

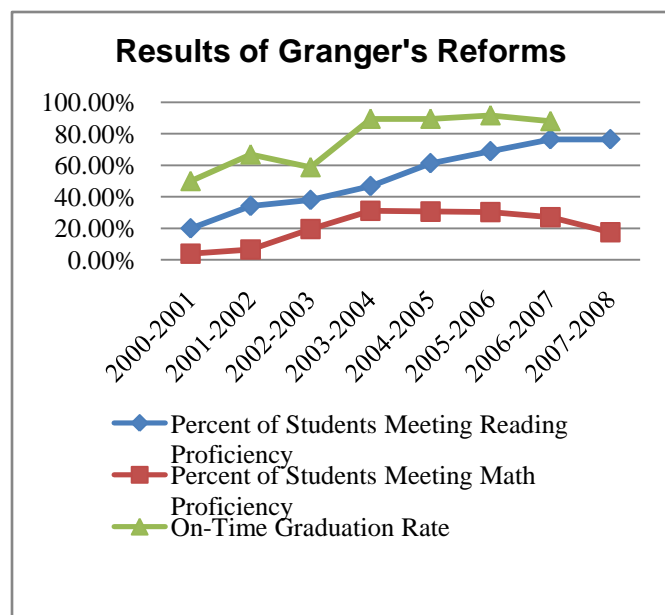
Sustaining Whole School Reform Efforts: A Profile of Granger High School

By Stephanie Shipton

Research has shown that strong leadership support for whole school reform is critical to the successful turnaround of low-performing schools.¹ Yet there is little discussion of how to successfully maintain changes in teaching, learning, and student outcomes when there is a changeover in school leadership. This profile highlights the efforts of Granger High School to sustain and build upon reform efforts throughout such a leadership transition.

Granger High School, located in Granger, Washington, is home to 388 students, nearly all of whom are from low-income minority families.² The school also serves a significant migrant population, and has had a history of poor performance and outcomes. In 2001, before reform efforts were set in motion, Granger had a deeply entrenched culture of low expectations, as was reflected in a graduation rate of 50 percent and dismal student performance on state assessments.³ Today, Granger boasts a graduation rate of 88 percent and strong student performance on state assessments.⁴

In 2001, Richard Esparza, the principal of Granger High School, embarked on a set of comprehensive school reforms aimed at creating a culture of personalization and high expectations. Facing dismal student achievement scores and an entrenched culture of low expectations, Esparza was able to successfully set his reforms in motion and transform the school culture to one of high expectations for all students before his retirement in 2007. Armed with promising results from Esparza's tenure, Assistant Principal Paul Chartrand took the reins as the school's new leader, and not only sustained Esparza's earlier reform efforts but made necessary midcourse corrections. What follows is a discussion of the efforts undertaken by both principals to build and sustain reform efforts at Granger High School over the course of nearly a decade and including a transition in power that occurred during a critical juncture of the reform implementation.



Source: Washington Department of Education, School Report Card, <http://reportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us/summary.aspx?groupLevel=District&schoolId=3245&reportLevel=School&orgLinkId=3245&yrs=2000-01&year=2000-01> (last accessed May 19, 2009).

Turning Around Granger High School

Principal Richard Esparza took the reins of Granger High School in 2001 and set out to ensure that Granger's students were given every opportunity to succeed. The idea—to encourage *all* students to believe that they are capable—flew in the face of the culture of the school, which had always held the attitude that Granger's hard-to-reach children were incapable of learning.

Esparza began with an attack on the gang atmosphere that pervaded the student population. In conjunction with a citywide anticrime movement, all graffiti was removed from the school within a twenty-four-hour period, and bandanas and baggy clothing were banned. A caseworker was brought in to work with students and their families on parenting and environmental factors that could negatively impact the students' success.

Esparza's next step was to reach out to the community to build parent and adult engagement in the school. Adults from the school visited each student's home, bringing voter-registration cards and a welcome brochure with the hope of encouraging parents to become more involved with the school community and their children's learning.

Esparza then set to work changing the organization of the school. Every professional staff member, including Esparza himself, was assigned to an advisory class of eighteen to twenty students; these groups met for thirty minutes a day, four days a week. The class provided a much-needed connection for students to a consistent, caring adult in the school and offered them an opportunity to receive extra help in math, reading, homework, and portfolio development. During each advisory class, the advisor teacher was responsible for checking in on the status of each student's work and acting as a liaison between students, teachers, parents, and the school administration. Every semester, students independently presented and led a conference with their advisor teacher and parents to review their work and progress in school, thereby helping to encourage student pride and engagement in learning. In 2008, 100 percent of students' families participated in the conferences, up from just 20 percent in the program's first year.⁵

Other improvement measures included holding students accountable for time missed due to unexcused absences through a "time owed" program, in which students had to make up missed absences in order to receive their report cards. Additionally, senior skip days were replaced with "senior appreciation days," which gave students the option of taking field trips around Washington.

Esparza combined the reforms aimed at changing Granger's school culture with increased academic supports and programs, with a primary focus on increasing student literacy skills. The Second Shot Reading program placed students in small classes with a teacher or paraprofessional to work on writing and reading skills, using "high motivation" stories to develop and expand analysis and writing proficiency. These stories involved an ethical dilemma or problem for students to analyze and write about. Any student performing at two or more years below grade level was automatically enrolled in the program.

While the primary focus of Esparza's reforms was personalizing student learning and increasing literacy achievement, some efforts were implemented to build and improve math skills. These included giving students a math problem from previous state exams during every third period class, regardless of the class's subject area. Students were also given extra tutoring in math during their advisory classes. Initially, student math scores rose; after two years, however, they plateaued and then



decreased. In response to this, the math program was expanded to additional class periods, and students who had fallen significantly behind and/or failed to pass the state assessments were enrolled in a summer math course.⁶

Evaluating, Sustaining, and Building Out School Reforms

In 2007, Richard Esparza announced his retirement as Granger’s principal. During his tenure, scores on the state reading assessment more than tripled, from 17.5 percent proficient to 77 percent proficient.⁷ Additionally, the school’s graduation rate increased from less than 50 percent to 88 percent.⁸ Although it had come a long way, Granger High School still had work that needed to be done.

Paul Chartrand, who had served as assistant principal under Esparza, assumed the role of principal beginning with the 2008–09 school year. Chartrand’s familiarity with the school and its staff made the transition nearly seamless, as expectations for staff and students had already been clearly established. He immediately began analyzing the available data on student performance and attendance to establish areas of improvement, making it clear that the focus of the school and its work was on the students. Early on, Chartrand reviewed the reforms in place to determine their effectiveness. For example, the time-owed program, while great in theory, lacked the accountability to make it an effective tool. A mandatory lunch-hour tutoring session was implemented in its place.

In analyzing the trends in student performance on state assessments, Chartrand found that while the school had succeeded in engaging students in literacy, this had not held true for math. Although students were receiving high marks in their math classes, only 18 percent of tenth graders met or exceeded the standards for the state math assessments in 2008.⁹ The sharp contrast between students’ perception of their math skills and the reality of their test scores led Chartrand to take a closer look at the school’s math department, where he found rampant grade inflation and less than stellar instruction. As a result, the department’s grading system was overhauled, as well as classroom instructional practices, with an increased focus on student learning and teacher collaboration and supports.

Having evaluated the programs implemented under Esparza, Chartrand then turned his attention to building upon this foundation to implement additional, significant organizational changes through the creation of professional learning communities and a new college preparatory program. Chartrand looked to the DuFours Model of Professional Learning Communities as a basis for his modifications to the school’s scheduling. This model advocates for a shift from teaching to learning, with an emphasis on teacher collaboration. The idea of the Professional Learning Communities focuses on building relationships with shared ideals and a strong culture of student achievement, to ultimately result in a “community of commitment” to student success.¹⁰ At Granger, this translated to the creation of block scheduling that set aside a ninety-minute planning period every other day and an afternoon every Wednesday for teachers to meet in their content areas for collaboration on instructional practices, student success or areas in need of improvement, and professional development. In order to gain support from teachers, Chartrand organized a trip to a DuFours conference. The plan worked, and teachers put their support behind the model.

Chartrand also fully implemented the Navigation 101 program (NAV 101) to further work on preparing students for postsecondary success. NAV 101, which is run out of the Washington Department of Education, supports students in determining and defining what they want to do after



high school.¹¹ The program operates on five key elements: curriculum-driven student advisories; student portfolios; student-led conferences; student-driven scheduling; and the evaluation of student progress through continual analysis of student data.

Several components of the NAV 101 program had already been put in place at Granger under Principal Esparza, including student-led conferences and curriculum-driven advisories. The additional NAV 101 components built on the existing structures to provide students with fuller supports for postsecondary success. By their senior year, all students at Granger are now armed for the college admissions process with a clear goal, knowledge about how to get there, and examples of their academic successes throughout their high school experience.

While—many changes have been implemented at Granger High School under Principals Esparza and Chartrand, it is too early to see the full extent of their combined impacts. Student performance on the statewide assessments has made and continues to make significant gains. The school is also closing in on a graduation rate of 100 percent. Parents have seen marked changes in student interest in school, pride in academic accomplishments, and aspirations for postsecondary success.¹² Through building the support of teachers and a strong school leadership dedicated to improving teaching, learning, and student outcomes, Chartrand has skillfully and successfully sustained a culture of student learning at Granger High School.

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Endnotes

¹ R. Herman, P. Dawson, T. Dee, J. Greene, R. Maynard, S. Redding, and M. Darwin, *Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools: A Practice Guide* (NCEE 2008-4020) (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

² Paul Chartrand, personal communication, November 4, 2008.

³ Washington Department of Education, *School Report Card*, <http://reportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us/summary.aspx?groupLevel=District&schoolId=3245&reportLevel=School&orgLinkId=3245&yrs=2000-01&year=2000-01> (last accessed May 19, 2009).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ The Achievement Alliance, *It's Being Done: Granger High School Washington* <http://www2.edtrust.org/NR/rdonlyres/C1F210DA-772A-4C3B-A7FF-6187D52308BC/0/GrangerHighprofile.pdf> (accessed May 20, 2009).

⁶ Susan H. Stafford, *Granger High School Grapples with the Basics—And Wins*, Center for Public Education, January 2008.

⁷ James Joyce, “Granger’s Very Inspiring Principal,” *Yakima Herald-Republic*, May 29, 2008, <http://www.yakimaherald.com/stories/2008/05/29/granger-s-very-inspiring-principal> (accessed May 11, 2009).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ School Data Direct, “Granger High School,” <http://www.schooldatadirect.org/app/data/q/stid=48/lid=118/stlid=162/locid=937872/catid=1013/secid=4662/compid=851/site=pes> (accessed May 11, 2009); Paul Chartrand, personal communication, November 4, 2008.

¹⁰ Richard DuFour, “What Is a Professional Learning Community?” *Educational Leadership* (May 2004).

¹¹ Washington Department of Education, *Navigation 101 Frequently Asked Questions*, <http://www.k12.wa.us/navigation101/FAQs.aspx> (accessed May 11, 2009).

¹² Stafford, *Granger High School*.

