.

Remaining Challenges

Improve ACT Scores

Beginning in 2016, all juniors in Oklahoma will be administered the ACT at no charge. While this is a great initiative by the Oklahoma State Department of Education, it will provide a new set of challenges for staff and students. PHS has traditionally had ACT scores above average; however, faculty and administration were not satisfied and wanted more competitive scores. (See Table 5.)

Table 5	
ACT Composite Results: PHS	
2007	2015
20.7	21.7

The school plans to take the following steps to improve ACT scores:

- Provide professional development to staff to increase their ACT awareness and knowledge.
- Seek help from outside presenters on ways to increase ACT scores for students.
- Enhance the ACT prep focus group.
- Provide practice ACT exams to students.
- Increase the students' ACT knowledge with ACT days and in PAWS meetings.



Improve College and Career Programs

For decades, secondary education focused on preparing students for college. But nationwide, the goal for America's education system has changed. There's a big push to prepare students for a dual purpose — college and a career. PHS has made many strides in the classroom in increasing the rigor of its academics, now it is striving to improve programs that will help students improve their readiness for college and careers:

- Give ninth and 10th-graders more opportunities to visit college campuses.
- Give 11th-graders more opportunities to attend junior college days.
- Have the staff visit the CTE program that students will feed into.
- Have 10th-graders visit the CTE center.
- Work with CTE center to increase course offerings for 10th-graders.
- Increase the course offerings for concurrent courses.
- Allow 11th-graders to take concurrent courses.
- Build and establish a college and career center on the school campus.
- Increase military recruitment visits for students.

Becoming More Google Apps Savvy

While the Google platform and apps are not difficult to learn, learning to utilize the programs in a classroom is a challenge for most teachers sorting out the programs themselves. The school plans to take the following steps to improve teachers' and students' knowledge in Google apps:

- Increase enrollment in Google apps courses.
- Focus professional development (PD) opportunities on training in Google Apps for Educators.
- Find outside sources to provide PD for teachers.
- Encourage teachers to attend sessions about Google at the Annual HSTW Staff Development Conference.

PHS Didn't Do It Alone: Policy and Support

PHS cites several policies and support systems — HSTW, district and state — that have assisted the school in advancing its culture of continuous improvement.

HSTW Support

- Technical Assistance Visit
- Professional development
- State data conferences
- Publications
- HSTW assessment data
- Ten Key Practices
- Assistance from state coordinator
- Collaboration with other HSTW sites

District Support

- Early release days for professional development
- Funds for school initiatives
- Support for all HSTW initiatives
- Mandates that student graduate with more credits than state requires

State Support

- Professional development workshops
- Free tuition for seniors who take college courses
- Free college tuition for students whose parents earn less than \$50,000 annually
- Strong funding for students in CTE programs
- Strong support for HSTW program in the state

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Appendix A

High Schools That Work Key Practices

HSTW has identified a set of Key Practices that impact student achievement. Following are the HSTW Key Practices that provide direction and meaning to comprehensive school improvement and student learning.

High expectations — Motivate more students to meet high expectations by integrating high expectations into classroom practices and giving students frequent feedback.

Program of study — Require each student to complete an upgraded academic core and a concentration.

Academic studies — Teach more students the essential concepts of the college-preparatory curriculum by encouraging them to apply academic content and skills to real-world problems and projects.

Career and technical education (CTE) studies — Provide more students access to intellectually challenging CTE studies in high-demand fields that emphasize the higher-level mathematics, science, literacy and problem-solving skills needed in the workplace and in further education.

Work-based learning — Enable students and their parents to choose from programs that integrate challenging high school studies and work-based learning and are planned by educators, employers and students.

Teachers working together — Provide teams of teachers from several disciplines the time and support to work together to help students succeed in challenging academic and CTE studies. Integrate reading, writing and speaking as strategies for learning into all parts of the curriculum, and integrate mathematics into science and CTE classrooms.

Students actively engaged — Engage students in academic and CTE classrooms in rigorous and challenging proficient-level assignments using research-based instructional strategies and technology.

Guidance — Involve students and their parents in a guidance and advisement system that develops positive relationships and ensures completion of an accelerated program of study with an academic or CTE concentration. Provide each student with the same mentor throughout high school to assist with setting goals, selecting courses, reviewing the student's progress and suggesting appropriate interventions as necessary.

Extra help — Provide a structured system of extra help to assist students in completing accelerated programs of study with high-level academic and technical content.

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