

# Hewlett Foundation

(Grant #2008-2048)

## Positive Deviance Report

September 2012

**“Positive Deviance is part of the fabric of our school...PD is part of who we are.”**

*John Olson, Principal, Merced High School*

### **The Grant**

The Hewlett Foundation partnered with the CTA Institute for Teaching in 2008 to sponsor a project to determine if high school graduation rates could be increased utilizing the Positive Deviance approach. The project began in early 2009 at Merced High School and continued through the 2011-2012 school year.

### **Background**

Merced High School is located in Merced, California. With 80,542 inhabitants, it is the largest city in Merced County. Merced High School is a School-wide Title I school. Seventy-six percent of the students qualify for Free and Reduced Lunch. Many students' families have been deeply impacted by the economic downturn of the last few years. The current unemployment rate in the city of Merced is 20%, while Merced County has the highest foreclosure rate in California. The average household income for the city of Merced is \$33,500.

Merced High School is the oldest of five comprehensive high schools to be established in the Merced Union High School District. The 2011-2012 school year brought a higher than projected enrollment of 2,770 students. MHS continues to be a very diverse campus. Its current ethnic make-up is 54% Hispanic, 20% White, 17% Asian, and 7% African American. Approximately 9.2% of the students are classified as English Learners, with Spanish and Hmong the two most prevalent non-English languages.

- a. Over the past few years the Positive Deviance Initiative at Merced High School has established a core team of teacher, student, administrative, and community stakeholders. The activities/outputs that were conducted/generated over the past few years include:**

### **Symposium**

In August 2008, IFT held a symposium focused on creating cultures of success in schools and ending the dropout epidemic in California. The two-day event included teachers and principals from California schools, CTA leaders and staff, and several prominent experts in change using strength-based approaches. The event also introduced the Positive Deviance approach to stakeholders in potential demonstration sites; applications for the project were introduced and distributed.

### **Statewide Positive Deviance Trainings**

Two workshops were held for educators, CTA leaders and staff in April 2009 (Burlingame) and May 2009 (Orange County). Mark Munger, Consultant from the Tufts University Positive Deviance Initiative facilitated the sessions. In August 2009, a PD training was held for several dozen CTA staff members at the union headquarters. Merced High students, teachers and administrators participated in all of the workshops.

### **Summer Collaborative Planning Meetings**

These meetings provided core school staff with the opportunity to collaborate over the summer, prior to the start of the new academic school year. Staff developed a calendar of proposed Positive Deviance (PD)

activities, and an implementation plan for the project. The staff also identified key development trainings and events that were presented to the entire school staff at the beginning of the academic school year. The core school staff also discussed what was working and what needed to be modified regarding time commitments and scheduling for future PD activities, staff development trainings and events.

### **Student Video Interviews**

During the Spring of 2009, in an effort to begin learning more about the student experience and the strategies that students utilized for staying in school, MHS staff collected initial data with MHS students at-risk for dropout through personal video interviews.

### **Bi-Weekly and Monthly Meetings with Core School Staff**

In the beginning of the PD initiative, core staff was scheduled to meet the first and third Thursday of every month for half an hour during lunch. Over the course of the year, the staff determined that these bi-monthly meetings were not providing sufficient time to complete their work. Therefore, they were replaced by monthly meeting that included a working lunch and one additional release period. In these meetings, staff debriefed on current learnings from their small group student forums and large group student forums. They also organized and planned upcoming PD activities and identified criteria for potential PD Mentors and potential PD student participants. The staff decided that all school staff would have the opportunity to participate in the PD Project and a list of expectations, duties and responsibilities associated with PD Mentorship was presented to all staff. PD students who had previous participated in the project were also encouraged to identify school staff members that they believed would be an asset to the project. The students then extended a personal invitation to the staff members to attend the first initial PD Meeting of the school year. The criteria used to select potential PD students included: low socioeconomic status; absences/history of attendance issues; being at grade level according to standardized assessments; grades/GPA; and teacher, counselor or administrator referrals (students that were perceived to be at risk of dropping out (e.g. homeless or in foster care, etc.).

### **Bi-Weekly and Weekly Small Group Student Forums**

Similar schedule changes were made to accommodate students' schedules and student networking activities sponsored by various onsite clubs and community organizations. The small group student forums were rescheduled to meet three times per month for one half hour. This provided for more flexibility in scheduling for both staff facilitators and students, and it also increased the numbers the student participants. During these small group student forums staff met with their assigned PD students in groups of 8-10 students. The small group student forums served as one of the key data collection activities; staff would facilitate discussions among the student attendees regarding behaviors that led to persistence in school and graduation, as well as the challenges facing students in school and at home and how to mitigate those challenges.

### **Monthly Large Group Student Forums**

The Monthly Large Group Student Forums transitioned from 30 minute monthly meetings during lunch into 90-minute meetings to include lunch and one release period which would alternate between periods. This schedule was established to prevent excessive student absence from any one period and to provide students with the opportunity to network and build stronger relationships with staff members and other students. During the large student forums, staff facilitated team building exercises to build trust among participants, provided training to students on the PD process, and led large group discussion on how to mitigate challenges in school (e.g., studying, grades, homework, testing etc.), and at home (e.g., study habits, family dynamics, relationship building etc.).

## **Last Word Assembly**

The Last Word Assembly was a school-wide end of year event that included all 9<sup>th</sup>-grade students. The students and their teachers were released to the gymnasium from their English classes to participate. PD Mentor students (graduating seniors) led the student conversation which focused on student learning about their high school experiences, sharing of advice on how they overcame the challenges of high school and words of wisdom on what to do in order to ensure successful graduation from high school.

## **Student-Staff Positive Deviance Summit**

In September 2011, a two-day Positive Deviance Summit, led by Mark Munger of the Positive Deviance Initiative, was held. Dozens of students shared their personal journeys, and discussed what they perceived as obstacles or challenges in their quest to become a high school graduates. Mark facilitated discussions among staff and students on how others mitigated the obstacles and challenges that many of the students were facing. Teachers and other staff members were provided the opportunity to fine-tune their listening skills and appreciative inquiry techniques.

## **Positive Deviance Trainings for core school staff**

The PD training sessions were conducted throughout the PD project and provided stakeholders with a comprehensive overview of the PD process. The periodic trainings provided staff with hands on learning in appreciative inquiry questioning techniques, listening and interviewing techniques and the transformational change process. Conceptual games and activities, listening exercises, tips for PD student group facilitation, and the art of asking questions were addressed in the various sessions.

## **PD Community Engagement Event**

This was a community event that was hosted at MHS in conjunction with the CTA Community Outreach department. There were over 200 participants (teachers, students, parents and community leaders). The conversations focused on Closing the Achievement Gap and the identification of individual and community strengths. Participating PD students were provided community service credits for their efforts.

## **End of Year Culminating Experience**

An end-of-year culminating experience for PD staff and students in May 2012 included a field trip to Cal State University Monterey. The trip provided participants the opportunity to build stronger interpersonal relationships and to practice communication skills. Students were also able to establish a network of contacts within the CSU Monterey community where more than 50% of students are the first-generation in their families to attend college.

## **b. The intermediate and ultimate outcomes of the Hewlett/Institute for Teaching Positive Deviance work at Merced High School are as follows:**

### **The Intermediate Outcomes**

The PD approach was implemented in MHS as a means for reducing the number of students that dropout in high school. Building on other assets-based approaches to change, the PD approach sought to improve individual outcomes by learning from the “positive deviants” in communities (i.e., those persons who have been successful, but have the same resources and opportunities as those who have not been successful) and disseminating their effective behaviors and practices to others. Moreover, at MHS, the project itself was intended to be teacher-driven; the PD approach was to be used to learn from positive deviants (i.e., high-risk students that have not dropped out) and develop programs, policies, and interventions to assist all students at MHS that were at-risk for dropping out of school. From the Spring of 2008 through the Spring of 2012,

approximately one-third of MHS teachers were involved in the project at some point. During the project the composition of the core staff team and participating students changed. Each year new teachers became involved while others sought different opportunities for involvement at MHS. New incoming 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> graders would transition into the project, while graduating seniors would venture out into the world.

### **The Ultimate Outcomes**

The PD Project at MHS was designed to address the pervasive challenges of high school dropouts by: 1) identifying positive deviants (i.e., students at risk for dropping out that persisted); 2) uncovering their uncommon strategies through inquiry and observation; and 3) Creating an action plan to disseminate and transfer discovered behaviors to other at-risk students. The PD process became an embedded part of the school culture at MHS, and it was found to have a significant impact on building stronger relationships between students and teachers. It was also instrumental in opening and improving communication lines among students and teachers.

Since the implementation of the PD project at MHS, retention rates and graduations rates have shown a significant increase. However, it is important to note that MHS had other initiatives and strategies in place that focused on academic performance, graduation rates, and decreasing dropouts. Nevertheless, the PD Project at MHS is viewed as a contributor to the reduction of dropouts at MHS.

According to dropout rate statistics calculated by the California Department of Education (CDE) calculates an annual dropout rate that adjusts for students that enroll in other California schools. For the 2010-11 school year the Annual Adjusted Grade 9-12 Dropout Rate for MHS students was 1.7 % this represents a significant decrease from the 3.2% reported for the 2009-10 school year. In addition, the data also shows that the MHS dropout rate has been lower than the district and state for the same time period.<sup>1</sup>

It is also worth noting that from 2009-10 (the first year that cohort graduation rates were tracked by the CDE) to 2010-11, MHS decreased their cohort dropout rate by 5% and increased their graduation rate by 7%. Moreover, their cohort dropout rates are lower than both the district and state.<sup>2</sup> (At the time of this report, data for 2011-12 were not yet available).

The reduction in the dropout rate of MHS students is further substantiated at the local level. In a Memo from Leonard Kahn, the Assistant Superintendent/CBO of Merced Union High School District that was presented to the Merced Union High School District Board of Trustees on December 9, 2011 it was reported that dropout rates were reduced by over 25%, from 399 in the 2009-10 school year to below 300 in the 2010-11 school year.

**c. There have been substantive changes that have occurred within or outside our organization that will have a substantive impact on the work supported by the grant. These include:**

The on-going school budget cuts in Merced, as in California, have made it nearly impossible to initiate new programs and initiatives in our schools. Nevertheless, the Institute for Teaching is continuing to support the PD efforts at Merced High School utilizing CTA members' dues as part of our 2012-13 IFT budget. IFT is also funding two additional grant projects at MHS in 2012-13. These involve social studies and journalism. In addition, because of the opening of a sixth comprehensive high school in MUHSD in 2013, MHS will immediately lose more than 500 ninth and tenth graders. By the time the new school, El Capitan High is at full capacity, MHS enrollment will drop to approximately 1,800 by 2015.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://data1.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://data1.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/>

**d. The lessons that we have learned that will help in our continued efforts to achieve our intended outcomes include:**

**Overview of Lessons Learned**

The PD process led to valuable school, teacher, and student outcomes. However, the PD approach requires a paradigm shift that is particularly difficult for educators because of the policy environment, top-down accountability, the structure of schools, and the traditional culture of teaching. Even in schools with supportive leadership and committed teachers, true collaboration, participation, and involvement is challenging. Overall, the project resulted in stronger teacher-student relationships and empowerment for both students and teachers.

- 1) Successful students had connections to school that were not necessarily academic (e.g., members of athletic teams, drama, the school band, student government and other clubs and organizations)
- 2) The relationships that students fostered with individual teachers provided much needed support and encouragement during challenging times (e.g., family financial challenges, abuse, loss of loved ones, etc.).
- 3) Systemic strength based change requires a strong school-wide communication plan to educate staff, students and the broader school community about the concepts and goals of positive deviance, as well as strength-based teacher driven change.
- 4) Utilizing a strength-based approach to address the intractable challenges in our schools requires clearly detailed goals and expectations; defined roles, responsibilities and guidelines for all stakeholders; and extensive on-going training for staff. Training should include: how strength-based approaches differ from deficit-based approaches; what is PD; what is the inquiry process; exercising distributive leadership; developing facilitation and listening skills and interviewing techniques.)

**e. This report will be presented to the CTA Institute for Teaching Board of Directors at their next scheduled Board Meeting on November 16, 2012. In addition, a comprehensive Evaluation of the Positive Deviance Project, by Vital Research, LLC, will be sent to you after it is presented to the IFT Board on January 31, 2013.**

IFT plans to develop a summary or brief of the evaluation report and key learnings for broader dissemination to CTA's Board of Directors, CTA State Council leaders, local CTA Presidents and at CTA Regional Leadership Conferences during the upcoming school year. It is also likely that formal presentations will be made as part of IFT's on-going member and staff training program. The IFT will also disseminate key learning's via the IFT website [www.teacherdrivenchange.org](http://www.teacherdrivenchange.org) and via CTA's monthly newsmagazine, the *California Educator*.