

**Memorial Junior High School**

**Eagle Pass Independent School District**

**Eagle Pass, Texas**

## Memorial Junior High School

### *Eagle Pass, Texas*

Eagle Pass, population 22,000, sits in the rolling, scrub brush–covered hills of Maverick County. The highway into town merges into Main Street, a nondescript four-lane road lined with small businesses, fast food restaurants, a supermarket, and a few hotels. On the other side of town is the international bridge that crosses over into Piedras Negras, Mexico, population 250,000.

North of Main Street are many older homes, as well as a substantial amount of new housing developments with large homes sitting close together on nicely manicured lawns and quiet streets. The other middle school in town, Eagle Pass Junior High School, is brand new and matches the affluent houses in this part of town. Although the staff, parents, and students of Memorial Junior High School consider the other middle school, Eagle Pass Junior High School to be the more affluent school in town, it has 95 percent of its students participating in the federal free or reduced-price lunch program, the same percentage as that of Memorial.

The attendance boundary for Memorial Junior High lies south of Main Street. In this part of town, houses tend to be older. On any given block, nicely kept homes sit next door to ones that are run-down. Outside the city limits, but within the school’s boundaries, the number of trailers and mobile homes increases. Only a few miles out of town are areas called *colonias*—land that originally had been colonized by squatters, or leased cheaply from the county until sufficient money had been paid to obtain ownership. In the colonias, roads are typically unpaved, and houses sit next to trailers that sit next to plywood shacks. Several of the houses appear to have been sheared in half because the owners could afford to build only one portion at a time. One student’s house is missing an entire wall. An eighth-grade teacher describes some of the houses she has visited: “Many of them, in some instances, don’t even have electricity. They borrow electricity from the neighbors, when they can. Some of them don’t even have refrigerators in their home.” One abandoned house has a cross in front of it; a student had recently died there during a gang-related beating (he was trying to get out of the gang). At the southern end of the school’s boundary lies the Kickapoo Indian Reservation.

### *State Context*

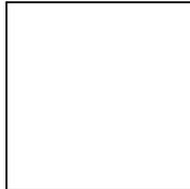
Texas has a high stakes accountability system in place, and uses the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) to assess the performance of students, schools, and districts. The TAAS has been aligned with the learning standards identified in the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills curriculum guidelines. The TAAS has been in place and stable since 1993, and historical data is available on the Texas Education Agency website ([www.tea.state.tx.us](http://www.tea.state.tx.us)). Students are assessed in reading and mathematics annually in grades 3 through 8 and are given an exit exam in grade 10. Additionally, a writing examination is given in grades 4, 8, and 10. This exam consists of both a multiple choice and an open-ended portion. Students are required to pass the exit examination before graduating, and schools and districts are given an accountability rating of Exemplary, Recognized, Acceptable, or Low Performing based largely on the performance of students on the TAAS exams.<sup>10</sup>

Texas is one of the few states that currently presents student achievement data disaggregated by both race and income level, and the state has seen improvement on the TAAS for all student groups since 1994. Additionally, school and district accountability ratings are dependent not only on

<sup>10</sup> Student drop-out data are also taken into account.

overall achievement levels, but also on the achievement of separate groups of students that are based on race and income. Among other things, an Exemplary rating means that at least 90 percent of the students who took the TAAS passed all core subject areas—that is, reading, writing, and mathematics. In addition, it means that at least 90 percent of each ethnic group and 90 percent of students identified as economically disadvantaged passed each subject area test.

**Figure 4: Percentage of All Texas Students Passing All Sections of the TAAS, Grades 3 through 8 and 10**



Source: Texas Education Agency’s Academic Excellence Indicator System

Texas is set to adopt a more rigorous exam during the 2002–03 school year. This exam will be called the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) and will focus more heavily on higher-level skills.

***School Demographics***

The district has two junior high schools consisting of grades 7 and 8. Memorial Junior High had roughly 1,000 students in the 2000-01 school year. Ninety-seven percent were categorized as Hispanic. Student demographics have remained stable for the past decade except for the loss of 500 students in 1998 when the grade configurations of the district’s schools were changed from 7–9 and 10–12 to the current configuration of 7–8, 9–10, and 11–12.

**Table 8: Memorial Junior High School Student Demographics**

Demographic Factors	2001–02
Hispanic	97%
Kickapoo Indian	2.5%
White	0.5%
Free or Reduced-Price Lunch Participation	95%
Limited English Proficient (LEP)	21%

Source: Memorial Junior High Attendance Data

***Student Achievement***

The school has shown tremendous academic growth over the past seven years, increasing by more than 120 percent the number of students passing all sections of the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills. The rate of growth has been roughly twice the rate of the state averages in writing and mathematics, and almost three times the state’s average in reading. In addition, the school’s average scores are at or above state average scores in all areas of the test. Just for the Kids, a nonprofit organization that tracks and evaluates high-performing schools, placed Memorial Junior

High on its 2001 Honor Roll<sup>11</sup> because the school had shown academic excellence over a sustained period of time.

**Table 9: Memorial Junior High School Eighth-Graders’ Performance on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills**

Year	Percentage passing: Reading		Percentage passing: Mathematics	
	School	State	School	State
1993–94	56	77	41	59
1994–95	62	76	50	57
1995–96	63	78	64	69
1996–97	67	84	71	76
1997–98	81	82	89	80
1998–99	85	88	89	86
1999–2000	86	90	92	90
2000–01	91	92	97	92
Growth	63%	20%	137%	56%

Source: Texas Education Agency’s Academic Excellence Indicator System

***Portrait of the School***

Memorial Junior High is a one-story brick building shaped like a large letter T, with banana trees lining one side of the entrance. A sign above the main entrance states that people may be searched with a metal-detecting device. The school office, located just inside the front entrance, is walled with windows, making it possible to see into the office reception area and the principal’s office. To the right of the main entrance is a large cafetorium (a space used as both a cafeteria and an auditorium) and to the left an immaculate hallway. The school is clean, colorful, and inviting. A variety of banners hang from the ceiling, including one celebrating the recent award by a state organization that honors high-performing schools using best practices. On the walls are banners detailing the school’s mission statement and exit criteria. Artistically painted on the “Wall of Fours” are the names of each eighth-grader who has scored at the top score on the state’s writing assessment in each of the previous three years. Student work is tastefully and prominently displayed throughout the school.

***Creating a Positive School Climate***

A variety of interrelated factors contribute to the overall climate at Memorial. The attractive facilities help create a setting where a culture of support and caring can grow, and demonstrate to students that they are valued and their achievement is important. This ethic of care combines with a strong academic focus and safe surroundings to create an environment that contributes to student

<sup>11</sup> See the Texas Business and Education Coalition–Just for the Kids 2001 Honor Roll publication and the Just for the Kids website at [www.just4kids.org](http://www.just4kids.org).

learning. The students and the staff demonstrate a strong sense of pride for their school, a pride that has spread to the students' families and to the general community.

### *Caring for One Another*

Almost everyone uses the word “family” to describe the Memorial community. This sense of family is both figurative and literal. One teacher shares that “95 percent of the teachers are bilingual, so we can connect with the students. We’ve been graduates from Eagle Pass, the majority of us” (Teacher Focus Group). Several teachers have their own children attending the school. Many of the students have brothers, sisters, and cousins also at Memorial. Even though up to 90 percent of the students live far enough away from the school to be bused in, many members of the school community know each other outside of the school environment.

The sense of family is demonstrated in many ways. For instance, conversations are conducted with intimacy and respect, whether between administrators, teachers, custodians, or security staff; between adults and students; or among students. People make a point of knowing what is happening in each other’s lives. They know about important and not-so-important events. They ask about each other’s families. If a staff member reprimands a student for being tardy or for inappropriate behavior, he or she does so with love and kindness, frequently using intimate pronouns like “mi hija” or “mi hijo” (literally, “my daughter” or “my son”). Students, in turn, generally respond respectfully to these reprimands.

### *Focusing on Academics*

While Memorial has established a caring community, it has done so in order to support its primary purpose: educating children. One science teacher says, “We’re all working together for all of the kids. Not just one group working for this group, one group working for that one. It’s everybody working for all of the kids.” Teachers, administrators, counselors, and district personnel agree with this sentiment. Students are aware of this focus. One student shares how “the teachers—the teachers just . . . they work hard for you and they try to get you at top level” (Student Focus Group). Parents talk about the extra effort teachers put in and their dedication to student success. There are other indicators of this unwavering focus on the students. The band teacher explains, “We’re busy. Most of the teachers are busy; you don’t see a lot of teachers in the teacher’s lounge.” Principal Oscar Castillon shares how most of the “teachers stay after school and have their own tutorial programs, without getting paid.” A teacher echoes this comment: “I’d tell [the students], you can come in and I’ll be here for an hour or so if you need help with homework” (Language Arts Teacher-a).

One way that the school staff demonstrate their focus on academic achievement is through their display of banners, trophies, and other awards that students have received for excellent work. Where most schools have cases of trophies to recognize athletic achievement, Memorial also has cases of trophies recognizing the academic achievements of students, in addition to the banners of commendation. Student work is displayed on colorful bulletin boards in every wing of the building.

### *Fostering a Safe Environment*

There is rarely a moment during the day when there are not several adults visible. When the students are in the hallways, teachers are in their classroom doorways; custodians are spread throughout the school; the four security guards, two police officers, and the probation officer mix with the students; and assorted administrative staff are out of their offices. All of these adults quietly talk to individual students and groups of students, most of the time in English, but sometimes in Spanish: “Hurry up, students”; “Let’s go, guys; come on, ladies”; “Do you have permission to go to your locker?”; “Vamos, vamos, apurense.” Clearly, this adult presence helps keep order, but the

students also do their part. They move quickly and with purpose. They talk like typical middle school-age kids, but they are seldom too loud and there is little horsing around. They interact with the adults in a way that makes the transitions both a way to move from one place to another and a way to build relationships.

This proud, achievement-oriented, and safe atmosphere is at odds with the school's reputation. It has been, and still is, known as the "bad school on the bad side of town" (Language Arts Teacher-c). Several parents shared the misgivings and fear they had felt before their children enrolled in the school. After their children began attending Memorial, these worries disappeared, and the students and their parents realized that the school's reputation was unfounded. One parent agrees with her son's sentiment that the school was not what they expected. Teachers voice their delight at being able to work at Memorial. Students describe their appreciation of the educational aspects of the school, but they also express their appreciation for feeling safe. Students describe the security guards as members of the school family. One student shares how the "security guards know what's going on because they're out there with us. They're also like our teachers; they're always around us" (Student Focus Group). Another explains how

you know that there's the securities here, that if anything happens they're here. They're here in our lunch. They're here all the time. So it's . . . you know that if something does occur, that nothing bad will really happen 'cause they're watching. (Student Focus Group)

Indeed, while in some schools security personnel seem to be looking for student misbehavior and are often avoided by students, at Memorial the security personnel are casual and easy-going, and students appear to be as comfortable with them as they are with other adults in the school.

#### *Valuing School Pride*

The facilities are the first indication of the pride that exists at Memorial, and the people of the school community strengthen this impression. At the annual holiday band concert, pride shows in the faces of the five or six hundred people who attend: band directors; students in the jazz, orchestra, and mariachi groups; parents; extended family members; community members; school staff; and the students who come to watch.

The school rejoices often. They held a rally to celebrate the Just for the Kids award. One of the band teachers describes how they have pep rallies to get everyone excited about taking the state assessment, and then another rally to celebrate their successes when the scores come in. Counselors circulate among the classrooms to formally present monthly awards to students who have done well academically and have been friendly, helpful, and responsible members of the school community. Students are nominated by teachers to receive these awards. This process not only recognizes academic achievement, but also rewards the behaviors that the school values.

The previous art teacher (who has moved to the high school) had volunteered his time to paint the Wall of Fours, and the staff wanted to keep up this tradition. During the department head meeting, the principal explains that they will have to find a way to raise the money to pay a local sign-painting business \$1,500 to paint the names of so many successful students. To reinforce the value of this expenditure, the principal relates seeing families who have come to the band concert pointing out to each other their children's names permanently painted on the wall in recognition of their achievement.

### ***Structuring the School***

Memorial's staff are unhesitant in their identification of the most significant factors in the school's success: interdisciplinary teaming and block scheduling. The two systems were implemented at different points in the school's history, and it took time and considerable effort to make them work together. The school has now reached a point where interdisciplinary teams and block schedules have melded into a single, harmonious system.

#### *Implementing Teaming*

At Memorial, each grade level occupies its own wing and consists of four teams. There are two hallways in each wing, and two teams on each hallway. Proudly displayed at the entrance to each hallway are the names of the two teams that reside there, along with large emblems of the university mascots. One hall houses the Rice Owls alongside the Texas Lutheran University Bulldogs. Another has the Princeton Tigers and the University of Texas Longhorns. The team names represent the colleges and universities from which the teachers, administrators, and some former students at the school have received their degrees. This choice of team names gives students an opportunity to see themselves attending a postsecondary institution, and also identifies visible role models—people from their own community who have successfully completed the course of study at a postsecondary institution.

There are roughly 120 students per team. Each team is staffed with a teacher for each core subject (mathematics, language arts, science, and social studies) and an instructional aide. Responding to student needs and low test scores, the school hired an extra language arts and mathematics teacher for each seventh-grade team to give students more individual attention. A counselor explains, "The low student–teacher ratio is paramount as far as being more effective in the classroom. . . . When they come in from elementary, I think they need more preparation."

#### *Extending Class Time*

Memorial uses a system that includes two schedules called A/B and C. The C schedule consists of eight 50-minute periods and is used only for the first few days of school and during whole-school testing periods. Each A or B day consists of four one-and-one-half-hour blocks of time and a 40-minute lunch period. Students have one block each of language arts and mathematics every day; they take science and one elective on A-schedule days, and social studies and a second elective on B-schedule days.

Teachers teach three blocks each day and have one free block. On A-schedule days, the free block is used as a planning period. On B-schedule days, the free block is used for team conference periods. Thus, every other day teachers get a one-and-one-half-hour block of time for planning their own classroom teaching activities, and a one-and-one-half-hour block of time for team conference periods. According to the principal,

within the team conference period they do most of the team planning. They go over their lessons and see how they're going to tie them together if they have to. They do any modifications that they have to at that time. They visit with parents.

#### *Benefits of Interdisciplinary Teaming and Block Scheduling*

The interdisciplinary teaming combined with the block scheduling has an effect on most aspects of life at Memorial. Some of these effects are obvious and their genesis easy to describe. Others, however, are more subtle and the ties to the organizational design harder to identify.

*Focusing on instruction*

Block scheduling and teaming improves instruction in several ways. First, the core (non-elective) teachers feel that the 90-minute blocks of uninterrupted instruction help them teach better. The principal explains how delighted the science teachers are because they can start an experiment and finish it the same day. A mathematics teacher's lessons now include reviews of previous assignments, warm-up activities, conversations to tie into the next unit, a guided lesson, time for students to work individually or in groups, question and answer segments, and time for the teacher to work individually with students. These teachers have invested considerable effort in ensuring that they use the increased class time effectively. They are not just taking longer to teach in the same way they have previously. Rather, they thoughtfully include classroom activities designed to ensure that students are learning, such as review of those parts of assignments that students are struggling with; more discussion of the subject matter; and more individual time devoted to all students, especially those who are struggling.

The common planning time also allows for collaboration and for the integration and alignment of curriculum. One teacher explains,

We try to pretty much work to where we're all doing the same thing. And this is also an excellent time, because we get to share ideas. And if something worked for me, and I thought it was great, then I get to share it with the rest of the teachers. And the same thing goes for them. If they presented a lesson and it worked out really great for them and the kids were able to understand it and do well with it, then we incorporate it into ours. (Language Arts Teacher-b)

Further, teaming ensures that each student's academic performance is understood thoroughly by a small group of teachers. Because these teachers meet regularly, they are able to discuss individual students. One teacher explains how this helps the team focus on each student's needs:

We see a different side of students. I may have someone who's not comfortable with science and I cannot get that child to perform at all. You know, we'll go sit down and I'll find out that they're awesome in [another subject area]. It's usually, if they're not good in science, it's the language arts where they excel. And they'll show me examples and I'll think, oh, this child can write? I didn't even know they could write. Because they won't for me but they will for their language arts. So you get to see different sides of the students. (Teacher Focus Group)

These team conference periods make it virtually impossible for any student to slip through the safety net. Teachers are able to determine if students are having difficulty in more than one class. Problems are identified quickly so that teachers can attempt to intercede before it becomes clear that a student is not going to pass.

Finally, competition between the teams motivates both the teachers and the students. A teacher shares that "it's what affects our scores mostly, that there's a friendly competition between the teams. We always want to be in first! And our kids always have that competition" (Teacher Focus Group). Teams compete on a variety of fronts, including motivation and spirit, lunchtime intramural sports, six-week test scores, and yearly state assessment scores. Teachers point out, however, that they carefully monitor the use of competition. They say that they have been emphasizing that all of the team members also belong to the larger team of Memorial. This emphasis is the result of learning that some students were becoming dissatisfied with their own teams and wanted to move to another team.

*Building relationships*

Teaming and block scheduling greatly enhance the relationships between teachers and students, but they also help students establish healthy relationships with each other, and allow teachers to bond with other teachers, with the administration, and with parents.

Instead of being one person in a thousand, students interact with a smaller group which helps them create friendships and fosters respect. In the words of a science teacher: “[Teams] helped create a culture of caring and inclusion for the students: They have their little team family of those five or six teachers that basically take them in under their wing and are caring for them.”

Teachers speak of one another in warm and caring ways. A language arts teacher explains how the teams are not only safe havens where teachers work together, but also where they support each other. One teacher describes how deeply they care about each other:

And I think that it’s not only work—I think we’ve become a family, and if we have a major personal problem or anything, they’re willing to listen. There’s always that smile, that pat on the back, and “Keep on going.” And if you do something positive, they know. So it’s like a family—you know that they’re there for you. It doesn’t have to be only school materials—it’s also personally. (Teacher Focus Group)

Not only do teachers on each team form close ties with each other, but with other members of the staff who attend team meetings. These small group interactions with the instructional lead teacher, counselors, and the principal create an environment that allows for direct communication.

In the focus groups, both teachers and parents talk about the benefits of being able to meet together as a group. If parents are not able to come in to the school, the team visits the parents at home or at their workplace. One team challenges itself to make visits to the homes of every student on their team during their planning periods. These visits help teachers develop a warm rapport with the parents, and by posting pictures of the visits they have made, they have encouraged other students to ask teachers to visit their homes also.

*Communicating effectively*

Teachers are well informed at Memorial. Not only do they know what the other members of their teams are doing in each of their classrooms (even though these teachers may be teaching other subject areas), but they are aware of what teachers are doing on the other teams in either grade. Also, they are well informed about school and district business. The foundation of this communication network is the team meeting. The school’s instructional officer<sup>12</sup> often attends these meetings and, at times, so do the principal and the counselors. Teachers also meet with their academic departments at least once a month (these meetings sometimes occur after school); department heads meet weekly with the principal and the instructional officer. The principal and the instructional officer meet often with district representatives. Additionally, there are monthly districtwide vertical meetings focused around each curricular area so teachers are well informed about instruction in their content area throughout the twelve grades.

Because of the extensive communication provided through this network, faculty meetings occur only when necessary and are conducted in the morning before classes begin. Faculty and team leader meetings have a business-like atmosphere that underscores the importance everyone places on being informed. Participants come to meetings having already discussed the issues, and this

<sup>12</sup> A more common term is *curriculum lead teacher*. This person is the school’s principal instructional leader, performing a variety of duties including teacher training, curricular decisions, mentoring, monitoring the state assessments, and attending a variety of training. Each campus within the district has an instructional officer.

enables quicker decisions and shorter meetings. This culture of communication makes it clear that each group (teachers, staff, administrators, district personnel) know enough about each other's domains to trust that appropriate decisions are being made at each level.

*Sharing decision making*

There is little evidence of any power struggles between the school and the district. The people at each level perform the duties that they have the most control over, and provide input and assistance to the other groups as needed. The district Title I coordinator explains how “everything is pretty well campus-based. We help them but we don't make major decisions.” The principal stresses that the teachers are free to make their own instructional decisions, but “if you need help, I'm going to provide you the help.” He feels that his primary duty is to “see that the teachers have the space to teach, free of interruption.” A teacher uses some of the same words to describe this approach:

[Administration's] philosophy is . . . “Let the teachers teach. If they're being successful in their classrooms, let them do what they're doing. . . . We know that when we have a problem, we have a suggestion or anything, we can always call on them. . . . We don't need them to be in our classroom every single day to monitor what we're doing.” Because I think they already know what we're doing in the classroom. (Teacher Focus Group)

The district Title I coordinator explains how the campus makes almost all of the decisions concerning the use of resources, including budgeting and training. She describes how “their staff development . . . is more focused to their needs . . . [since] they develop their [own] plans.” The teachers and the principal outline a wide variety of areas where decisions are made at the appropriate level. Teachers make most curricular decisions, providing extensive input into the selection of textbooks, interacting with students and parents, choosing who they want to team with and what team certain students should be on, and determining how to most effectively reach the students. Teachers also make key decisions about how to best structure the teaming and block scheduling system. For example, teachers decided to do away with a 35-minute advisory period that they thought was ineffective. Many decisions such as resource management issues, personnel issues, and campus planning are made in the team leader meetings and the Site Based Decision Making team meetings—which include the principal and staff, parent, and community and business representatives. It is important to stress that, although each group makes independent decisions, they each communicate necessary information and solicit advice from each other.

It is difficult to portray how important the shared decision making is to the success of the school. Certainly, time is saved and resources are used more effectively. More important though, is the sense of efficacy, control, and professionalism that is expressed through both language and daily activities. One teacher explained that she felt empowered when the teaming model was put in place:

I guess you could say it was kind of like magic. Because we didn't have to depend on administration anymore. And it seemed like the teacher had control now. We had a say-so; we had a voice. And we could express that opinion, that voice that we had. (Language Arts Teacher-b)

*Meeting with students and parents*

Principal Castillon contrasts Memorial's situation with that of other schools he has seen, where the principal's primary contacts with parents are discussions of discipline issues. He feels that teaming has made his job easier. A language arts teacher explains why:

Before we didn't have team teaching and teachers were pretty much on their own, you know? If we had discipline problems, we had to rely on the principal or the assistant principal and at times they were busy and the kid was sent back to the classroom and so the problem was not solved.

This sentiment is shared by a science teacher: "We have our parent conferences with the students. We try to take care of things before they escalate to sending them to the office. You know, if we use the office, that is the last resort." Parents agree with these statements and add that they appreciate interacting with a small group of teachers, all of whom are very familiar with their child.

### *Valuing respect*

Historically, Memorial has had many discipline problems, including gang-related issues. Over the years, discipline problems have decreased as each team and grade level implemented first the teaming and then the block scheduling model. These approaches have allowed teachers to foster respectful interactions with students. With this structure now firmly in place, discipline problems continue to decline. In a recent six-week period, there were seven discipline reports, as compared to 40 or 50 during the same period last year. A mathematics teacher explains that if he refers one student to the counselor for discipline problems a month, that is "way too many." A language arts teacher feels that teaming has "really curbed the gang members" by creating a sense of belonging that allows students to build close relationships with many adults. Because of the closeness of the teams, teachers "knew how [students] behaved in all of their classes. I knew if they misbehaved in mine and they didn't in another" (Teacher Focus Group).

Some of the explanations for the improved discipline are obvious. One teacher explains that "the block schedule has helped a lot, also, with the discipline and tardies, because the kids are not out in the hall as much as if they would be changing classes six, seven times" (Science Teacher). In addition, since the teams are housed together, the students do not have far to travel between one class and the next. Students are seated and ready to go when class begins. Transitions are fairly calm and relaxed. The band teacher explains why this might be: "I don't know if you have noticed or not, but we don't use bells. . . . It's kind of like, everybody knows where they're supposed to be, where they're supposed to go." The teams also help in two other important logistical ways. First, each team has its own color for hall passes. This makes it easy for the staff to spot a student who is in an area of the school where he or she does not belong. Second, student movements can be controlled by having them migrate in teams. Students are called for assemblies by groups: "The Bulldogs may now proceed to the cafetorium." After a few minutes, the next team is called, and so on.

### *Building resources*

The localized decision making enabled by the team model creates an infrastructure for sharing of resources and efficient and appropriate use of resources. At the district level, money and resources from a variety of sources (federal and state monies and a few grants) are managed to ensure that there are no overlaps, but the majority of the decisions about how to use the money are made at the campus level. The district Title I coordinator explains, "The funds are campus specific and they go into each individual plan at the campuses. They use the funds to meet the intent and purpose of the programs, but in various ways." She also explains that the schoolwide distribution of Title I funds (instead of targeting only identified students) gives the school the flexibility to affect the greatest number of students.

Decisions made at the team level affect how resources are used in three ways: what personnel are hired and how they are distributed, what professional development the staff attends, and how resources are shared. Funds are often used to increase the number of teachers in one given

area—for example, by doubling the number of teachers teaching language arts in the seventh grade. The instructional aides helped in a variety of ways, such as one-on-one work with students who need extra help. The teams work together to determine which teachers will need assistance for a special project or what can be done to help the whole team. The aides also work one-on-one with students who need extra help.

With teaming comes a common voice. One teacher shared how some professional development in the past was repetitive, with the same presenter year after year and forced attendance. The district listened when teachers cried, “Enough is enough,” and now teachers are asked, “What kind of inservice would you like to have? What kind of topics would you like covered?” (Language Arts Teacher-b). The teams work together with the instructional officer to decide on what training they need to increase overall team effectiveness.

### ***Attending to all Students***

Memorial displays several characteristics that help support students and ensure success for the whole school population. Memorial’s commitment to empowering all students is reflected in the processes they have in place to meet a variety of student needs: those who need a little extra help on particular assignments, those who are at risk of failing a class, migrant students who missed a portion of the school year, and those with other special needs.

Teachers at the school express a willingness to provide extra help to struggling students, both during regular class time and outside of the normal school day. Students, teachers, administrators, and parents all speak of the teachers’ dedication and commitment to student learning. One student shares how “maybe you’re just the only one in your class who didn’t get it, so that’s why they’ll make a special time after school to make sure you understand it” (Student Focus Group). When students are identified by the team as needing more individualized attention, teachers discuss which teacher will have the time to work with them before or after school. Several teachers offer daily morning sessions for those students who arrive early.

Students who need more support than the tutoring sessions have other avenues for help, including working one-on-one with instructional aides, talking to counselors, changing their learning environment by moving to another classroom, and attending Saturday test-preparation and tutoring sessions. The Saturday sessions replaced the traditional summer sessions for struggling students, with the goal of getting them help as soon as a need was identified rather than waiting until they had failed at the end of the year.

Nineteen percent of Memorial’s student population is classified as migrant. These students are served by a federally funded Migrant Education Program.<sup>13</sup> Students who have missed school because they travel with their parents as they work in agriculture can attend extra one-hour sessions four days per week. Assignments are created specifically to give each student the instruction necessary to be on par with his or her classmates.

The school has a variety of ways to serve students with special needs. Students with severe mental retardation have a self-contained, life skills classroom where they learn academics and work on social and living skills. All other students with special needs are served by full inclusion in general education classrooms. One teacher explains how the teaming works particularly well for these students:

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<sup>13</sup> The Migrant Education Program (MEP) is authorized under Part C of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, as amended. It helps ensure that migrant children access and benefit from both basic school services and current education reform and school improvement initiatives. For more information see <http://www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/MEP/programs.html>.

Back then [before full inclusion] they were like, “I’m special ed!” But now they won’t say special ed; [they say,] “I’m on the Longhorn team now.” They take pride, and it’s good to see that they feel that they belong to somebody, just like everybody else. (Teacher Focus Group)

This teacher notes that Memorial has a policy of trying to get everyone to take the state-mandated Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). This is exceptional because the Texas accountability system is based in part on student performance on the TAAS. If a school has low student performance, the school’s accountability rating will drop. Texas allows schools to exempt certain students in special education from taking the TAAS, which often helps schools to maintain higher student performance ratings. Memorial staff try hard to prepare all students for the test, including those in special education. The school consistently has 93 percent of all students taking the tests. In the teacher’s words: “And most of all . . . seeing [the special education students] taking the TAAS and passing—getting 3s and 4s on the writing. I mean, that’s . . . excellent. . . . I’m really proud of them.”

The staff at Memorial also focus on readying students for more challenging course work. Twenty-one percent of Memorial’s students are enrolled in Pre-Advanced Placement classes in language arts, science, social studies, and mathematics in both the seventh and eighth grades. Additionally, an Integrated Physics and Chemistry science class is offered to eighth-graders. The 20 or so students in the Algebra I class each year take the end-of-course exam (with over 95% percent passing rate the last three years). Students in other Pre-AP classes do not take end-of-course exams, but they will be on the AP track when they reach high school.

### ***Using Data to Drive Instruction***

The staff at Memorial use data to make instructional decisions from the moment students enter the school. Teachers analyze past performance on the state-mandated tests to identify students who might need additional support: “As a matter of fact, in this school, we have had Saturday programs for TAAS tutorial, for those kids that did not pass the TAAS in the sixth grade” (Mathematics Teacher). Memorial also gives students school-created pre- and post-tests, allowing teachers to measure their progress. The mathematics teacher notes that generally, “we see a really big difference” in their pre- and post-test scores.

Students are given a variety of assessments during each six-week period. Some of these are formatted like the TAAS test, which enables the instructional officer to do item analyses on individual students’ scores to provide direction for the teachers to re-teach certain objectives. The teams meet to discuss student progress, and, when necessary, talk with students to get as much information as possible before making a decision:

We bring the kids in, we try to talk to them about what’s going on: “Were you just not focused this six weeks? What’s going on at home? Is there something going on here at school that we can help you with or are you not understanding the way we’re presenting the material to you? What can we do for you?” And we . . . monitor their progress. If their progress doesn’t get any better, then we bring the parent in. (Science Teacher)

This focus on student performance data leads to important instructional changes. For example, after the mathematics teachers implemented mathematics blocks every day (instead of every other day), they saw a sharp increase in mathematics scores on assessments. Accordingly, the language arts teachers implemented daily blocks for their courses.

### ***Investing in Teachers***

Memorial's success has not occurred by chance. One thing that has contributed to their success is the staff's strong appreciation for continued learning. As a campus, staff attend a large number of professional development activities, averaging roughly eight sessions per teacher per school year (Memorial teacher training document). In addition, they have an informal but well connected network between staff members to share information. Finally, new teachers are socialized into the Memorial philosophy by formal and informal mentoring.

#### *Training Teachers*

A language arts teacher at the school explains how Memorial generally has more staff at district trainings than any other campus. Teachers' requests for training are usually granted, and it is often a problem because too many teachers want to attend a particular class. A teacher shares a possible explanation for this enthusiasm by describing the power teachers have in choosing their own training:

Every department gets to voice opinions, and I think that has worked a lot better because we are getting inservices that help us with our core courses, and we don't have to sit through these boring inservices where you really, you know, you just kind of doodle throughout and not learn very much and just waste your time. (Language Arts Teacher-b)

The list of training that the staff has attended supports this statement. Teachers and staff attend a wide selection of inservices, conferences, and curriculum development sessions. To help teachers use the teaming and block scheduling system to its fullest, almost all of the staff have attended a Texas Middle School Conference where numerous workshops and seminars on teaming are presented. Teachers working with special populations attend gifted and talented, English as a Second Language certification, special education, and bilingual trainings, some of which emphasize working with the students who are members of the Kickapoo Indian tribe.

#### *Collaborating on Teaching*

The formal professional development affects the teaching practices used at the school. The principal explains, "You can see it. You can see it in their lesson plans; you can see it in their classrooms." But these trainings explain only a portion of the collective knowledge that exists at Memorial. Equally as important is the sharing of knowledge that is part of everyday life at the school. The ex-principal phrases it nicely: "We're having staff development on a daily basis."

Sometimes this sharing is very low key, entailing placing reading material in the teachers' mailboxes (Language Arts Teacher-b). At other times, training occurs with small groups of teachers during the day. When a language arts teacher's students achieved high ratings on the state achievement tests, the instructional officer asked her to present an informal inservice to the other language arts teachers. Oftentimes staff members return from training and make changes in their classrooms. If these changes are successful, teachers share because "if it works for me, I want it to work for everybody" (Principal). Additionally, the teachers' enthusiasm helps influence campus and district decisions about what inservices should be taught on a wider scale: "Look, this is what I've seen. . . . And this looks really innovative, this looks really good. And they will support it. They'll do it right away. . . . They'll get the training" (Language Arts Teacher-a).

#### *Integrating New Teachers*

Logistical know-how, curriculum knowledge, and campus culture are generally transmitted through teacher mentoring. The principal partners each new teacher with one or more experienced

Memorial teachers. The teaming model facilitates this partnership because of both physical proximity and the luxury of common planning periods. Teachers are able to plan together, but they are also able to visit each other's classrooms to observe one another in action. The department heads are also instrumental in the training of teachers. They provide curricular direction, but also observe teachers upon request, and, if a teacher asks, teach a lesson so that the new teachers can observe them.

The instructional officer is clearly the main force behind this in-house teacher support system. As one teacher puts it, "She pretty much keeps us going" (Language Arts Teacher-c). She is very involved with the curriculum—identifying training opportunities, acquiring materials and other resources, attending department and team meetings, and, in general, doing everything she can to help the teachers be successful.

### ***Story of Change***

Presently, Memorial is being recognized for the positive gains the students are making academically. This had not always been the case. In the past, Memorial was known more for the problems it had with keeping discipline. The school was making the news because of the frequency of assaults and fights. If the seventh grade decorated their halls, the older students would pass by and destroy the walls in a matter of minutes. The attitude of the time was that "everything that you could fix, you could fix through discipline" (Ex-principal). Teachers followed a prescribed set of instructions for particular infractions that invariably ended up sending a student to the office. Because so much attention was focused on discipline, teaching was difficult. Teachers would follow the curriculum as best they could, which generally entailed teaching "lesson by lesson from the book," and if you finished the book, you had done your job (Mathematics Teacher). The other measure of success described was "if you had discipline in the classroom, you're okay" (Language Arts Teacher-c). Learning was further hampered by short class periods, large class sizes, and the large number of students each teacher was responsible for teaching.

There was little communication or support among the teachers. New teachers were given some materials and a teacher's edition of the text, and left alone. In addition to discontent among the teachers, there was a general attitude of "always blaming things on the children" (Ex-principal) because they were poor or could not speak English, or they were recent immigrants or came from single-parent households.

### ***Loading with Purpose***

Memorial's turnaround was due in large part to Ana Gonzalez, the school's previous principal. She describes the move from teaching at the local high school to Memorial in 1990 as "devastating! The worst experience of my whole educational life!" But looking back at the changes that she helped put in place, she says, "What I did at that school has been the greatest accomplishment of my life."

The very crisis that Memorial was experiencing in terms of its discipline problems and low academic performance was what inspired the principal to envision something better. To make this vision become a reality, she became a workaholic and in turn demanded hard work from her staff. When describing the principal, teachers talked about how exacting and uncompromising she was, but they always spoke of her with respect. According to one staff member, the principal "felt inside of her that it was going to work, and she was going to do whatever it took. And she believed in it so strongly that nobody was going to get in her way! She was focused" (Instructional Officer).

As principal, she provided the single-minded focus necessary to start the school moving in a new direction. When Oscar Castillon, one of Ms. Gonzalez's assistant principals, became principal in

1996, he built upon this foundation to keep the school moving forward. The instructional officer described him as much more relaxed than Ms. Gonzalez, but his quiet style of leadership was effective in creating a common vision and a strong sense of purpose for the whole school community. His philosophy of ensuring that teachers had the “space to teach” gave teachers responsibility for their jobs and also made the students take more responsibility for their own learning.

### ***Transforming the Climate***

Upon arriving at the school, the principal’s first order of business was to change the expectations the staff had for students. She believed all students were capable of learning, and that it was important to be respectful of what they brought with them from home. She had no patience for staff who tried to use a student’s home life as an excuse for poor performance. As she explained,

Don’t come and tell me that this is a poor Mexican child and he comes from the barrio and everything. No, no, no. . . . We have absolutely no jurisdiction over [him] while he’s at home! [When] he crosses that street and he gets in here—what are we doing about that child?

She also worked with staff to change their thinking about performance. She explained to the staff that student grades on report cards were a poor indicator of student knowledge and growth or of teacher effectiveness. She told the staff, “To me, grades are unimportant. To me, learning is important.” Instead of grades, the staff had to find ways to demonstrate student progress by “bringing this child from here all the way up here” (Ana Gonzalez). She also raised questions as to why certain processes were in place. When she first arrived, the students were kept behind the school in the morning where they would mill around and occasionally break windows. When she was told that that was how it had always been, and that there was no particularly good reason, she made a decision that was unpopular with some of the staff: to allow the students to enter the building through any of the entrances. Reducing the number of students entering through any one entrance helped calm the morning routine and stopped the breaking of windows. Coincidentally, that year the district created a closed-campus policy (students remained on campus the whole school day) and a dress policy, which also helped keep students calmer.

### ***Changing the Organizational Structure***

Changes in school climate were important to the improvement of the school, but Principal Gonzalez was looking for a way to create more dramatic increases in student performance. She became aware of the teaming model through reading research and having conversations with teachers who had worked in middle schools in other districts. With district support, she visited schools in Texas that were using the model and spoke with a variety of experts in the field. Convinced that the model would be effective at Memorial, she began educating the teachers about it and putting processes into place to change the school’s organizational structure.

At the end of her first year, the principal surveyed the teachers to find who would be willing to begin interdisciplinary teaming. She wanted only the people who were willing to make a change. A small group of seventh-grade teachers were intrigued by the concept and agreed to participate in a pilot. That year, the group visited several schools in Texas that were using teaming and were impressed with what they saw.

Teachers from other districts also came to Memorial to share their stories, and a variety of other professional development activities were provided. One wing of the school building was allocated for the pilot team. A teacher explained that the first year was difficult, especially learning to

“listen to five different opinions and not leave the team planning period very upset [with] each other.” Many teachers shared the same reservations, but the successes of the one seventh-grade team were hard to ignore:

There [were] a lot of teachers that were not really interested in going into the team. It was something new and it [was] something that they [weren't sure would] work or not. So they were kind of leery of saying yes. But once they saw how it curtailed discipline and attendance went up, . . . everybody started to have a different opinion [about] it. (Principal)

The next time Principal Gonzalez asked who wanted to use the model, the rest of the seventh-grade teachers and the eighth-grade teachers were convinced. That summer, a large group of teachers attended a middle school conference. According to a mathematics teacher, the conference enabled them to learn the “dos and don'ts” of teaming, gave them exposure to teachers using the model, and provided them a rich trove of resources and processes to allow them to extract what they would need for their particular circumstances. In addition to the conference, the principal had teachers read books written by “pioneers” in the field<sup>14</sup> and then brought the authors in for staff development. A counselor remembers the objective to “bring in as many presenters as possible. And not just local presenters, but from all across the country. They spent a lot of money bringing in excellent presenters.”

The eventual success of the teaming model was also due to the staged implementation. The seventh-grade pilot group was able to mentor the rest of the seventh-grade teachers and the eighth-grade teachers the following year. These teachers in turn were able to help the ninth-grade teachers implement the model the year after that. (This change took place before the district restructured the schools into their current grades 7–8, 9–10, and 11–12 configuration.)

The teaming model provided a climate that nurtured the creation of the block schedule. One teacher explained how they could borrow time from each other: “If I had a project and I needed the students to stay two [periods], I would talk with another teacher and make arrangements” (Teacher Focus Group). At the same time, the team and the principal were looking for ways to address the poor mathematics scores (“our big monster,” according to Ms. Gonzalez) in grade 9. They came up with a plan to have the students take two mathematics classes a day. The gains in mathematics scores, along with the informal block scheduling that was already going on, convinced the ninth-grade team to go to a full block scheduling model. As with the teaming, success caught on:

So we started [the block scheduling] with the ninth-graders. . . . And some of the teachers [had been] very, very happy about their schedules [and didn't want to change]. And I said, “Oh no, I don't think we can be with the kids an hour and a half, you know, 45 minutes is more than enough. And now I don't think I can go back.” (Teacher Focus Group)

The final structural change that was essential to Memorial's turnaround was the movement of the ninth-graders to the new high school for grades 9 and 10 in 1998. Naturally, losing 500 students created an immediate change. Halls were less crowded and noise levels went down. There

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<sup>14</sup>Two authors that Ms. Gonzalez brought to the school were John Lounsbury and Elliot Merenbloom. Books by Lounsbury that staff read included two National Middle Association publications: *As I See It* (1991) and *Perspectives: Middle School Education, 1964–1984* (1984). Books by Merenbloom also included publications from the National Middle School Association: *Developing Effective Middle Schools Through Faculty Participation*, second edition (1988) and *The Team Process in the Middle School: A Handbook for Teachers* (1991).

was also more uniformity in the student population. A science teacher remembers how intimidated the seventh-graders were by both the size and the maturity of the ninth-graders. With the ninth-graders gone, the transition was much easier for new students coming into the school, and teachers noticed a change in the behavior of the remaining students.

### ***Focusing on Curriculum and Instruction***

Climatic and structural modifications were important changes in and of themselves, and they had an impact on student achievement. But three other factors were critical Memorial's efforts to better serve the students: targeted professional development, the use of the Accelerated Reader® computer-based reading program, and the creation of the instructional officer position.

Training the teachers in the use of block scheduling and teaming greatly facilitated the introduction of those models. Campuswide programs, like the New Jersey Writing Project, helped the campus align around instructional methods and provided consistency across programs for the students. Content area training improved teachers' knowledge in their area of specialization and provided them with up-to-date instructional methodology. Teachers also took course work at nearby colleges to gain special certifications. For example, the language arts teachers worked to become certified in ESL instruction, and teachers who had not yet passed the state's teacher competency examination did so.

Principal Gonzalez wanted teachers to focus on improving students' reading abilities, so the staff put a variety of processes into place for improving reading instruction. For example, to double the amount of time that students spent reading a book in school each day, the mathematics, science, social studies, or elective teachers would devote one period a week to reading. Even with this increased emphasis, she was frustrated with the slow increase in reading skills. She looked for ways to increase the amount of time students spent reading and to emphasize comprehension. She used Title I funds to purchase a computer-based reading program called Accelerated Reader, books for the library, rewards for the students, and a networked computer for each of the reading classrooms. This focus on reading instruction and repeated skill assessments became very intense, but it paid off. According to one language arts teacher, "We can attribute a lot of our success now to the Accelerated Reader program" (Language Arts Teacher-c).

The principal convinced the district that instead of hiring an assistant principal, they should hire a person dedicated to curriculum and instruction. She was able to hire an instructional officer who brought energy and conviction to the school. He served as a mentor to many of the teachers. He helped secure resources, set up in-house and out-of-town professional development, and wrote curriculum. In short, he did what he could to support the teachers.

### ***Building Consensus***

Upon her arrival at the school, she mandated a no-excuses attitude for student learning. She believed that a "boss" was necessary and that the staff would respond to a committed instructional leader. Her impression of some of the staff members was that they were working to please themselves instead of helping the students. She challenged this attitude in many ways, even walking unannounced into teachers' classrooms to demonstrate teaching techniques that would help the students learn. Along with high expectations, she talked often of the benefits of change, and about the kind of staff Memorial would need: "She asked us if we were willing to make changes. . . . We had to drastically change our thinking. If anybody was not willing to do that, [he or she was] asked to ask for a transfer to another school" (Teacher Focus Group).

Many of the staff did leave. By the principal's estimate, roughly 25 percent of the staff left over the five years that she was there. She explained that she had to work with people outside of the

school to have some of these teachers moved. Others left because they were long-time teachers and change was difficult for them. A counselor explained that it was not uncommon to hear these teachers explain: “I’ve been doing this for 20 years, I know how to teach and some of my students are in college and are successful.” The counselor went on to say she heard “a thousand and one excuses because they don’t want to change.” Some left because they just could not “handle the heat” (Instructional Officer).

Those who stayed varied in their commitment to change. Most of the teachers understood that there were some teachers who were not doing their jobs and had to go. Some took a wait-and-see attitude. A few that stayed resisted change, but eventually bought into the changes that were being made. For example, a teacher who left for maternity leave before the teaming was in place and returned to work on a team shared her story:

And so, when I came back it was very easy for me to just kind of flow and blend in with what was happening. And it changed my mind. I had been one of the ones thinking it wouldn’t work and it was going to be difficult and there were going to be very many challenges to face. And I didn’t know how we were going to solve problems with parents . . . but it worked totally opposite of that. (Language Arts Teacher-b)

The principal emphasized that the turnaround succeeded because of the teachers who remained and the new staff hired during that period. These teachers were more receptive to change, but she understood from the visiting experts’ advice that change had to occur slowly and that those involved would have to make the choice on their own. Each major change (teaming, block scheduling, and double-blocking of certain content areas) started with a small group of teachers and spread by example. One teacher shared how strong an influence other groups’ successes could be: “Once you see how it works, you can’t help but feel envious because you want to do the same thing” (Language Arts Teacher-b).

An important aspect of these changes was that they were always implemented by groups of teachers working together and were never dependent on individual performers. Group change happened by design. Ms. Gonzalez explained how “I would tell them, I don’t want any prima donnas here. That doesn’t help me. I don’t want one teacher to be successful. I want all my hundred and some-odd [teachers to be successful].” Change took time. “This was not easy,” one teacher recalled “It took us years to learn how to work with other teachers” (Teacher Focus Group).

### ***Moving Forward***

The Memorial school community members are proud of their accomplishments, but they realize that the infrastructure they have built and the strong relationships they have with one another make any areas of need very visible. They know they still have a lot of work to do to fulfill the objectives and goals they share. It is evident from everyday practice that the staff are always identifying problems and possible solutions. Much of their planning focuses on the new state tests that students will take in the 2002–03 school year. Memorial’s Campus Improvement Plan (CIP) details a variety of content area professional development sessions that staff have already participated in and will continue to attend for the next three years. The CIP also documents how classroom instruction is changing to reflect the higher-order thinking skills that will be required for success on the new tests and the district goal to have at least 35 percent of the students enrolled in Pre-AP classes.

The band director demonstrated the excitement shared by Memorial’s staff about the changes they still want to make:

I love it. Maybe I'll retire in the next five years, but the more I look at it, I don't feel like it. 'Cause I love my job and I love what I do here. I think that tells you a lot. I love my parents. I love the staff here. It's beautiful. I think everybody should come teach at Memorial. . . . It's a good staff and we have a good principal and . . . administration and the whole—the whole shebang!

Principal Castillon explains how captivating the learning environment is to the staff and students alike. Pointing to a classroom near his office he explained,

You can feel it when you walk into her classroom. You can see what she's doing. You look at the kids, you look at their eyes and you listen to the teacher, you look at the bulletin boards, and you don't want to leave. You don't want to leave. You want to sit there and—and see what's happening, you know? You want to—you want to finish the lesson.

Raising awareness of what needs to be done and making solid plans will be important to Memorial's continued success, but it is the energy of the staff that will allow them to overcome any future barriers.