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ABSTRACT

When the new superintendent of Orangeburg School District Five was appointed in 1992, he found that Orangeburg-Wilkinson High School graduates did not have the skills to enter the workplace and postsecondary institutions that require high-level academic skills. He identified these three things that Orangeburg would need to do to improve academic and technical achievement: find a principal with energy, dedication, and concern for students; convince the community the school needed to improve; and build faculty commitment and support teachers in holding students to high standards. The superintendent and his leadership team took these steps to raise standards and improve student achievement: made the high school a place where students can learn; raised graduation requirements; provided a special environment for ninth graders to give them a boost as they enter high school; raised expectations at school and in the classroom; provided structure, time, and staff development to support improved student performance; taught in ways that motivate students to learn challenging content; upgraded the vocational program; and strengthened guidance and advisement. Orangeburg's leaders and teachers changed the culture of learning at the high school and technology center. Overall academic performance improved; students took the recommended curriculum; and the high school increased its expectations of students. (YLB)

Case Study: Orangeburg-Wilkinson High School Orangeburg Consolidated Five Technology Center, Orangeburg, S. C.

Case Study

ORANGEBURG-WILKINSON HIGH SCHOOL
ORANGEBURG CONSOLIDATED FIVE TECHNOLOGY CENTER
Orangeburg, S.C.

This high school consists of two campuses working together to create conditions leading to higher student achievement. One campus blends high-level mathematics, science and language arts with vocational/technical studies; the other emphasizes humanities and business to give students a focus in high school. Less than a decade ago, the school was plagued by problems: The cafeteria was messy and the hallways were cluttered. Students were disrespectful and had lost interest in school. A "don't care" attitude prevailed among many students and teachers. Very little learning was occurring.

Today, the school reflects the kinds of changes that low-performing schools must make if they want to improve student performance. Classes are business-like. Students are polite and attentive. District and school leaders have raised standards and created an environment in which students want to learn.

The Setting

Orangeburg, S.C., is located 40 miles south of Columbia, the state capital. The population of the greater Orangeburg area is 45,000. Like many South Carolina communities, Orangeburg has had to abandon an economy based on textiles and agriculture and seek new business and industry. One company manufactures fluoropolymer tubing; another makes insulators for electrical wire and cable. Several printing companies are located in the area.

Orangeburg is well-known for two historically black colleges — South Carolina State University and Claflin College. Nevertheless, about 30 percent of the adult population has less than a high school diploma.

The campuses of Orangeburg-Wilkinson High School and the Orangeburg Consolidated Five Technology Center are located within a mile of each other. The school enrolls 1,800 students in grades 9 through 12, including 88 percent African Americans and 12 percent whites. Fifty-four percent of high school students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches.

The Need for Improvement

When Walter Tobin was appointed superintendent of Orangeburg School District Five in 1992, one of the first things he did was to review the performance of local high school students. He found that Orangeburg-Wilkinson High School graduates did not have the skills to enter the workplace and postsecondary institutions that require high-level academic skills. About half of students graduating with a vocational/technical focus took "general" English courses; nearly 75 percent took "general" mathematics and science courses.

"The community thought it had a good school system, because postsecondary institutions accepted more than 80 percent of Orangeburg graduates," Tobin said. "The reality was that most students never completed college, and many who graduated from college majored in fields such as psychology and sociology that provide few jobs."

Developing Support for School Improvement

Tobin was formerly superintendent of South Carolina's Lexington School District Four, where he had helped launch the *High Schools That Work* initiative to improve the performance of students at Swansea High School. Based on experience, he identified three things that Orangeburg would need to do to improve academic and technical achievement:

- Find a principal with energy, dedication and concern for students;
- Convince the community that the school needs to improve;
- Build faculty commitment and support teachers in holding students to high standards.

The principal needed to be so committed to student success that he or she would have no trouble making hard decisions associated with closing down the general track, raising expectations, and establishing discipline and order. "A strong principal is essential," Tobin said. "Schools leaders must know what to do, believe it will work, and be able to help teachers see their role." Four principals came and left before Tobin found one who had the vision and commitment to make changes. The technology center also experienced turnover in leadership and teachers.

Before school and district leaders convinced teachers that student performance was the number-one priority, things were so bad that teachers would arrive late or leave early if they had a planning period at the beginning or end of the day. "In hiring new teachers, we looked for people who were willing to support the effort to improve student learning," Tobin said.

Tobin built community support by involving parents and community leaders on school improvement committees and including them on visits to successful *HSTW* sites.

Strategies for Improving the School

Tobin and his leadership team took a number of steps to raise standards and improve student achievement. They decided to:

■ Make the High School a Place Where Students Can Learn

The superintendent drew a "winner" when he appointed Thomasenia Benson as principal of the high school. She understood the problems facing the school but refused to accept low performance. She set out immediately to change the behavior of teachers, parents and students. In doing so, she devised "non-negotiable policies" for the three groups. Her policies for teachers included:

- Teach the full period—from bell to bell.
- Set high expectations for all students.
- Do not let students use poverty, a single-parent home, or any other circumstance as an excuse for not doing school work.
- Create a business-like atmosphere in the classroom, and convince students that learning is their "business."
- Model the business-like behavior expected of students.

During the summer before her first year as principal, Benson sent a letter to parents to explain her "non-negotiable policies" for students. She said she would expect all students to:

- Behave properly at school—no disrespect, profanity or violent behavior.
- Arrive at school and at class on time.
- Attend school unless ill.
- Dress appropriately.
- Leave portable cassette tape/compact disc players at home.
- Focus on learning.

School leaders and teachers honored the policies. "Students had lots of questions, of course, but we stuck to our guns," Benson said. The policies are still in effect, and students have conformed to the standards. "This atmosphere gives us a chance to learn," one student said. "It may be strict, but it lets us know that the teachers care how we perform in school."

Teachers who were unwilling to hold students to high standards and teach challenging content were encouraged to leave. The principal showed her "grit" by asking 20 teachers to find other employment. These teachers have been replaced by ones who are willing to help students learn.

■ **Raise Graduation Requirements**

The district is raising graduation requirements by having all students complete a challenging curriculum and a major. Low-level academic classes have been replaced, and all students complete Algebra I. Beginning with the class of 2001, all students will complete 24 credits for graduation.

Minimum Graduation Requirements at
Orangeburg-Wilkinson High School and Orangeburg Technology Center

1991	1999	2001
4 credits in English	4 credits in college-preparatory English	4 credits in college-preparatory English
2 credits in mathematics	3 credits in mathematics, including algebra	4 credits in mathematics, including algebra
1 credit in science	2 credits in science	3 credits in science
No credits in social studies	1 credit in social studies	1 credit in social studies
1 credit in U.S. History	1 credit in U.S. History	1 credit in U.S. History
½ credit in economics/government	1 credit in economics/government	1 credit in economics/government
No credits in computer applications	1 credit in computer applications	1 credit in computer applications
7 credits in electives	6 credits in electives	6 credits in electives
		1 credit in a foreign language or a vocational course
No major	4 credits in a major	4 credits in a major

The school board established a policy that requires all students in grades 10 through 12 to complete a four-credit major in one of four areas: health and human services, business and marketing, engineering and industrial technology, or humanities. Students planning to enter a four-year college or university must also identify a major.

"In the past, many students had no direction and no understanding of the purpose of school," Benson said. "A required major gives students a focus and helps them see the importance of high school in their plans for the future."

- **Provide a Special Environment for Ninth-Graders**

School leaders have completed the first phase of a ninth-grade academy to give students a boost as they enter high school. The academy requires students to complete double periods of Algebra I and English. Guidance counselors and teachers work with the students regularly to help them 1) learn about career and educational options, 2) recognize the need to take demanding courses and to perform well in them, and 3) identify potential career fields and the requirements for entering them. The 25 academy teachers meet each Monday to share their instructional plans, to discuss how to reach students, and to explore ways to help students connect content from several courses.

- **Raise Expectations at School and in the Classroom**

The emphasis at Orangeburg-Wilkinson High School is on learning. Students are expected to behave in school as they would in the workplace. "It has taken a long time, but we have created a safe place for students to learn," Benson said.

Teachers require students to read and write frequently, to make oral presentations, to answer questions in complete sentences, and to do challenging homework. Many students do an hour or more of homework each day outside of class. School leaders evaluate teachers on whether they:

- Require students to use higher-order thinking skills and/or problem-solving techniques in each lesson;
- Create an environment that promotes learning;
- Make clear assignments;
- Set high expectations for all students;
- Provide feedback on students' performance;
- Approach each student in a firm, fair, consistent and caring manner.

To emphasize the importance of these strategies, Benson makes 20 to 25 classroom visits per week. She reviews objectives and gives teachers feedback on their instruction. "This takes a lot of time, but it is very important," Benson said.

School leaders and teachers are creating classrooms in which students are expected to meet high standards. For example, 10th-grade philosophy students read journal articles and write structured 750- to 1,000-word essays every two weeks. They are graded on clarity, content and critical thought. Students read nightly and write almost every night. Despite the rigor of this class, the students are ethnically and socioeconomically representative of all students in the school. They like the class because it is structured, interesting and challenging.

As teachers raise expectations, many students need extra help. Special classes are offered to help students who need intensive study in English and mathematics. Students who score at or below state standards in reading or mathematics are required to take a reading and writing acceleration class or a mathematics acceleration class. Half of the students at Orangeburg-Wilkinson High School are enrolled in these classes.

- **Provide Structure, Time and Staff Development to Support Improved Student Performance**

To address a high failure rate at the school, leaders adopted a block schedule consisting of four 90-minute classes per day. The additional time allows teachers to plan applied, contextual classroom assignments that call for a high degree of problem solving. All classes except Algebra I and English 9 follow this schedule. Instead of completing Algebra I and English 9 in a semester, students take each of these courses a full period throughout grade 9. As a result of the block schedule, students spend less time in the halls between classes and encounter fewer opportunities to get in trouble. The schedule also provides nearly three hours of planning time per week during which teachers can work together. Staff development is available to help teachers build a repertoire of learning activities to hold students' attention during 90-minute periods.

In other staff development efforts, the superintendent requires all elementary and middle school teachers to learn how to address students' reading problems (identified through a computer program). All teachers and administrators have received intensive training in how to get students to take more responsibility for learning.

- **Teach in Ways that Motivate Students to Learn Challenging Content**

School and district leaders at Orangeburg believe it is important to teach in ways that motivate students to work hard to meet high expectations. The principal sets the tone by constantly evaluating teachers on:

- Using a variety of teaching strategies in each 90-minute period;
- Actively engaging students in the learning process and making sure students are on task;
- Connecting content to real-life problems.

District and school leaders have been aggressive in upgrading technology to help students prepare for the real world. The high school received funds from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration to create a state-of-the-art computer lab and to provide students and teachers with Internet access. The equipment gives the school the capacity to conduct interactive video conferences for distance learning.

- **Upgrade the Vocational Program**

Using recommendations from a *High Schools That Work* technical assistance visit team, district leaders improved the vocational program at the technology center by:

- Strengthening guidance and advisement services to help students at the high school see the benefits of completing a career major;
- Improving the appearance of the center to make it more inviting to students;
- Upgrading curricula, instruction and equipment.

The technology center organized an advisory committee to review the *HSTW* technical assistance report and to determine how to carry out the recommendations. The decision was made to target students in the ninth-grade academy to help them understand the benefits of pursuing a career major that includes courses at the technology center. As a result:

- Students complete career interest inventories;
- Technology teachers make presentations at the high school on how academic studies are connected to work and further study in various career majors;
- Twelfth-graders are assigned to "mentor" ninth-graders who visit the technology center;
- All ninth-graders participate in job-shadowing programs in the workplace;
- The technology center hosts open-house events for parents.

The job-shadowing program for ninth-graders takes place in October and November. Students fill out an application and get parental approval to participate. Following the experience, they write a report for an English class.

To make the technology center more attractive, the district surveyed students to find out what they wanted. As a result, the same guidance services are offered at the center and at the high school, the same end-of-the-day announcements are made at both facilities, and a laboratory has been converted into a cafeteria for students who spend the day at the center. Painting and landscaping have been part of the "face lift" to give the center a business-like appearance.

School leaders reorganized the center's programs, raised program completion requirements, offered academic courses so that some students could remain at the center throughout the day, and provided staff development programs to help teachers change what and how they teach. Teachers are expected to focus on improving student performance.

Courses at the technology center were organized into three broad career clusters: 1) business and marketing, 2) health and human services and 3) industrial technology. The courses were also updated to meet the requirements of business and industry and to motivate students to enroll. Low-quality courses were eliminated and new courses were added. The new courses include medical office careers, rehabilitation services, sports medicine, health care careers, and health science anatomy and physiology. Students must earn four or more credits in a career major to be considered program completers.

In a significant change, leaders recruited 10 English, mathematics, science and social studies teachers from the high school to offer challenging courses at the center. Students can take biology, chemistry, physics, English I through IV, Algebra I and II, geometry, pre-calculus/trigonometry, government, economics, and history. The courses are rigorous, and students no longer "get off easy" by spending the school day at the center. In 1998-99 a total of 120 students signed up to take all of their classes at the center.

- **Strengthen Guidance and Advisement**

School leaders see guidance and advisement as a key factor in getting students to value a high school education. In addition to offering advisement in the ninth-grade academy, counselors administer interest inventories and aptitude tests to identify students' interests and abilities.

A teacher-adviser program in Orangeburg enables small groups of students to remain with the same teacher or counselor throughout high school. The groups meet with their teacher-advisers for an hour and a half each week.

A teacher-adviser meets with each student and the student's parents on parent advisory day — held annually in the fall and in the spring. During this meeting, students and parents look at the results of interest and aptitude tests, and students register for the next semester. To ensure the success of this event, teachers phone parents in advance to emphasize the importance of helping children plan for high school and beyond. As a result, 75 to 80 percent of parents attend the meetings. "This was the first time I ever sat down individually with someone at the school to discuss my child's future," one parent said.

Counselors begin working with students and their parents in the eighth grade. They encourage students to choose a career cluster and to identify a career major by the end of grade 10. However, students are not "locked into" a cluster, and their programs of study are reviewed at least annually.

Parents must come to the school on a designated day to pick up their children's first report card of the year. They can also meet with their children's teachers at that time. The school stays open in the evening to accommodate as many parents as possible, and 90 percent of parents participate.

Progress in Requiring High Standards of All Students

Orangeburg's leaders and teachers have changed the culture of learning at the high school and the technology center and are beginning to see evidence that career-bound students[1] are meeting higher standards.

- **Overall Academic Performance Has Improved**

The 1998 *High Schools That Work* Assessment showed that Orangeburg students had improved in reading, mathematics and science since 1996. (See Figure 1.)

[1] Career-bound students are the 60 to 65 percent of high school youths who plan to attend a two-year technical or community college, enroll in a four-year college or university with an open admission policy, or enter the military after high school graduation.

Figure 1

Improvement by Orangeburg Students on the *High Schools That Work* Assessment

	1996	1998	*HSTW* Goal
Reading	257	279	279
Mathematics	264	294	295
Science	265	285	292

Note: Scores range from 0 to 500.

Efforts to get more students to meet the *HSTW* performance goals are paying off: The percentage of students who met or exceeded the *HSTW* reading goal increased from 28 percent in 1996 to 54 percent in 1998; the percentage who met or exceeded the mathematics goal rose from 22 percent in 1996 to 49 percent in 1998; and the percentage who met or exceeded the science goal increased from 17 percent in 1996 to 43 percent in 1998.

- Students Are Taking "the Right Courses"

The percentage of students completing the three academic components of the *HSTW*-recommended curriculum[2] increased between 1996 and 1998. (See Figure 2.) The percentage of students completing the recommended English curriculum increased 10 percent, and the percentage completing the recommended mathematics curriculum increased 54 percent.

Figure 2

Percentage of Orangeburg Students Completing the *HSTW*-Recommended Academic Curriculum

	1996	1998	Experienced *HSTW* Sites *
English	33%	43%	39 %
Mathematics	33%	87%	79%
Science	61%	64%	56%

* Experienced *HSTW* sites are schools that have been in the *HSTW* network for at least two years and participated in the 1996 and 1998 *HSTW* Assessments.

[2] *High Schools That Work* recommends that all students complete a program of study that includes four college-preparatory-level English courses; at least three mathematics courses, including two at the level of algebra, geometry or other high-level mathematics courses; at least three science courses, including two at the level of chemistry, physics or other high-level science courses; and four additional courses in an academic or a vocational concentration.

Although leaders and teachers on the two Orangeburg campuses still have work to do to get all students to complete challenging courses, the percentage of students who completed certain college-preparatory or advanced English, mathematics and science courses increased between 1996 and 1998. (See Figure 3.) Students who took these courses and participated in the 1998 *HSTW* Assessment had average scores that either met the *HSTW* goals or were higher than the scores of their peers in 1996.

Figure 3

Comparison of Orangeburg Students
Completing Certain College-Preparatory-Level Courses
in 1996 and 1998

Courses	% in 1996	% in 1998
English		
College-Preparatory or Advanced English 12	21%	29%
Mathematics		
College-Preparatory Algebra	25%	64%
Algebra II	25%	95%
Geometry	41%	93%
Science		
College-Preparatory Biology	29%	37%
Chemistry	71%	93%

Fifty-seven percent of Orangeburg students who were assessed in 1998 had completed at least four mathematics courses, compared to 47 percent of students who participated in the assessment at experienced *HSTW* sites. The results are not surprising, since 82 percent of Orangeburg students reported that they were encouraged to take challenging mathematics courses and 60 percent said they were encouraged to take challenging science courses. In 1996 only 50 percent of Orangeburg's career-bound students said they were encouraged to take more mathematics and science courses.

More students in 1998 than in 1996 (80 percent versus 53 percent) said they received help in planning a high school program of study. Thirty-one percent in 1998 said they received help before the ninth grade, while only 18 percent in 1996 received help before grade 9. To complete a rigorous academic core, students must begin taking challenging courses early in their high school careers.

Improved academic guidance services are reflected in the percentage of Orangeburg students planning to continue their studies after high school — 80 percent in 1998 compared to 65 percent in 1996.

■ Expectations Are Higher

Orangeburg-Wilkinson High School has increased what is expected of students. In 1996 only 12 percent of students said they did two or more hours of homework daily; by 1998 the percentage had expanded to 45 percent. Greater percentages of students at Orangeburg-Wilkinson than at high-scoring *HSTW* sites[3] reported experiences that point to higher expectations. (See Figure 4.)

Figure 4

Students' Perceptions of Teachers' Expectations
at Orangeburg-Wilkinson High School
and at High-Scoring *HSTW* Sites

Students said:	Percentage at Orangeburg	Percentage at High-Scoring *HSTW* Sites
Most courses were challenging	76%	59%
Teachers set high standards and were willing to help students meet them	88%	81%
Teachers expected students to do well	93%	86%
They had to work hard to meet standards on team assignments	81%	66%
Teachers would not let them "get by" without doing the work	84%	69%
Most teachers cared about them	75%	68%

The 1998 *HSTW* Assessment data also suggest that changes at Orangeburg's technology center are working. For example, 47 percent of students in 1998 (compared to only six percent in 1996) said they did at least one-half hour of homework per week for their vocational courses. The percentage in 1998 exceeded the 35 percent of students at high-scoring *HSTW* sites who reported this level of homework activity. In addition, 43 percent of Orangeburg's students in 1998 (compared to 29 percent in 1996) said their vocational/technical teachers often stressed writing. Students whose vocational/technical teachers stressed writing scored 286 in reading in 1998, an increase of 32 points from 1996. Finally, 39 percent of students in 1998 (compared to 29 percent two years earlier) said they had to meet standards on a written exam to pass a vocational course.

[3] High-scoring *HSTW* sites are the 25 percent of sites with the highest average scores on the *HSTW* Assessment.

Lessons Learned

Orangeburg administrators, teachers and counselors have gained a number of insights from their school improvement efforts:

- School improvement is a daily challenge; it cannot be postponed until a convenient time.
- Schools need to assess program effectiveness continually and make changes as needed.
- Teachers need to participate in discussions of proposed instructional changes.
- School and district leaders must be willing to focus on school improvement for at least 10 years if they want to see results.
- College acceptance does not necessarily mean that a student is prepared for postsecondary studies, as many parents believe.

Plans for the Future

School and district leaders plan to increase student achievement by:

- Standardizing rigor and content across all classrooms in each content area.
- Involving more parents in working with teachers and counselors to develop and review challenging programs of study for their children.
- Providing staff development for academic teachers on what and how to teach career-bound students.
- Requiring students at the technology center to complete a senior project.
- Implementing an International Baccalaureate program. Candidates for such a diploma are required to study languages, sciences, mathematics and humanities in the final two years of high school.

Challenges Facing District and School Leaders

The major challenge facing district and school leaders is to get teachers to hold students to high standards in all classes. Teachers can do so by 1) requiring students to read at least 25 books (or the equivalent of this number) each year and 2) making reading assignments that cause students to demonstrate that they understand what they have read.

How the District Has Supported School Improvement

Improving the achievement of all students is more than "words on paper" in Orangeburg, S.C. Superintendent Tobin is "pro-active" in his efforts to get students to meet higher performance standards. When Tobin entered the district, he called a meeting of all school personnel to explain the importance of changing school and classroom practices to improve student achievement. He emphasized that all high school students need to connect what they study in high school with further learning after graduation.

District leaders realize the necessity for staff development in helping teachers change curriculum and instructional practices. They have sent school leaders and teachers to state and national conferences and have made it possible for them to visit "model" schools.

How the State Has Contributed to School Improvement

South Carolina has taken a number of steps to raise the achievement of high school students:

- State legislation requires career plans for all students and parental involvement in the process.
- The state's 1998 Educational Accountability Act forbids eighth-graders from entering high school until they have acquired the academic skills needed to complete high school studies. The legislation also calls for elementary and middle schools to provide intensive academic assistance in the summer to students who need it.
- The state department of education provides workshops to help high school teachers acquire applied academic learning strategies.

How the SREB Has Assisted in School Improvement

School and district leaders agree that the Southern Regional Education Board's *High Schools That Work* provides a framework for organizing a school improvement effort. *HSTW* also:

- Helps teachers see the importance of rigorous courses and high standards;
- Emphasizes the use of applied and contextual learning strategies that engage students;
- Provides staff development featuring national experts and local practitioners who give expert advice on how to implement the *HSTW* key practices;
- Provides assessment information that leaders and teachers can use to guide needed changes;
- Conducts technical assistance visits to help schools see challenges and opportunities;
- Networks school leaders with others facing the same hurdles;
- Provides information through mailings, the Internet, etc.

Summary

District and school leaders in Orangeburg, S.C., have had the vision and courage to "put learning first" in dealing with students, teachers and the community. They have been willing to make unpopular decisions and to build consensus for their actions. It has not been an easy or a quick task to "turn the campuses around." In fact, it has been a labor of love and patience for many involved. Teachers and students agree that the "reinvented" campuses are much more desirable than before. No one wants to return to the days when it was difficult to see the purpose of high school.

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