

California Comprehensive Center



A Descriptive Study of California's Schools to Watch—Taking Center Stage Program

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Executive Summary

Schools to Watch (STW) is an initiative of the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform that identifies high performing middle grades schools based on 37 criteria. Initiated in 2003, California's program, Schools to Watch—Taking Center Stage (STW-TCS), has designated 36 schools. This report describes STW nationally and in California, presents statistics on participating schools as compared to other middle grades schools in California, and summarizes program perspectives expressed by a random sample of 12 STW-TCS principals.

Three quarters of STW-TCS schools are in unified districts, slightly more than half are in southern California, and they are fairly evenly distributed among urban and suburban areas. Compared to all middle grades schools in California, on average, STW-TCS schools tend to be larger, and have fewer English learners (ELs) and students receiving free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL). Individual schools can look quite different, however. Three STW-TCS schools have FRPL rates of 85% or higher, 19 percent are above the FRPL state average for middle grades schools, and 44 percent are designated as Title I.

Based on the data used in this study, STW-TCS schools showed somewhat higher achievement on average than all other middle grades schools in California (even when controlling for demographics), met API growth at a higher rate (97 versus 76 percent for 2011-12), had lower expulsion and suspension rates, and similar rates of truancy. Post-designation, the achievement scores of STW-TCS schools on average have largely held steady.

Interviewed STW-TCS principals uniformly spoke positively about and described similar experiences with the program. They described the program's application and redesignation processes which required the use of an extensive "School Self-Study and Rating Rubric." Although time consuming, principals reported the usefulness of these processes. The main benefits of participation cited were networking with other schools, a focus on continuous improvement, and validation and positive publicity.

Networking was said to occur mainly from attendance at conferences, participation in reviewing new STW-TCS applications, and school visits. Principals reported that this networking allowed them to participate in a community of like-minded principals and provided them with other professional opportunities (e.g., participating on panels, serving as mentors).

Principals also reported that participation helped them reflect on their schools' practices and focus on continuous improvement. This focus on continuous improvement was said to be facilitated through the rubric, the reapplication process, and visits from other schools, which kept them accountable and visible.

Principals also noted the validation and positive publicity associated with the program. They described the pride school staff, students, and families have in receiving this designation. They also reported publicizing the award to further their relationship with the broader community.

Reported challenges included the time commitment and the cost of participating in conferences. Overall, virtually all respondents indicated that in their experience the program's benefits clearly outweighed its costs.

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Introduction

In 1999, the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform launched a national initiative called Schools to Watch (STW) to identify and designate high-performing middle-grades schools. The Forum is made up of educators, researchers, and officers of national associations and foundations dedicated to school reform and improvement efforts across the country. It is their position that high performing middle-grades schools have similar practices and policies in four areas: (1) academic excellence, (2) developmental responsiveness, (3) social equity, and (4) organizational structures and processes. Middle-grades schools can attain STW designation when they meet 37 specified criteria aligned to those four areas. Since its inception, 326 schools across the nation have been designated as STW (National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, n.d.).

STW schools create a national network of high-performing middle-grades schools identified through individual state programs. States must first apply to be part of the national program and then can set up programs to identify schools. California, one of 19 states with an STW initiative, has named its program “Schools to Watch—Taking Center Stage” (STW-TCS) (National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, n.d.).

California joined the STW program in 2002, when the state programs were first launched. The California League of Middle Schools (CLMS) and the California Department of Education (CDE), along with a group of partners, implement STW-TCS. The stated goals of STW-TCS are to create a research-based definition of characteristics common to high-performing middle-grades schools, to share strategies implemented in STW-TCS schools with educators around the state, to establish a statewide network of high-performing middle-grade schools, and to assist struggling schools that have similar demographics or that are within the same region (California STW–TCS, n.d.a).

The purpose of this report is to present descriptive analyses of the STW-TCS program in California. This includes statistical comparisons of the demographics and achievement between participating STW-TCS schools and other middle-grades schools across the state. In addition, we summarize perspectives of the program from a randomly selected sample of 12 STW-TCS principals (one third of schools in STW-TCS).

We frame our study around four main research questions:

1. What are the characteristics of STW-TCS schools? How do these characteristics compare to all California middle-grades schools?
2. What are the student outcomes for STW-TCS schools in relation to other middle-grades schools in California?
3. How do principals understand, perceive, and interpret their participation in STW-TCS?
4. What do STW-TCS principals consider to be among their best practices? To what extent and in what ways do they connect these practices to STW-TCS criteria?

AIR is working as a partner in the California Comprehensive Center (CA CC) at WestEd, which is a federally funded center designed to build the capacity of the CDE to improve student

achievement, support students with special needs, and disseminate research-based practices. We conducted this study in partnership with the CDE and CLMS. These partner organizations, as well as two STW-TCS principals, formed the study's task group that provided contextual information on STW-TCS and feedback on the study's methodology, interview recruitment strategies, data collection instruments, and interpretation of results.

This report describes the STW-TCS program. We begin with a brief overview of the program. Next, we provide the quantitative descriptive analyses of STW-TCS schools and include a brief description of the data sources used for these analyses. Then we present participants' perceptions of the program gained from interviews with principals. We conclude with a brief summary of the program.

About STW-TCS

California's STW-TCS has designated a total of 36 schools since 2002 (California STW-TCS, n.d.b). Each school year, STW-TCS identifies and selects middle-grades schools based on the four areas noted previously. California's STW-TCS defines these criteria as:

- **Academic Excellence:** The school is academically excellent. It challenges all students to use their minds well.
- **Developmental Responsiveness:** The school is sensitive to the unique developmental challenges of early adolescence.
- **Social Equity:** The school is socially equitable, democratic, and fair. It provides every student with high-quality teachers, resources, learning opportunities, and supports. It keeps positive options open for all students.
- **Organizational Structures and Processes:** The school is a learning organization that establishes norms, structures, and organizational arrangements to support and sustain their trajectory toward excellence (California STW-TCS, n.d.c).

The appendix has a complete description of each of these criteria.

Middle-grades schools in California interested in being designated as STW-TCS must apply to the program. Before submitting an application, school staff members are required to use the "School Self-Study and Rating Rubric" to rate their schools using a four point scale on the criteria.¹ The rubric can be used as a self-assessment before applying for STW-TCS and as a formative tool for continuous middle-grades school improvement effort (California STW-TCS, n.d.d).

Another resource provided to principals is the "Principal's Checklist," which lists 12 academic, leadership, and operational factors to consider before starting the STW-TCS application

¹ The School Self-Study and Rating Rubric can be downloaded at <http://clms.net/stw/forms/STW-TCS-Self-Study-Rating-Rubric.pdf>

process.² Principals can use the checklist to assess whether their school is ready to be designated as a model high-performing middle-grades school and to plan a timeline for the application process (California STW–TCS, n.d.d).

The STW-TCS applications are screened by trained reviewers representing CLMS, the CDE, existing STW-TCS schools, and more than 16 other education organizations who are members of the California Middle Grades Alliance. Reviewers participate in a two-day training session on the National Forum’s vision and criteria for high performing middle grades schools, and on the policies and procedures for reviewing and evaluating applications and participating in site visits. All participants sign a confidentiality statement and results of all reviews and visits are only shared with the specific applicant school (I. Howard, personal communication, September 30, 2012).³

Selected schools receive a site visit for further assessment of the schools’ progress in meeting the criteria. Schools not scheduled for a visitation receive feedback on their application and advice for future submissions. After the site visits, schools receive notification if they have been designated as a STW-TCS. Every three years designated STW-TCS schools must reapply, utilizing the School Self-Study and Rating Rubric to measure progress on the four criteria. The redesignation process is similar to the initial application process, in that schools reapply and receive a site visit.

Through STW-TCS designation, middle-grades schools receive benefits but also assume responsibilities. The specified benefits include recognition of success, complementary site team registration for the annual CLMS conferences, participation in CLMS professional development and network opportunities, and coaching. Responsibilities include continuously demonstrating high performance, acting as a guide or mentor for other middle-grades schools, participating in future STW-TCS school selection, presenting at state and national conferences, and providing yearly information on school academic performance (California STW-TCS, n.d.c).

In addition, STW-TCS has been part of three grant-funded programs in which CLMS is currently involved (P. Murphy, personal communication, September 10, 2012).⁴ These grant programs leverage the expertise of STW-TCS principals and schools that serve as mentors and learning laboratories for high needs schools.

Quantitative Descriptive Analysis of STW-TCS

To address our first two research questions, we used publically available data to provide descriptive information about demographics and academic performance in STW-TCS and nonparticipating middle-grades schools in California. Specifically, we used the following

² The Principal’s Checklist can be downloaded at <http://clms.net/stw/forms/STW-TCSI2PrincipalChecklist.pdf>

³ This information was obtained through email communication with Irvin Howard, Director, CA STW-TCS, and President of the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform.

⁴ This information was obtained through email communication with Peter Murphy, Executive Director, California League of Schools.

databases: Growth Academic Performance Index (API), Base API, Standardized Testing and Reporting results, California Work Opportunity), California Basic Educational Data System School Information Form, and the CDE's DataQuest (California Department of Education, n.d.). From these, we created summaries of demographic characteristics and conducted analyses to create school-level academic indicators.

To generate a school-level academic achievement indicator that is comparable across years, we first standardized⁵ the California Standards Test (CST) mean scale scores in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics within each grade level for the 2002–03 to 2010–11 school years. We then averaged these standardized scores across all grade-levels tested in a school, weighted by the number of students tested in each grade level. Last, we took the average of these ELA and mathematics standardized scores to obtain a single academic performance measure for every school in the state.

We also generated a measure that demonstrates a school's academic achievement relative to their student population. To do this, we ran regressions on the standardized CST ELA and mathematics mean scale scores, controlling for the following school characteristics:

- Percentage of African American students,
- Percentage of Asian students,
- Percentage of English learners (ELs),
- Percentage of Hispanic students,
- Percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, and
- Percentage of students with disabilities.

The difference between a school's actual and statistically predicted standardized score results is what we refer to as the School Achievement Index (SAI). An SAI greater than zero indicates that a school performed better than predicted, while an index less than zero indicates performance lower than predicted.

Comparison groups were created in order to examine differences between STW-TCS schools and schools not participating in the program on relevant measures. The schools in the STW-TCS group for each year only include schools currently designated as a STW-TCS. As STW-TCS and other middle-grades schools have varying grade-spans, our comparison group for each STW-TCS school by year is comprised predominantly of all nonparticipating middle grades schools testing the same grade span.⁶ If the tested grade spans of a STW-TCS changes across

⁵ Standardizing is a method used to compare scores across years. Raw scores are converted to a standard deviation to represent distance from the mean. As standardized CST and SAI are used in this report, comparison schools show a mean of around 0 in Exhibits 6 and 7. This is also true for Exhibits 11 through 14.

⁶ Since we focused on schools testing the same grade span, we also include K–8 schools if there are STW-TCS schools testing in those grades. Our analyses were weighted by student enrollment to adjust for the smaller number of STW-TCS with K–8 grade spans.

years, the comparison group will also change to match it. We excluded charter schools in the nonparticipating comparison groups.

The remainder of this section presents these quantitative descriptive analyses. First, we present general demographics of STW-TCS, as well as include comparisons between STW-TCS and comparison schools. Then, we present achievement data of STW-TCS and comparison schools. Next, we present data on a subgroup of STW-TCS schools and present achievement over time. Finally, we look at other outcome measures and compare truancy, suspension, and expulsion rates of STW-TCS schools versus comparison schools.

Demographics

The majority (27 of 36) of schools in STW-TCS are in unified school districts. They are distributed fairly evenly between cities ($n = 12$) and suburban ($n = 13$) locations, along with 11 schools in rural areas or towns. In addition, the majority of STW-TCS schools are located in the southern region of the state ($n = 20$), with a third ($n = 10$) in the northern region, and the remainder located in the central region ($n = 6$). Most STW-TCS schools (75 percent) are the only school designated in their district. Exceptions to this are schools in Los Angeles Unified School District ($n = 2$), Elk Grove Unified ($n = 2$), and Clovis Unified School District ($n = 5$). Exhibit I illustrates the distribution of STW-TCS across California.

Exhibit I. Map of Schools in STW-TCS Across California



- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. McKinleyville Middle School | 19. Tincher Preparatory School |
| 2. Silverado Middle School | 20. Bernice Ayer Middle School |
| 3. Toby Johnson Middle School | 21. John Glenn School of International Studies |
| 4. Edna Hill Middle School | 22. Gaspar de Portola Middle School |
| 5. Canyon Middle School | 23. Frank Wright Middle School |
| 6. Rancho Milpitas Middle School | 24. John F. Kennedy Middle School |
| 7. Dartmouth Middle School | 25. Granger Jr. High School |
| 8. Alta Sierra Intermediate School | 26. Mistletoe School |
| 9. Kastner Intermediate School | 27. Andrew Carnegie Middle School |
| 10. Clark Intermediate School | 28. Reyburn Intermediate School |
| 11. Castaic Middle School | 29. Washington Academic Middle School |
| 12. Medea Creek Middle School | 30. La Paz Intermediate School |
| 13. Holmes International Middle School | 31. Vista Verde Middle School |
| 14. Milikan Middle School | 32. Calavera Hills Middle School |
| 15. Culver City Middle School | 33. Katherine Albani Middle School |
| 16. Torch Middle School | 34. Granite Ridge Intermediate School |
| 17. R.H. Dana Middle School | 35. High Desert Academy |
| 18. Alvarado Intermediate School | 36. Olive Peirce Middle School |

Data source: Graphic reproduced from STW-TCS website at <http://clms.net/stw/schools.htm>

On average, STW-TCS schools were larger than comparison schools (1,055 versus 701 students). Also, average race and ethnicity of STW-TCS schools differed somewhat from comparison schools as shown in Exhibit 2. Exhibit 3 provides additional demographic characteristics of students in STW-TCS schools versus comparison schools. For example, only 43 percent of the students enrolled in STW-TCS are eligible for the free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL) program compared with 58 percent for the comparison schools.

Exhibit 2. Average Percentage by Race and Ethnicity of Students in STW-TCS Schools Versus Comparison Schools, 2011–12 School Year

Schools	White	Hispanic	Asian	African American
STW-TCS	38%	38%	10%	7%
Comparison Schools	27%	52%	9%	6%

Exhibit 3. Average Percentage of Students in Free or Reduced-Price Lunch Program, English Language Learners, and Special Education Students in STW-TCS Schools Versus Comparison Schools, 2011–12 School Year

Schools	Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Meals	English Learners	Students With Disabilities
STW-TCS	43%	10%	9%
Comparison Schools	58%	19%	11%

Achievement of STW-TCS Versus Comparison Schools

In this section, we present several achievement measures of STW-TCS and comparison schools including state and similar school rank, API scores, and average CST and SAI comparisons over time. For these analyses, we present results of the schools actually designated as STW-TCS in a given school year. Therefore, each school year represents a different number of STW-TCS schools. In addition, note that these analyses only present descriptive comparisons. Causal links between the STW-TCS program and achievement cannot be made. That is, these data should not be interpreted as showing an effect of participation in STW-TCS on student achievement.

Exhibit 4 shows average overall state and similar schools ranks (SSR) for STW-TCS over time.⁷ Because the base is the state average, the state and similar school rank shown for STW-TCS can be compared to the state average rank of 5. At an average yearly state rank of 8 and a yearly average similar schools rank ranging between 6 and 8, STW-TCS schools rank above the state average rank of 5.

⁷ California provides both a state rank for each school and a similar school rank. The similar school rank compares the school to 100 other schools with similar demographics and by school type (i.e., elementary, middle, high school). Additional information about the state and similar school rank can be found at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/ap/glossary11b.asp>

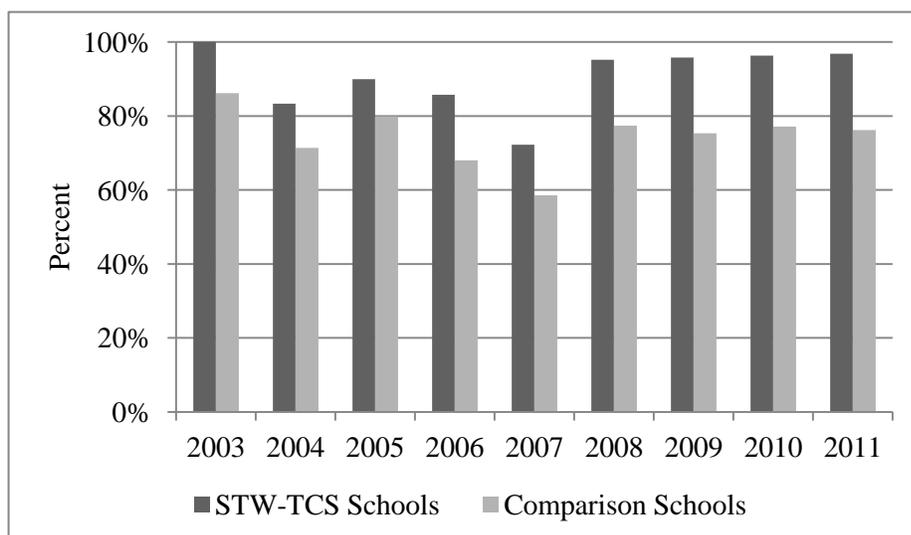
Exhibit 4. STW-TCS State and Similar Schools Rank

STW-TCS Schools	2003 (n = 3)	2004 (n = 6)	2005 (n = 10)	2006 (n = 14)	2007 (n = 18)	2008 (n = 21)	2009 (n = 24)	2010 (n = 27)	2011 (n = 32)
State Rank	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8
SSR	6	6	7	6	7	7	7	7	8

Note: Because the base is the state average, the state and similar school rank shown for STW-TCS can be compared to the state average rank of 5.

Exhibit 5 compares the percentage of STW-TCS and comparison schools that met schoolwide API growth targets from 2003–11. Over this time period, on average about 92 percent of STW-TCS schools made API growth targets versus 74 percent of comparison schools.⁸

Exhibit 5. Percentage of Schools That Met Schoolwide API Growth Targets by STW-TCS Versus Comparison Schools



The average student achievement scores for STW-TCS versus comparison schools is higher across two achievement measures, the CST and SAI (Exhibits 6 and 7). Since the STW-TCS averages represent a small number of schools, some of the variability reflects increases in the number of participating schools over time.

⁸ As part of California’s Accountability Progress Reporting System, schools receive a yearly Academic Performance Index (API) that measures academic performance and growth. The API is a number ranging from 200 to 1,000, with a statewide target of 800 for every school. Each year, California establishes for each school a base API and growth API. The growth target is 5 percent of the difference between the school or subgroup’s Base API and the statewide target. Schools that have an API of 800 are expected to maintain their API at or above 800. Since a new base and growth is set each year, comparisons of API cannot be made over time. Therefore, we present percent of schools that made growth targets over time. Additional information about the API can be found at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/ap/documents/infoguide12.pdf>.

Exhibit 6. Standardized CST for STW-TCS Versus Comparison Schools

Schools	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	Average
STW-TCS Schools										
Mean	0.52	0.74	0.59	0.68	0.62	0.67	0.56	0.57	0.55	0.60
Number of schools	3	6	10	14	18	21	24	27	32	
Comparison Schools										
Mean	-0.08	-0.05	-0.06	-0.05	-0.05	-0.05	-0.04	-0.05	-0.06	-0.05
Number of schools	774	1073	1102	1072	1091	1095	1603	1627	1638	

Note: Means are weighted by the number of students tested. Averages across years are weighted by the number of students tested in STW-TCS schools.

Exhibit 7. Standardized SAI for STW-TCS Versus Comparison Schools

Schools	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	Average
STW-TCS Schools										
Mean	-0.13	-0.02	0.08	0.17	0.11	0.19	0.09	0.17	0.21	0.14
Number of schools	3	6	10	14	18	21	24	27	32	
Comparison Schools										
Mean	0.03	0.00	-0.01	-0.02	-0.02	-0.01	-0.03	-0.03	-0.02	-0.02
Number of schools	763	1064	1102	1072	1091	1095	1603	1627	1638	

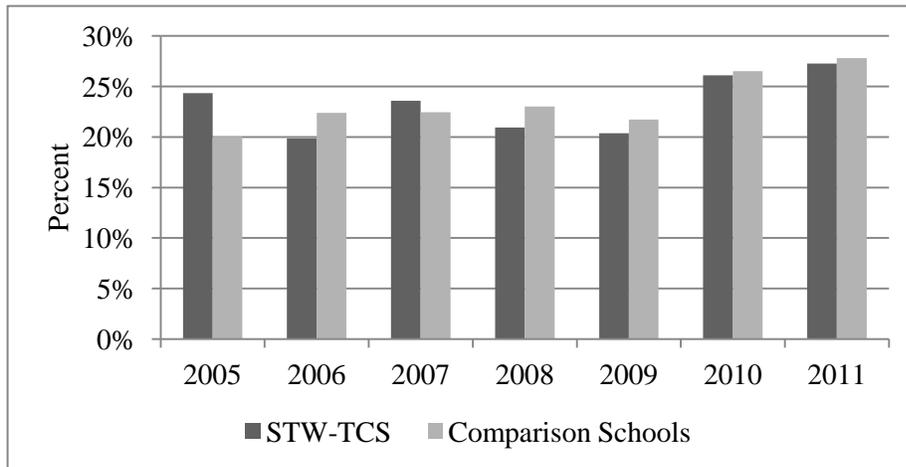
Note: Means are weighted by the number of students tested. Averages across years are weighted by the number of students tested in STW-TCS schools.

Truancy, Suspension and Expulsion Rates of STW-TCS Versus Comparison Schools

In addition to achievement, we also compared other measures of student outcomes, including truancy, suspension and expulsion rates.⁹ Exhibit 8 compares truancy rates of STW-TCS and comparison schools between 2005 and 2011. Except for 2005 and 2007, STW-TCS have slightly lower truancy rates than comparison schools. The exhibit also shows an increase of 4 percent to 6 percent in truancy rates for both STW-TCS and comparison schools between 2005 and 2011.

⁹ Please note, as stated earlier, STW-TCS averages represent the average only for schools designated a STW-TCS for that school year. For 2005 this includes 10 schools; 2006, 14 schools; 2007, 18 schools; 2008, 21 schools; 2009, 24 schools; 2010, 27 schools; 2011, 32 schools.

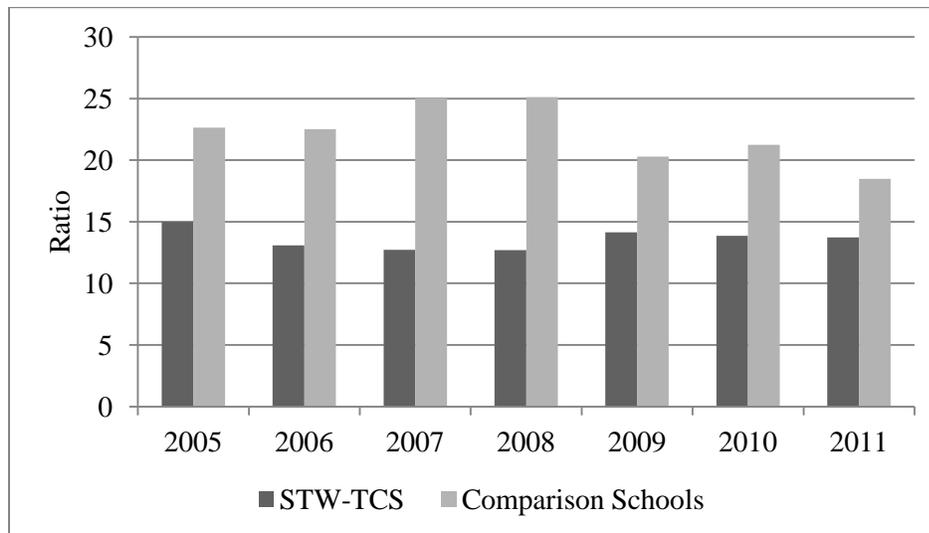
Exhibit 8. Truancy Rates for STW-TCS and Comparison Schools



Note: The CDE defines truancy as "Number of Students with Unexcused Absence or Tardy on 3 or more days." The truancy rate provided by the CDE takes the number of truant students and divides it by the school total enrollment.

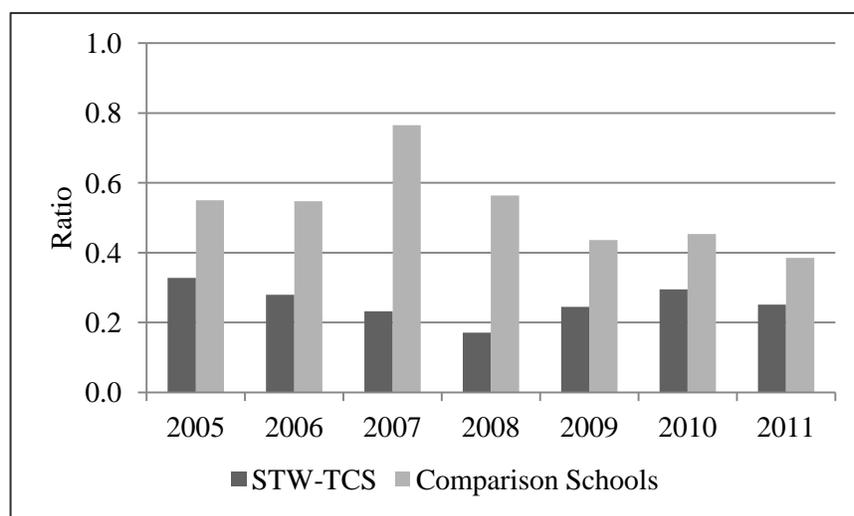
Exhibits 9 and 10 compare the ratios of suspensions and expulsions per 100 students between STW-TCS and comparison schools. STW-TCS schools show lower suspension ratios than the comparison schools. In 2011, for example, the ratio of suspensions in STW-TCS was 14:100 versus 18:100 in comparison schools. Similarly, STW-TCS schools have slightly lower expulsion ratios than comparison schools do.

Exhibit 9. Suspension Ratios, per 100 Students, for STW-TCS and Comparison Schools



Note: A student may be counted more than once in these ratios if suspended multiple times.

Exhibit 10. Expulsion Ratios, per 100 Students, for STW-TCS and Comparison Schools



Note: A student may be counted more than once in these ratios if expelled multiple times.

STW-TCS Achievement Over Time

As described in greater detail later in this report, during the interview component of this project all respondents cited the program's focus on continuous improvement as an advantage of participation. For this reason, we have included this as a focus of the analytical component of this study. That is, do the data for STW-TCS schools show continuous improvement over time? Although analysis of CST and SAI suggest that continuous improvement did not occur, analysis of API growth targets suggest the majority of STW-TCS did meet growth targets over time. Therefore, data in regard to this question appear mixed.

To explore this question, we examined the subset of STW-TCS schools ($n = 15$) that have been in the program long enough to have sufficient data. This subset of schools included schools with CST scores and SAI, two years prior to and four years after designation.¹⁰ The intent of this selection was to examine the degree to which STW-TCS schools appear to experience ongoing academic progress post-designation.

Exhibits 11 and 12 show average standardized ELA scores for CST and SAI, respectively, for this subset of 15 STW-TCS schools. Exhibits 13 and 14 show the average standardized mathematics scores for CST and SAI.

¹⁰ We only have CST scores (and subsequently can only create SAI scores) for the 2003-2011 years. Given this time range, this subset of schools only includes schools that were designated in a year for which we could use scores from two years predesignation and four years post-designation. Schools designated in 2003, for example, we would not have CST scores two years prior to designation and therefore, would not be included in these analyses.

For ELA, both the CST (Exhibit 11) and the SAI (Exhibit 12) show a slight increase and no increase when comparing the first to the fourth post-designation year. Since these scores have been standardized, the average for middle grades schools in California for both ELA and mathematics is around 0.

Exhibit 11. Average CSTs in ELA for Subset of STW-TCS Schools

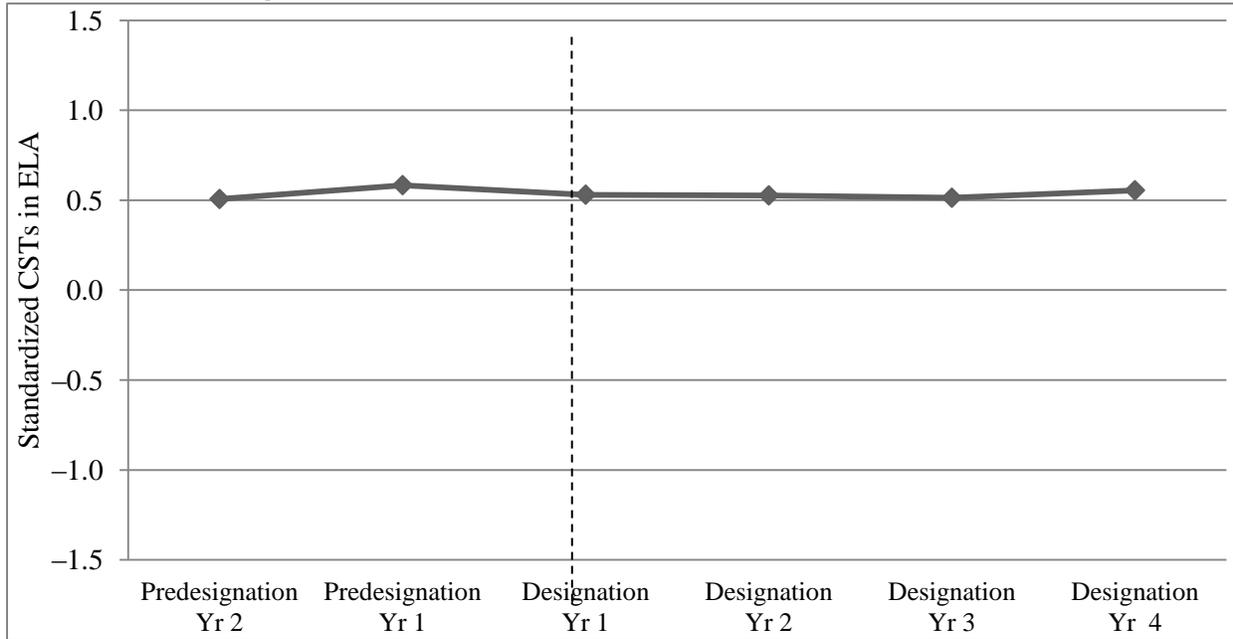
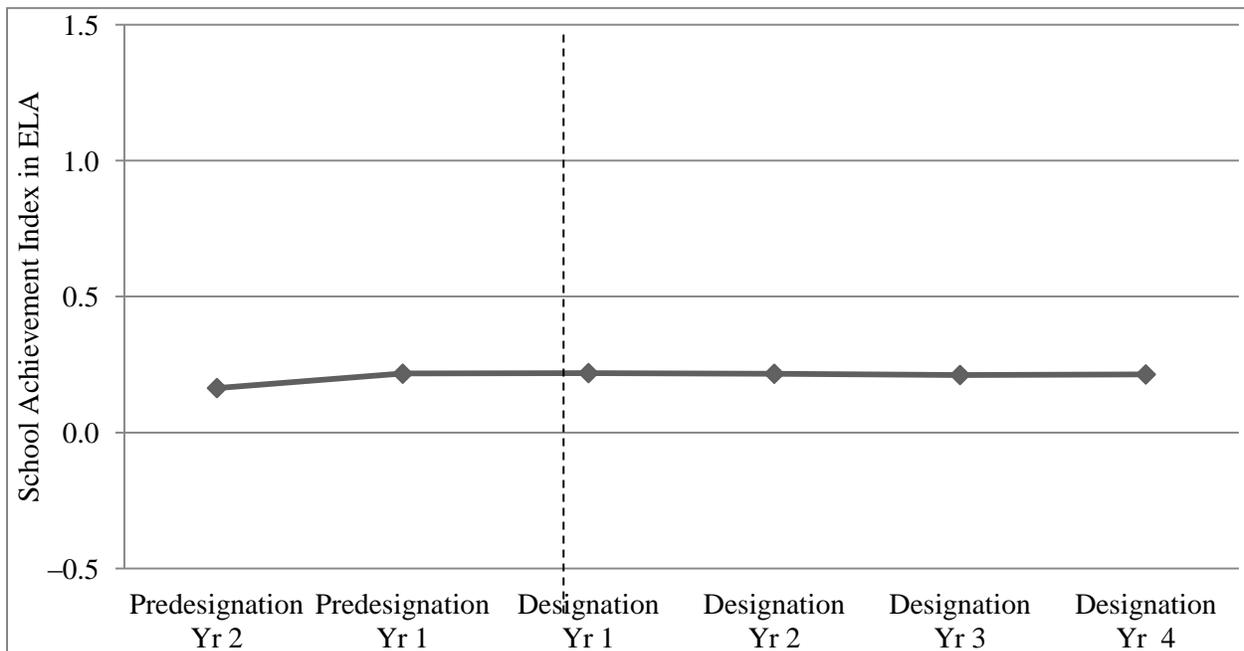


Exhibit 12. SAI in ELA for Subset of STW-TCS Schools



In mathematics, the CST (Exhibit I3) and the SAI (Exhibit I4) show a slight decrease in performance between the first and the fourth years of designation. Although these differences are small, the data indicate that academic performance is not continuously improving in STW-TCS schools over time but is generally maintaining or declining slightly.

Exhibit I3. Average CSTs in Mathematics for Subset of STW-TCS Schools

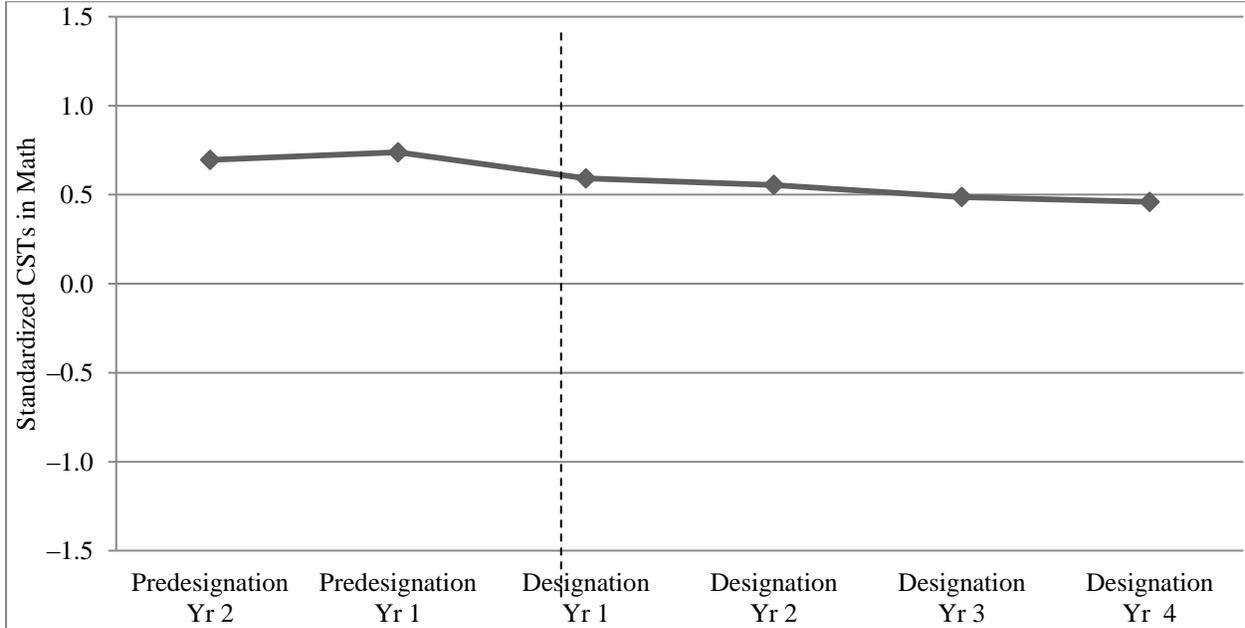
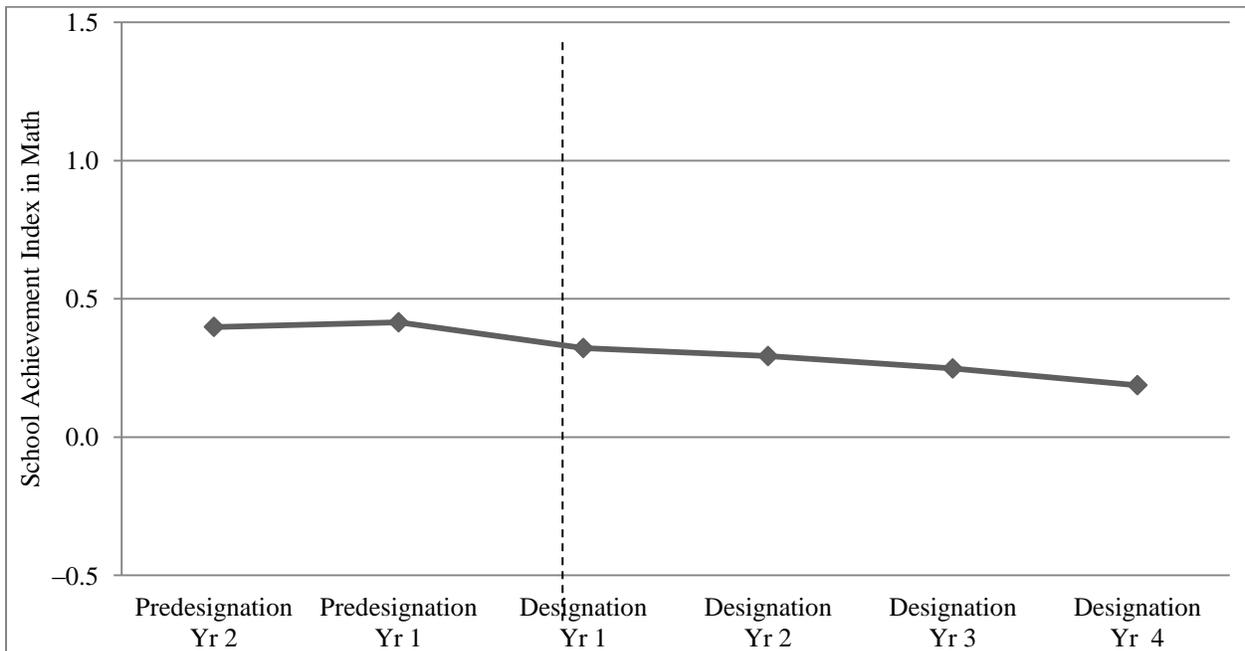


Exhibit I4. SAI in Mathematics for Subset of STW-TCS Schools



Analyses of API growth targets, as previously shown in Exhibit 5, show that since 2008 at least 95 percent of designated STW-TCS schools have met API growth targets. Since 2007 the average API for STW-TCS schools has been greater than 800, suggesting schools might continue to meet growth targets by maintaining an API of 800 (as noted previously, the state target for API is 800, and schools who meet this target are expected to maintain an API at or above 800). Thus, the API indicator presents a more positive picture of continuous improvement for STW-TCS schools.

Participants' Perceptions of the STW-TCS Program

To address the last two research questions, we conducted one-hour telephone interviews with a randomly selected sample of 12 STW-TCS principals. This represents one-third of STW-TCS participants. To guide these interviews, we developed a protocol that incorporated multiple rounds of feedback from the study's task group members.

During the interviews, we inquired about the program, respondent's experiences with the program, and perceptions regarding what participation in STW-TCS has meant to the schools. We also asked about the school policies, programs, and practices they deemed most successful. Once the interviews were transcribed, we analyzed the responses using a qualitative analysis program and summarized themes.

In the following section, we begin by presenting some overall impressions from the interviews. Then, we describe respondents' experiences with various program components and perception of the visibility of the program. Next, we discuss school practice reported by respondents as important to their schools' success. Then we describe benefits of the program and perceived program impact. Lastly, we provide a discussion of challenges and additional supports participants would like from the program.

Overall Impressions

Overall, respondents provided a fairly consistent picture of the program. Most described similar experiences applying to STW-TCS and spoke positively about the benefits of the program. For example, all respondents noted that participation led to increased networking opportunities, focus on continuous improvement, and validation and positive public relations. The most commonly reported challenges were the time commitment of the program and conference attendance costs. Since the networking component was a main benefit to participation, perhaps not surprisingly, the additional support most requested was increased opportunities for networking.

Program Components

In this section, we describe participants' experiences with various program components, including the application process, redesignation, review of other schools' applications to the program, conferences, school visits, and district support. For this and the remaining sections of this report, all quotations are from principals in this study.

Application

Principals were asked to describe the experience of applying to the program. Although reported processes varied, principals generally reported five steps: (1) introducing the program to staff, (2) evaluating the school based on the “School Self-Study and Rating Rubric,” (3) developing and refining the application, (4) submitting the application, and (5) participating in a visit by the STW-TCS Director, staff from [the middle grades office at] the California Department of Education, and a team of STW-TCS principals and other middle grades experts.

Principals generally reported that when they were first introduced to the program, it was important for them to gain staff approval and commitment. Two principals said they first discussed applying with department leaders who then took the idea to their staff. Another three principals reported waiting to apply for at least a year after learning about STW-TCS to ensure that their schools’ academic achievement and practices met the program’s standards.

The evaluation stage involved completing the rubric and collecting and analyzing data to assess whether the school met the program standards. STW-TCS requests that the application process be collaborative. Eight respondents were principals at STW-TCS schools during the time of the application process; all reported that the entire staff was involved in the application.¹¹ Specifically, all staff members in these schools completed the “School Self-Study and Rating Rubric,” which is divided into academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, social equity, and organizational structures and processes. Staff members not only provided ratings on the rubric, but were also required to provide specific evidence for each of the 37 criteria under the four headings mentioned above.

Principals spoke of the importance of having input from staff. One principal described schoolwide participation in the application as necessary since “it does no good to write an application if one person is spearheading it...because you have to have complete buy in.” All 12 principals described the evaluation, self-study, and rating of the school against the rubric as valuable and an important opportunity to have staff self-reflect on school practice.

The next step in the application process reported by principals involves using the school’s data and rubric results to write the application. Half (four of eight) reported that the actual writing was done by a core group of staff. They also reported that after the writing stage, the application was given to all staff to read and review during the refinement stage. The purpose of this stage is “to make sure everybody was in agreement with what was written” and to ensure that the information accurately reflected school practice.

Although the only district-level requirement is to sign their schools’ application, nine principals indicated their district had supported their decision to apply and remain engaged in the program.

¹¹ This includes a principal who stated that the school’s initial application was completed by one staff member but was rejected; the school reapplied the next year and involved all staff members in the process.

The processes of evaluating, writing, and refining the application were described as lengthy and time-consuming. For three schools, these stages were reported as taking over a year. As one principal who had previous experience reviewing STW-TCS applications explained, “It takes a long time if you want to do it well...[otherwise] it's obvious to the people reading the applications that the principal wrote it without the help of everybody involved in the school.”

The third stage of the application process occurs after schools submit the application and the application is under review. During the application review stage, a school's application may be rejected, additional information may be requested, or a school may receive a request for a school visit. One principal reported the school's application was rejected after the first submission. The principal said they had not spent enough time on the application. In addition, the principal reported the application was written by one staff member, when it “definitely (should be) a team effort.”

The principal spoke with the STW-TCS director, who provided suggestions for ways to strengthen the application. In the following year, the school successfully applied again after doing “the proper research, really understanding what [the program] was about,” and involving all staff members in the process. At another school, after submitting the application the principal reported being contacted by the director of STW-TCS. He was asked to clarify the data reported and was allowed to resubmit a portion of the application.

If a school's application receives high scores from reviewers and is recommended by reviewers to proceed to the next phase, the last stage of the application process is a visit from STW-TCS staff and other designated STW-TCS principals. These school visits span a full day and include up to 12 STW-TCS and CDE staff and designated principal visitors. The visit consists of classroom observations and meetings with school staff, district staff, the school board, community members, and students. It also includes informal interactions with students during class or break time.

These visits were described by principals as “the longest day of your career” and “the most wonderful day I ever had in all of education.” The principal who made the latter comment reported that the meeting with community members was “very reaffirming.” The community members spoke about what they liked about the school, which is something “you just don't hear...on a daily basis.” After the visit, each school received a report summarizing its strengths, suggestions for improvement, and notification if it had been designated as a STW-TCS.

Redesignation

STW-TCS schools must reapply every three years to remain in the program. Nine principals said they had experienced the STW-TCS redesignation process, either at their current school or at a previous school. All nine principals reported the redesignation process as similar to the initial application. They described how their schools were required to revisit the four program components by completing the rubric and collecting data to once again demonstrate that the school met the criteria.

Additional redesignation requirements included writing about new policies implemented, awards and recognitions received, school visits, and any other important occurrence within the

last three years. The redesignation also involved a less intensive half-day visit from two STW-TCS staff. One principal suggested these school visits were less intensive because there is less “to be validated” and “there’s a little more trust.”

Participation in Application Review

Once accepted into the STW-TCS program, school staff are encouraged to review applications and to visit other schools. Eleven principals reported they had served as reviewers while at their current school or at another designated school. In the earlier program years, principals reported staff met at the STW-TCS corporate office in Long Beach to receive two days of training on reading and scoring applications. Currently, though, principals report reviewer trainings are conducted over the telephone and online.

Ten of the eleven principals who reported serving as reviewers described the experience as valuable for reflection and learning new practices. One principal said, reading the “applications of people who have taken the time to be part of this process and to visit their schools, I do that willingly...because I believe it makes a difference in the lives of children across our state.”

Conferences

Another component of the STW-TCS program is that schools are expected to attend the national conference during their designation and redesignation years to receive their STW-TCS award and present on their school practice.¹² All interviewed principals, except one who had just been designated in 2012, said they had attended at least one national STW conference in Washington, D.C. In addition, all the principals interviewed said they had also attended at least one of the annual CLMS conferences.

Respondents reported that these conferences consisted of workshops and presentations from various STW schools and participants known nationally in and outside of education. Because of the inclusion of presenters from all over the country, one principal described it as “not a conference that’s just based on what’s great for education. It’s what’s great for the global community.” In addition, one principal described his experience at STW and CLMS conferences as gaining a “wealth of knowledge” and “something that you wouldn’t really have the opportunity to do if you weren’t involved in these organizations.”

The national STW conferences also include a visit to Capitol Hill to meet each school’s congressional representative.¹³ One principal reported this visit to the Hill as a “very positive experience.”

¹² While schools can always attend the national conference, they are only required to attend during their designation and redesignation years.

¹³ Information about the visit to Capitol Hill was obtained from the Schools to Watch—National Forum website at <http://www.middlegradesforum.org/index.php/legislative-visits>.

School Visits

The STW-TCS designation was described as a “flagpole” for inviting visitors from other schools interested in learning about successful practices, because the designation flags successful middle grades schools. All 12 principals interviewed had visited other STW schools or had visitors come to their school. These visits occurred after being asked by STW staff,¹⁴ networking with schools at CLMS conferences, or getting contacted by schools interested in learning about the program. Although most of these visits came from other schools within California, some principals also had STW teams from other states visit their schools. Principals said that most often they were contacted for visits because other schools had viewed their profile on the STW-TCS website and were interested in learning about a particular practice or had similar student demographics. Principals reported receiving between one and ten visits a year. They indicated that most school visits consisted of a full day of meetings, presentations, and classroom observations with a large group of staff.

STW-TCS schools, including those newly designated, are frequently contacted for visits because as one principal suggested, many middle-grade schools in California are “desperate” to find schools that are successful so they can “pick your brain.” Although about half of the principals said visits could be overwhelming, they also perceived them as a “gift” for sharing replicable processes that will benefit other students. One principal said this kind of generosity was common amongst STW-TCS principals because they tend to be “very open people” and care “about success for all kids, not just our own students.”

District Support

Although as mentioned previously, the only district-level requirement is to sign the school’s application, program guidelines suggest that schools involve districts in other program activities.¹⁵ Forms of district support varied across schools but generally consisted of encouraging schools to apply, perceiving the program as valuable, reviewing the program application before submission, providing financial support for attending program related conferences, and sending district administrators to the national STW conference.

Although district support was generally viewed as necessary, one principal said that he viewed the program “as a school event” so did not deem district support, other than financial, as necessary.

Visibility of the Program

Respondents provided mixed responses when asked about their perception of how well known the STW-TCS program is among middle-grade schools in California. Only one respondent described the program’s popularity across the state, calling the program “legendary” and saying, “If [schools] are not one, they want to be one.” Four respondents were unable to gauge the

¹⁴ These STW staff include both staff from STW schools from across the country and staff from California’s STW-TCS schools.

¹⁵ Information on district involvement can be found at <http://clms.net/stw/forms/STW-TCSI2PrincipalChecklist.pdf>.

popularity of the program because they were only in contact with other middle-grades schools already involved with STW-TCS or CLMS.

While three respondents said the program was well publicized by the CDE and CLMS at the state level, six respondents expressed concern over the lack of local publicity. One respondent said, “it just varies whether [outside recognition] is important for a district or not.”

Another respondent expanded on the perception that knowledge about the program begins locally, saying “once one school gets this, then of course everybody’s interested, and your neighboring districts are like, ‘Oh, how come they got that? What is that all about?’” Seven respondents mentioned becoming aware of the program through their district office or from another designated school in their district. In addition, greater advertising was a stated goal among the six respondents recommending the program to other principals.

School Practice

We were also interested in learning about STW-TCS principals’ perceptions of the most important programs, policies, and practices related to their schools’ success. Principals described a broad range of factors. As many of these fit into the four STW-TCS selection criteria—academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, social equity, and organizational structures and processes—we organize the results below accordingly.

Academic Excellence

According to the STW-TCS criteria, academic excellence includes challenging students with high academic standards and providing staff with opportunities to improve their practice (California STW-TCS, n.d.c). Nine of twelve principals stated that their school achieved academic excellence, in part, by continuously monitoring and holding students and teachers accountable for their performance. Examples of school’s monitoring and accountability of students included requiring students to use Cornell notes, keep work portfolios, self-assess, and revise work assignments. Respondents also stated that teachers support students through these processes in addition to developing curricula that are relevant for students and aligned with state standards. The continuous monitoring of students, as reported by eight principals, is facilitated in part by schools being data driven. Principals said their data driven practices include meetings held for staff to analyze and discuss student data. At five schools, these meetings included discussing results of common assessments where they identify struggling students and weak instructional strategies.

Three principals reported that oversight of teacher performance occurred through classroom observations. In addition, they said their schools provided teachers with the necessary professional development and tools needed to make them successful.

Developmental Responsiveness

STW-TCS defines developmental responsiveness as creating an environment that is responsive to the unique needs of middle-grades school students (California STW-TCS, n.d.c). Ten of twelve principals discussed their developmental practices, which they often referred to as “looking at the whole child.” Three principals mentioned providing students with opportunities

to take electives to help them develop creativity, explore career aspirations, and stay engaged in school. One school respondent reported adding a zero period for physical education so students have the option of taking an additional elective. Another school was said to offer up to 47 different electives because “not only are we looking at the academic rigor...of a child, but also at the creative, musical, kinesthetic part of being 12.”

Other developmentally responsive programming and practices cited included helping students become successful in algebra, attending to socio-emotional needs, and supporting transition activities. Two principals mentioned creating structures that assisted students with algebra. One school respondent said they adjusted their master schedule so that algebra readiness classes are taken in the morning when students are most alert. Another received approval from their district not to require students to take algebra before they are ready. Instead, the school was said to offer a short series of prealgebra lessons at the end of the school year.

Other school respondents described implementing practices at their schools to help with students’ socio-emotional needs. These included character-based and anti-bullying programs and focusing on successful transitions to middle and high school. Transition activities included visits to feeder schools and mentoring opportunities.

Social Equity

For the STW-TCS program, social equity includes valuing diversity and providing all students with access to high quality teachers, learning opportunities, and supports (California STW–TCS, n.d.c). Nine principals credited success to their social equity practices. The most common practice, described by seven principals, was providing additional supports for academically struggling students. One respondent said this included assigning the best teachers to ELs new to the country. Another principal described utilizing a learning center model for students with disabilities to help them become more successful in general education classrooms. At this learning center, students were said to receive targeted instruction from a special education teacher. Among six schools, other forms of support were mentioned. These included offering mandatory and voluntary extended learning opportunities before and after school and during lunch.

Principals also discussed other specific equity practices. For example, a principal said that separating Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) and non-GATE students created a negative culture within the school. In response, the school eliminated their lower level student track and created a GATE diversified model, which allowed all students to take advanced courses.

Organizational Structures and Processes

The fourth STW-TCS selection criterion is organizational structures and processes in which schools create systems that enable continued high performance (California STW–TCS, n.d.c). All principals mentioned at least one organizational structure or process that was important to their success. Eleven principals discussed having some form of teacher collaboration at their schools, such as professional learning communities. Teacher collaboration was described as sharing common departmental preparation times; developing lesson plans together; and

discussing student work, common assessments, and student data. Principals described collaboration as a way to empower teachers in their instructional practices.

Five principals also reported using teaming models that allowed cohorts of student to take the same classes and have the same teachers. Principals said that teaming allowed for stronger relationships between students, teachers, and parents. Two school respondents said that each team in the school is autonomous, with its own academic and discipline practices, newsletters, and field trips.

Benefits of the Program

During the interviews, principals were asked to describe not only their experiences with the program but also any benefits to program participation. From principal reports, three main benefits to participation were described: networking, a focus on continuous improvement, and validation and positive publicity. Below we elaborate on each of these benefits.

Networking

All respondents described “networking” as a benefit of participating in STW-TCS, which included learning from as well as sharing and collaborating with other principals. These experiences were said to arise mainly from attendance at the CLMS and STW conferences, the applicant review process, and school site visits. For some principals (5 of 12), networking provided an opportunity to develop a community of like-minded principals. Principals (5 of 12) also described networking as additional opportunities they became exposed to due to participation in STW-TCS, such as mentoring, serving on panels, or visiting the House of Representatives. One principal reported that these opportunities help them to see a “bigger world out there.”

Eight principals reported the networking that occurred from participation in STW-TCS as creating learning opportunities. As described by participants, the applicant review process, school site visits, conference presentations, and discussions that arise with other STW-TCS principals through these activities provide an opportunity to learn and be exposed to different school practices. As one principal reported, “it’s...one of those things where you get to see something outside of your district and your little world and an opportunity to learn something new and to see a different school.”

Other principals described engagement with other schools through this program as an “eye opener,” an opportunity to be exposed to new ideas that have proven successful elsewhere, and to learn from others’ successes and failures. One principal, for example, described creating a list of ideas and program names to explore after reviewing STW-TCS applications. This exposure also prompted a few principals (3 of 12) to reflect on their own school’s practice. As one principal explained, “every time...we’ve been...[on a site visit], we have come back and reexamined ourselves as a school.”

Ten of twelve principals also described networking as an opportunity to share practices with other principals. This sharing of practice was said to occur through the conferences and school site visits. As described by one respondent, as principals continue to meet each other through

various conferences (e.g., CLMS, Middle Grades Alliance conference) and activities, they begin to talk with their colleagues about what policies, strategies, and programs are implemented at their school and vice versa.

Many principals (6 of 10) reported that sharing practices is also important because it is done through “a cohort of similar schools.” Principals become “part of a larger conversation about academic improvement” and through the STW-TCS program “there’s this instant grouping or colleague pool.” These statements suggest that it is not only the sharing of best practices that is important but also the development of a community of principals who share similar perspectives.

Focus on Continuous Improvement

All respondents reported that participation in STW-TCS helped them to reflect on practice or focus on continuous improvement. Nine principals particularly emphasized this, with some describing it as a continuous improvement model. Principals described the program and the rubric as providing a “focus,” “guide,” and “purpose and direction” to the school. It “gives you the banks of the river.” Principals reported liking this focus since “nobody’s perfect” and the program helped schools to “evolve,” “move,” and keep “goals in the forefront and ...pushing [you] to look at your weak areas.”

This focus on continuous improvement was said to be facilitated through the rubric, the reapplication process, and visits from other schools, which kept them accountable and visible to others. Four respondents compared the continuous accountability of STW-TCS with that of other school awards. As one respondent described,

What I like about Schools to Watch is that it doesn’t end. It isn’t a, “Here you go. You got a big award. Hang up your banner and never think about it again.” You have to have goals and you have to have things you are going to be working on...It’s not just an honor that you get and then you forget about.

Validation and Positive Publicity

Another benefit of program participation reported by all principals is the “recognition,” “stamp of approval,” and “validation” the program provides. For one respondent, the focus on middle-grades schools also made this award unique. He noted that few middle grades schools receive other public school recognition, such as California Distinguished School or National Blue Ribbon. Respondents also described that the validation created “pride” among staff, students, and parents.

Ten respondents indicated that receiving the STW-TCS designation provided positive publicity and public relations. Principals discussed the branding of the school through the hanging of a banner, notification that the school is STW-TCS on the marquee, and notice of designation on the school website and letterhead. A few principals (3 of 12) discussed how designation had provided them with local media coverage.

Half of the respondents reported that designation improved or strengthened parents' perception of the school. They noted that parents and the community have increased "confidence" in the school, "feel better about what we're doing," and "have a lot of pride" in the designation. One principal described how designation and the public relations associated with it had allowed the school to make connections with the city government, chamber of commerce, and other local organizations.

Impact of Participation

We were also interested in the perceived impact of participation in STW-TCS. Most respondents (8 of 11)¹⁶ noted that the main impacts were further support for the work the school was already doing and the focus on continuous improvement. Only one respondent reported that STW-TCS had not impacted the school, but mainly because, as a high performing school, the school was already engaging in many best practices.

A quarter of respondents reported altering or creating programming to support students and families in response to the program's encouragement of developmental responsiveness. As one principal reported, "Schools to Watch focuses on...parent-community involvement, so it definitely made us look at that further." One principal reported offering additional programming to engage families, while another mentioned adding extended learning time to support struggling students.

Challenges and Additional Supports

A common challenge reported by slightly more than half of respondents (7 of 12) was the time commitment involved with the program. Five participants, in particular, described the application as a lengthy and arduous process. It takes time "to do well," is a "big undertaking," and "a lot of work." Three participants also noted the time to visit schools and to be visited as a challenge. Although the school visits were generally seen as positive, one respondent noted, "you can over network to some extent." Another challenge of program participation, reported by half of respondents, dealt with the cost of conference participation. STW-TCS schools are expected to participate in the CLMS conference yearly and the STW national conference held in Washington, D.C., when initially designated and when redesignated. Even with these challenges, most participants (11 of 12) reported that the benefits outweighed the costs.

Respondents also reported challenges related to maintaining high academic performance. These challenges included decreasing budgets (83 percent of respondents), changing school composition (25 percent) (i.e., increasing/decreasing enrollment, increasing numbers of students living in poverty), maintaining continuous academic improvement when schools were already high performing (25 percent), and staff turnover (17 percent).

Concerns expressed over the budget cuts included increased class sizes, reduction of support staff (e.g., counselors, nurses, administrative staff), and elimination or scaling back of programs

¹⁶ One of the randomly sampled schools was a new designee and, therefore, could not respond to the impact that program participation had on the school.

to support students. Still, a few of the principals (3 of 12), emphasized the high expectations and commitment of the staff despite these fiscal challenges. For one respondent, being a STW-TCS school reflected the commitment to success for all students even in the face of hard times.

When class size is larger you're still trying to implement your instructional strategies, you're still trying to extend learning time, do all of those things that you've been doing, and so ... there's a certain fatigue factor.... But you take that as the world you live in and [say], "Okay, what can we do about it?" We're in Schools to Watch because we believe in the success of all kids and because we've had success implementing things. We just find other ways [to continue] to do them.

However, another respondent questioned whether the budget cuts, particularly those affecting programming to support students, ultimately would change the nature of STW-TCS.

[Although] that effort can sustain itself, it also flies in the face...of where we are in California with regard to education budgets.... At some point there is going to be a critical mass [jeopardizing]...what can continue to happen....and how...that translates into student achievement, ...engagement, and a kid's sense of belonging in school. As soon as you get to 45 kids in a class, that's not a middle school.... Schools are...going to have to examine who they are and what Schools to Watch actually means.

Respondents were also asked what additional support they would like from STW-TCS. While a third of respondents did not suggest any additional support or activities, slightly less than half (5 of 12) suggested more networking opportunities with STW-TCS colleagues. These suggestions included increased networking at conferences, online conferencing opportunities, more site visits to share signature practices, using online media such as a blog or chat board to increase communication, creating smaller cohorts of principals by area to regularly share best practices, and a yearly meeting with STW-TCS principals to share strategies.

Two respondents said that additional support in the form of funding for either the conferences or to support the work of the schools would be useful. Another two respondents suggested more public relations to increase awareness of the program and to continue to increase the profile of middle-grades schools. Similarly, one principal indicated that although the application could be simplified to make it less intimidating, rigor was also an important advantage of the program.

Summary

The national Schools to Watch (STW) program is an initiative of the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform designed to identify high performing middle grades schools. California joined this program under the name Schools to Watch—Taking Center Stage (STW-TCS) in 2003. This report has provided a description of STW nationally and in California, presented statistics on participating schools, and provided a summary of program perspectives as expressed by a randomly selected sample of STW-TCS principals.

Given the program's focus on high achieving schools, it is perhaps not surprising that STW-TCS schools show somewhat higher achievement on average than all other middle grades schools in

California. At the same time, demographic analyses of these schools show they may serve somewhat different populations.

STW-TCS schools tend to be larger and enroll lower percentages of ELs and students receiving free or reduced-price lunch. Still, individual schools can look quite different. Three STW-TCS schools have FRPL rates of 85% or higher, while four schools have EL rates of 26% or higher. However, even when controlling for these differences, STW-TCS schools appear to academically outperform their counterparts. STW-TCS schools also show lower expulsion and suspension rates.

The random sample of 12 STW-TCS principals uniformly spoke positively about the program. The main benefits mentioned include networking with other schools, validation and positive publicity, and a focus on continuous improvement. Networking occurred primarily through interactions with principals and other school staff during CLMS and STW conferences and school site visits. Principals reported that designation in the program also validated the efforts of school staff; instilled pride in teachers, students, and staff; and provided positive publicity within the larger community. Principals also reported that participation provided purpose and direction and a focus on continuous improvement. This focus on continuous improvement was said to be facilitated through the rubric, the reapplication process, and visits from other schools, which kept them accountable and visible.

However, despite this last cited benefit, the post-designation analysis presented in this report show that the achievement scores of STW-TCS schools on average generally held steady in English Language Arts and slightly decreased in mathematics over time. At the same time, most STW-TCS schools continued to meet their API targets. Reported challenges included the time commitment and the cost of participating in conferences.

Overall, virtually all respondents indicated that in their experience the program's benefits outweigh its cost. Hopefully, this report will inform others about this state and federal program designed to "improve academic and developmental outcomes for all students in the middle grades."¹⁷

¹⁷ As described on The National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform website located at <http://www.middlegradesforum.org/>

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Appendix: Description of the STW Criteria

The following was excerpted from the STW website (<http://www.middlegradesforum.org/>)

Academic Excellence

High-performing schools with middle grades are academically excellent. They challenge all students to use their minds well.

1. All students are expected to meet high academic standards.
 - Expectations are clear for students and parents.
 - Prior to students beginning an assignment, teachers supply students with exemplars of high-quality work that meet the performance standard or level.
 - Students know what high-quality work should be like.
 - Students revise their work based on meaningful feedback until they meet or exceed the performance standard or level.
2. Curriculum, instruction, assessment, and appropriate academic interventions are aligned with high standards.
 - They provide a coherent vision for what students should know and be able to do.
 - Students, teachers, and families understand what students are learning and why. In any class and at any time, students can explain the importance of what they are learning.
 - The curriculum is rigorous, non-repetitive, and moves forward substantially.
 - Work is demanding and steadily progresses.
3. The curriculum emphasizes deep understanding of important concepts and the development of essential skills.
 - Teachers make connections across the disciplines to reinforce important concepts and assist students in thinking critically and applying what they have learned to solve real-world problems.
 - All teachers incorporate academic and informational literacy into their course work (i.e., reading, writing, note taking, researching, listening, and speaking).
4. Instructional strategies include a variety of challenging and engaging activities that are clearly related to the grade-level standards, concepts, and skills being taught.
 - To reach students, all teachers draw from a common subset of instructional strategies and activities such as direct instruction, cooperative learning, project-based learning, simulations, hands-on learning, and integrated technology.
5. Teachers use a variety of methods to assess and monitor the progress of student learning (e.g., tests, quizzes, assignments, exhibitions, projects, performance tasks, portfolios).
 - All teachers use frequent assessments to benchmark key concepts and the achievement of their students.
 - Students learn how to assess their own and others' work against the performance standards, expectations, or levels.
6. The faculty and master schedule provide students time to meet rigorous academic standards.
 - Students are provided more time to learn the content, concepts, or skills if needed.

- Flexible scheduling enables students to engage in academic interventions, extended projects, hands-on experiences, and inquiry-based learning.
7. Teachers know what each student has learned and still needs to learn.
 - Students are provided the support they need to meet rigorous academic standards.
 - Students have multiple opportunities to succeed and receive extra help as needed, such as: co-teaching or collaborative resource model, support and intervention classes, before- and after-school tutoring, and homework centers.
 8. The adults in the school are provided time and frequent opportunities to enhance student achievement by working with colleagues to deepen their knowledge and to improve their standards-based practice.
 - They collaborate in analyzing student achievement data and making decisions about rigorous curriculum, standards-based assessment practice, effective instructional methods, and evaluation of student work.
 - The professional learning community employs coaching, mentoring, and peer observation as a means of continuous instructional improvement.

Development Responsiveness

High-performing schools with middle grades are sensitive to the unique developmental challenges of early adolescence.

1. The staff creates a personalized environment that supports each student's intellectual, ethical, social, and physical development.
 - Adults and students are grouped into smaller communities (i.e., teams, houses, academies) for enhanced teaching and learning.
 - These small learning communities are characterized by stable, close, and mutually respectful relationships.
 - Every student has a mentor, advisor, advocate, or other adult he/she trusts and stays in relationship with throughout the middle school experience.
2. The school provides access to comprehensive services to foster healthy physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development.
 - Teachers are trained to recognize and handle student problems.
 - Students with difficulties, and their families, can get help.
 - The school houses a wide range of support—nurses, counselors, resource teachers—to help students and families who need special assistance.
 - The school staff members offer parent education activities involving families.
3. Teachers foster curiosity, creativity and the development of social skills in a structured and supportive environment. All Teachers:
 - Enhance standards-based learning by using a wide variety of instructional strategies.
 - Incorporate well-developed procedures and routines for effective classroom management.
 - Facilitate learning by deliberately teaching study and organizational skills.
 - Integrate creative activities in the lessons (e.g., current technologies, visual and performing arts, etc.).

4. The curriculum is both socially significant and relevant to the personal and career interests of young adolescents.
 - Students talk about daily issues in their own lives, their community, and their world.
 - Students take action, make informed choices, work collaboratively, and learn to resolve conflicts.
5. Teachers use an interdisciplinary approach to reinforce important concepts, skills, and address real-world problems.
 - For example, students may read a historical novel for language arts and history and then study music from the same time period in music class.
 - Students can work on the same project in several different classes.
6. Students are provided multiple opportunities to explore a rich variety of topics and interests in order to develop their identity, learn about their strengths, discover and demonstrate their own competence, and plan for their future.
 - Teachers and counselors push students to challenge themselves and set high academic and career goals for their future.
7. All students have opportunities for voice—posing questions, reflecting on experiences, and participating in decisions and leadership activities.
 - All students have a real say, or have legitimate representation, in what happens at school.
 - School staff members have an "open-door" policy to encourage student involvement and connection.
 - Students take an active role in school-family conferences.
8. The school staff members develop alliances with families to enhance and support the well-being of the children.
 - Parents are more than just volunteers or fund-raisers; they are meaningfully involved in all aspects of the school.
 - Parents are informed, included, and involved as partners and decision makers in their children's education.
9. Staff members provide all students with opportunities to develop citizenship skills, to use the community as a classroom, and to engage the community in providing resources and support.
 - Students take on projects to improve their school, community, state, nation, and world.
10. The school provides age-appropriate, co-curricular activities to foster social skills and character, and to develop interests beyond the classroom environment.
 - Student co-curricular activities cover a wide range of interests—team sports, clubs, exploratory opportunities, service opportunities, and a rich program in the visual and performing arts.
 - Activities include both boys and girls and students of all skill levels.

Organizational Structure

High-performing schools with middle grades are learning organizations that establish norms, structures, and organizational arrangements to support and sustain their trajectory toward excellence.

1. A shared vision of what a high-performing school is and does drives every facet of school change.
 - The shared vision drives constant improvement.
 - Shared, distributed, and sustained leadership propels the school forward and preserves its institutional memory and purpose.
 - Everyone knows what the plan is and the vision is posted and evidenced by actions.
2. The principal has the responsibility and authority to hold the school-improvement enterprise together, including day-to-day know-how, coordination, strategic planning, and communication.
 - Lines of leadership for the school's improvement efforts are clear.
 - The school leadership team has the responsibility to make things happen.
 - The principal makes sure that assignments are completed.
3. The school is a community of practice in which learning, experimentation, and time and opportunity for reflection are the norm.
 - School leadership fosters and supports interdependent collaboration.
 - Expectations of continuous improvement permeates the school culture.
 - Everyone's job it to learn.
4. The school and district devote resources to content-rich professional development, which is connected to reaching and sustaining the school vision and increasing student achievement.
 - Professional development is intensive, of high quality, ongoing, and relevant to middle-grades education.
 - Teachers get professional support to improve instructional practice (i.e., classroom visitations, peer coaching, demonstrations lessons, etc.)
 - Opportunities for learning increase knowledge and skills, challenge outmoded beliefs and practices, and provide support in the classroom.
5. The school is not an island unto itself; it is a part of a larger educational system (i.e., districts, networks and community partnerships).
 - There are deliberate vertical articulation and transition programs between feeder elementary schools and destination high schools.
 - The district supports (funding and time) its schools' participation in best practice networks, associations, learning communities, and professional development focused on middle grades improvement and achievement.
 - School and district work collaboratively to bring coherence to curriculum, instruction, assessment, intervention, data collection, analysis, and accountability for student achievement.

6. The school staff holds itself accountable for the students' success.
 - The school collects, analyzes, and uses data as a basis for making decisions.
 - The administrators and faculty grapple with school-generated evaluation data to identify areas for more extensive and intensive improvement.
 - The staff delineates benchmarks, and insists upon evidence and results.
 - The school staff intentionally and explicitly reconsiders its vision and practices when data call them into question.
7. District and school staff possess and cultivate the collective will to persevere, believing it is their business to produce increased achievement and enhanced development of all students.
 - The faculty and administrators see barriers as challenges, not problems.
8. The school and district staffs work with colleges and universities to recruit, prepare, and mentor novice and experienced teachers.
 - Principals insist on having teachers who promote young adolescents' intellectual, social, emotional, physical, and ethical growth.
9. The school includes families and community members in setting and supporting the school's trajectory toward high performance.
 - The administrators and teachers inform families and community members about the school's goals for student success and the students' responsibility for meeting those goals.
 - The administrators and teachers engage all stakeholders in ongoing and reflective conversation, consensus building, and decision making about governance to promote school improvement.

Social Equity

High-performing schools with middle grades are socially equitable, democratic, and fair. They provide every student with high-quality teachers, resources, learning opportunities, and supports. They keep positive options open for all students.

1. To the fullest extent possible, all students, including English learners, students with disabilities, gifted and honors students, participate in heterogeneous classes with high academic and behavioral expectations.
 - Faculty and administrators are committed to helping each student produce proficient work.
 - Evidence of this commitment includes tutoring, mentoring, enrichment assignments, differentiated instruction, special adaptations, supplemental classes, and other supports.
 - Accelerated, short-term interventions for students with similar needs are fluid and do not become low-level or permanent tracks.
2. Students are provided the opportunity to use many and varied approaches to achieve and demonstrate competence and mastery of standards.
 - Teachers know each student's learning style.
 - Teachers differentiate instruction in order to give each student equal opportunity to comprehend the standards-based curriculum.

3. Teachers continually adapt curriculum, instruction, assessment, and scheduling to meet their students' diverse and changing needs.
 - The faculty is always seeking ways to improve programs, curriculum, and assessment to better meet student needs.
4. All students have equal access to valued knowledge in all school classes and activities.
 - All students use technology to do research and analyze data, read more than textbooks, and understand how to solve complex problems.
 - To the fullest extent possible, students with disabilities are in regular classrooms that are co-taught by special education professionals.
 - All students have access to participate in interest-based classes, activities, or opportunities.
5. Students have ongoing opportunities to learn about and appreciate their own and others' cultures.
 - The school values knowledge from the diverse cultures represented in the school, community, and our nation.
 - Materials in the media center represent all of the cultures of the students.
 - Families often come and share their traditions and beliefs.
 - Teachers use multi-cultural materials and methods.
 - Multiple viewpoints are encouraged.
6. The school community knows every student well.
 - Each student is appreciated and respected.
 - Staff members do not use negative labels or discuss students in negative ways.
 - Every student has an adult advocate and supporter in the school.
7. The faculty welcomes and encourages the active participation of all its families and makes sure that all its families are an integral part of the school.
 - Transportation, meals, childcare, and translation support are provided so all families of diverse cultures and languages can attend school events.
8. The school's reward system is designed to value diversity, civility, service, and democratic citizenship.
 - The faculty recognizes the contributions of all its students.
 - Awards are not limited to sports and academic honors.
 - Students' success and good deeds are always noticed.
9. Staff members understand and support the family backgrounds and values of its students.
 - The school recruits a culturally and linguistically diverse staff.
 - The staff members are a good match to the school's community.
10. The school rules are clear, fair, and consistently applied.
 - Students and parents are informed of school rules and know exactly what will and does happen if students break the rules.
 - The school's suspension rate is low and in proportion to the student population.

- Staff members routinely analyze and act upon referral and suspension data and make sure that no one group of students is unfairly singled out by classroom teachers and school staff.
- The school's disciplinary referrals and suspension rate are low as a result of proactive interventions that keep students engaged, resilient, healthy, safe, and respectful of one another.