

# High School Case Studies

On April 24, 2019, these case studies were shared during the presentation **How Do Principals Influence Student Achievement? A Summary of Leadership Study Results for Practitioners** by Dr. Elaine Allensworth from the University of Chicago, Consortium on School Research. A snapshot of the research associated with this presentation is available at <https://consortium.uchicago.edu/publications/how-do-principals-influence-student-achievement>.

## Elm High School

Elm High School has several school-wide goals, according to Principal Parsons, including: 1) create college and career readiness for students at all grade levels, 2) help students to manage some of their internal social-emotional issues, and 3) celebrate success as a school. Principal Parsons said that creating a college-going culture is one of his top priorities: *“Really, really creating a college-going culture.... Part of that is...the appearance of what kids see around the building. But rigorous learning is where we’re pushing toward developing stronger curricula that supports that college readiness.”* When asked what goals are being emphasized during the current school year, teachers highlight areas related to college and career readiness, including: college readiness/prep, Freshman OnTrack, ACT/test scores, the targeted instructional area (TIA) of argumentative writing, and the Common Core.

Although everyone understands the principal’s vision and goals, there is inconsistency among teachers at Elm in the degree to which they buy into the school-wide focus and vision of postsecondary education for all. A few of the teachers question the exclusive focus on college entrance and persistence. According to Ms. Peck, one of the teachers at Elm, the postsecondary goals the principal set are impractical and too ambitious. Ms. Peck said, *“Sometimes I feel like [Principal Parson’s] goals are unrealistic because it’s really hard to say that we’re going to get every single student into college when we have kids who really cannot read.”* Ms. Estes, another Elm HS teacher, believes there should be more of a focus on valuing and providing students with training for alternative postsecondary paths, such as the military and various trades.

Even though not all teachers buy into the school-wide goal of college readiness for all, Elm has different initiatives in place to help students become college ready, including teacher- and school-led service-learning projects. In addition, the school has three different external organizations working in the school to implement various initiatives, including: an organization providing near-peer mentoring for ninth graders, a local college providing support to help teachers integrate technology into their teaching, and an organization providing support to encourage college and career readiness. Some of the teachers said that it is difficult to maintain a strong focus due to different organizations leading pieces of the effort.

Principal Parsons believes in distributed leadership and says to staff that he is not *the* expert in the building. For him, the school relies on the expertise of everyone in the building. He encourages staff to work together. Although collaboration is important, the school schedule makes it difficult for staff to collaborate across departments. The principal, and other members of the leadership team, attend teacher meetings on a regular basis. Principal Parsons believes school leadership should be part of these meetings. He says it is important to *“make sure that we understand and feel where people are coming from, listening so we can make quality decisions to guide the school forward.”*

Staff members at Elm consistently monitor student data through biweekly meetings, during which teachers meet in grade-level teams to carefully examine students' behavior, attendance, and grades. Each teacher has a list of seven or eight struggling students with whom they check in and follow up on a weekly basis. Teachers at Elm are responsible for enacting support for students who are identified as struggling. One Elm teacher, for example, describes providing lunchtime tutoring to struggling students assigned to her just before the end of the grading period as a way to assist them in making up missing work. Other teachers offer lunchtime tutoring to their students more frequently. However, not all teachers believe in the usefulness of chasing down students who are repeatedly absent from class. According to Ms. Smith, one of the teachers:

*If a group of freshmen are failing, [teachers] might grab them all at lunch [or] might volunteer to work with them, catch them up and stuff. Sort of like a mini study hall...But there's been some pushback with teachers, too, because...if a student doesn't show up for two weeks and then is just given a packet to do the work, and then their grade [improves]...is that really benefiting the students?*

Often, support is available only at the end of a grading period.

## Oak High School

At Oak High School, the entire staff is organized around the common vision of college enrollment and college persistence. This vision is clear and articulated in a consistent manner by the principal, assistant principal, and staff members across the school. When asked about the school's goals, Principal Solomon said, *"We always emphasize college enrollment, because we are a school that's all about getting kids into college and getting kids to persist in college...We talk about college all the time...everything else trickles from that."* Ms. Woodard, an 11th grade math teacher, said, *"So the goal is to get them ready to handle the rigors [of college and] also to succeed once they get there. Not to just get in, but to actually succeed."* The staff recognize that the school's vision is ambitious.

All of Oak High School's goals branch from the vision. Ms. Brock, the assistant principal, stated that the college-going culture is *"what we live. Everything we do is geared towards making sure students are prepared to have some post-secondary education."* In order to get all students prepared to enroll and succeed in college, students participate in college-focused seminars every year; each year the seminar is focused on a slightly different aspect of the college-going process. The teachers align all of the coursework and assignments to college readiness standards. Oak also provides college-going support to students through a full-time college counselor who works with current students and recent graduates who are in their first year of college. In addition, parents and students are given college-going information tailored to the students' GPAs and ACT scores to help them find a good match based on the selectivity of colleges.

School staff provide additional instructional support to struggling students through two different school-wide programs. First, all students who are in ninth or tenth grade and have a D or F and/or are missing assignments in one or more classes are required to attend a mandatory tutoring session during their lunch hour. Second, the school has a daily, school-wide study hall period during which pairs of teachers switch off supervising study hall and working with students who need attention. For example, during the study hall period on Mondays and Wednesdays, one teacher supervises a quiet study time for all students in both classes while the other teacher meets and works with individual students or small groups of students who need additional help. Then, on Tuesdays and Thursdays, they switch roles — the teacher who previously supervised the study hall now works with individual students and the other teacher supervises the study hall for both classes. In this way, each teacher has the opportunity to meet with and provide support for struggling students at least two times a week.

Leaders at Oak implemented a system to monitor student progress and support teachers in meeting goals. Mr. Perez, a teacher and department chair at Oak, said,

*[Principal Solomon is] constantly pressuring us to make sure that we have this data [and that] we use it. [She is] always asking us, "So*

*what are you doing? How are we improving?”... She’s always there as a support to help us improve scores, but also there as sort of a pressure saying, “You need to make sure you’re doing something.” It keeps us working, but also provides support if we ask for it.*

Mr. Todd, another teacher at Oak, stated that Principal Solomon’s focus on monitoring data pushes the teachers to have conversations that some, but not all, would have without the system in place. He stated that the principal is very *“results-oriented.”*

Teachers at Oak collaborate a great deal on planning and improving instruction. Teachers meet in department teams on a regular basis to collaborate, monitor how their students are doing, and participate in professional development. Teachers are expected to meet and to accomplish specific goals. Ms. Woodard, an Oak teacher, described departmental team collaboration this way, *“At the end of the day, we have focus, we have goals, but we individually sort of drive them and collaborate together, and we share a lot.”* Teachers are given guidelines during these collaborative meetings, but are also given considerable autonomy in how to move their work forward. According to Ms. Brock, the assistant principal, *“The teachers are really stepping up this year in regards to collaboration with one another...video-taping each other, observing each other in the classroom. This is the first time for us...where multiple departments are engaging in that type of collaboration and discussion.”* Thus, teachers are given the freedom to collaboratively drive the work forward within the overarching structure set forth by the leadership team.