

# Giving All Students the Keys To College and Skilled Careers:

## One District's Approach

*The authors tell the tale of how the Garden Grove Unified School District, winner of the Broad Prize for Urban Education in 2004, continues to make progress toward its long-term goal of helping all students become ready for college or skilled careers.*

**BY CHRYS DOUGHERTY AND HEATHER ZAVADSKY**

**T**HIS IS the story of how the Garden Grove Unified School District in California is taking on the challenge of preparing all students for college and skilled careers. Though every student may not plan to attend college, the district has decided that the opportunities made available to students should not depend solely on the foresight of teenagers or the prejudgments of adults. The curriculum that gives each student the ability to succeed in college, should he or she choose to attend, also provides the key that unlocks the door to skilled careers for the non-college-bound.

Though many definitions of “college and career readiness” are possible, Garden Grove’s operational definition is that students are deemed “ready” if they complete California’s full “A-G” college-readiness course sequence and demonstrate mastery of the content of each course through an end-of-course exam. Checking for students’ learning of course content is important because Garden Grove wishes to guarantee to students, parents, colleges, and employers that course labels accurately advertise what the student has learned.<sup>1</sup>

Taking on as great a challenge as seeing that “all students are ready for college and skilled careers” has required, first, an unflinching recognition of how far the district has to go. On arriving at the lowest base camp



*English teacher Carrie Lankford discusses strategies for improving note-taking and organizational skills with seventh-graders at Ralston Intermediate School.*

at Mount Everest after an arduous climb, one doesn’t conclude that the mountain has already been conquered. While Garden Grove’s graduation rate has been higher than those of many of the district’s urban counterparts, this number decreases greatly when you count only those students who are “college ready.”<sup>2</sup> Substantial short-term gains can be made by making sure that all students who are well prepared academically enroll in challenging high school courses, but extending that success depends on how well the district prepares all students between preschool and eighth grade to succeed in those

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courses. Quick fixes are no more likely than shortcuts to the summit of Mount Everest.

## BACKGROUND

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Garden Grove is one of the growing number of “urban suburban” districts in the U.S. It serves 50,000 students in parts of seven municipalities in the Los Angeles area. The district’s demographics are essentially urban: of the district’s roughly 50,000 students, 60% receive subsidized lunches; 53% are Hispanic; 31%, Asian; 15%, white; and 1%, African American. The district is heavily populated by families who immigrated recently to the United States. English is the second language for roughly 80% of the district’s students, who speak 68 different languages.

Garden Grove has a number of advantages that have put it in a better position to take on the challenge of educating its students to high levels. In particular, Garden Grove has been relatively free of many of the afflictions that have made it difficult to improve urban districts, such as unstable leadership, politics arising from issues peripheral to student learning, and the endless “churning” or “layering on” of multiple programs, practices, and “new initiatives,” so that the hapless school system never gets to do a good job of implementing any one thing.<sup>3</sup> Garden Grove strives to do an excellent job of implementing a small number of programs and strategies, and thus the district has been careful not to undertake any activity, even one attached to a large grant award, unless it ties directly to the district’s goals.

The implementation of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has complemented Garden Grove’s own growing focus on the use of data to inform teaching and learning. California had already begun testing in more grades than NCLB requires, and Garden Grove has found the NCLB-required disaggregation of data by income and ethnic group highly useful. The goal-setting focus of the law matches well with Garden Grove’s approach, and the district has developed two specific and measurable internal goals that, if met, will address the requirements of the state’s accountability system and NCLB. Both goals are focused on individual student progress and proficiency, and data are collected and tracked at the district, school, classroom, and student levels.

## THE BROAD PRIZE AND NCEA’S BEST PRACTICE FRAMEWORK

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Garden Grove was named a finalist for the Broad Prize for Urban Education in 2002 and 2003, and the

district won the prize in 2004. While the most visible benefit of becoming a two-time finalist and winning the nation’s largest annual education prize was the \$750,000 in scholarship money that the award brought to the district’s students, a major additional benefit was the external review process that came as part of finalist status.

The review was built around the National Center for Educational Accountability’s Best Practice Framework, a research-based taxonomy that focuses on five key thematic areas: 1) curriculum and academic goals; 2) staff selection and capacity building; 3) instructional programs, practices, and arrangements; 4) data and monitoring systems for tracking progress at the school, classroom, and individual levels; and 5) recognition, intervention, and adjustment based on the data yielded by the monitoring system.<sup>4</sup> The framework emphasizes the importance of close collaboration in all five areas among district administrators, school administrators, and classroom teachers. Without the right division of labor, programs are unlikely to be implemented well. Garden Grove has found the framework to be a useful way to organize thinking about the many specific practices that in combination have improved student learning.<sup>5</sup> What follows is a discussion of just a few of Garden Grove’s practices in each of the five areas.

## CURRICULUM AND ACADEMIC GOALS

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To achieve readiness for college and skilled careers, students must climb a long ramp that begins in early childhood. Most disadvantaged students are not even on this ramp unless we consciously work to put them there and provide the necessary support to keep them there.<sup>6</sup> Leaving students on a much lower ramp until middle school or even high school forces them, in many cases, to climb an almost impossibly steep on-ramp to gain access to the higher ramp. Therefore, intervention must take place as early as possible.

With early intervention in mind, the district is working to greatly expand preschool opportunities and has worked hard to develop a continuum of learning objectives that can help position students on the college-readiness ramp as early as preschool. For example, teams of teachers have worked to establish standards for writing that are consistent across the grades, so that a fifth-grader with a rubric score of 4 is writing better than a fourth-grader with the same rubric score. Reading and writing activities have been introduced extensively into kindergarten classrooms, and evidence gathered by the district indicates that, given appropriate support, these young students are excelling.<sup>7</sup>

In reading and mathematics, Garden Grove has con-

cluded that California has set the proficiency standard on the state test high enough to determine whether a student is likely to be on the college-readiness ramp.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, the district has set a goal that every student who is enrolled in the district for five years should score at the proficient level on the state test in those subjects.<sup>9</sup> The district's second goal is that English-language learners who are in the district four years or longer will demonstrate proficiency in English on the California English Language Development Test.<sup>10</sup>

Unlike some schools and districts that have jettisoned untested subjects in an attempt to raise test scores, Garden Grove has remained determined to provide a balanced education, including a strong emphasis on the fine arts. The district also believes that the sooner students are placed in an effective instructional program, the less pressure teachers and administrators will face later on to double- and triple-block each basic subject, thus crowding out time for the other subjects.

## STAFFING, LEADERSHIP, AND CAPACITY BUILDING

Without an effective teaching staff, ambitious academic goals are merely pipe dreams. Therefore, Garden Grove has carefully thought through each part of its system for developing a high-quality teaching faculty. Teachers are viewed as a long-term investment, and the district seeks to hire teachers who have the passion and commitment to work with the district's large population of disadvantaged students and English-language learners and who believe that, with time, effort, and good teaching, all of them can be brought to high levels of academic achievement. The district is looking for individuals who seek constant learning on the job and who will work well in a collaborative environment. In exchange for this commitment, Garden Grove provides teachers the support necessary to encourage them to stay.<sup>11</sup>

Professional development does not consist of a smorgasbord of one-time efforts but is focused on a small number of instructional strategies with careful follow-through support for each one.<sup>12</sup> The district relies on a team of Teachers on Special Assignment (TOSAs),

along with site-based teacher leaders, to support uniform and meticulous implementation of instructional strategies and programs. These highly qualified veterans mentor new teachers for a minimum of two years.

## INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAMS, PRACTICES, AND ARRANGEMENTS

Garden Grove's approach is to study carefully the findings of research and the district's own experience. The district encourages steady improvement or refinement of the practices that have been shown to work and discourages throwing out what works and starting

over. Real improvement in education over the long run comes from hundreds of small improvements made by teachers and passed on to other teachers through collaborative learning.<sup>13</sup> This process is disrupted by a careless turnover of programs.<sup>14</sup>

Garden Grove adopts new programs only after a team of teachers and administrators closely examines the data and other evidence, using a collaborative decision-making process that the district calls a "Consult." For example, a team of teachers and administrators from all levels might be asked to consider the adoption of a new reading program. The district and a Consult team develop criteria for choosing, such as the quality and extent of the research base supporting the program and the program's ease of implementa-

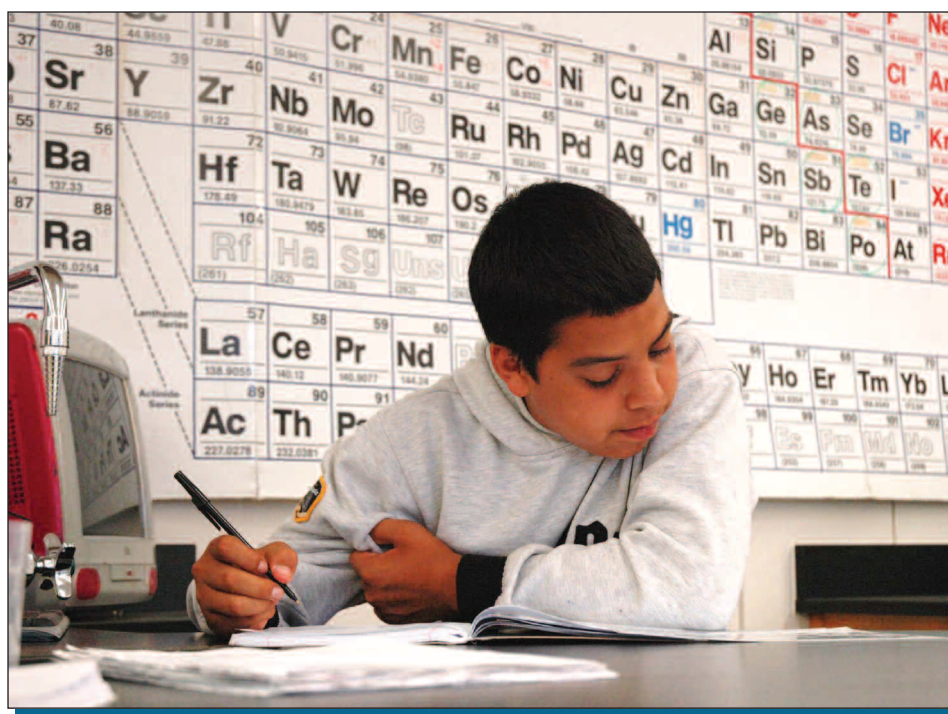
tion by the district's teachers.<sup>15</sup> In some cases, the district has piloted competing programs in separate groups of classrooms, and the Consult team has reviewed the outcomes prior to making a final decision on which program to recommend.

As part of its policy of raising expectations and moving students up to the college-readiness ramp, Garden Grove has been placing more students in advanced courses, beginning in middle school. The district has removed entry requirements for these courses and has provided counselors with placement guidelines, using individual performance data, to encourage students to take more challenging courses.<sup>16</sup>

However, unless such policies are implemented with



*A second-grader at Stanley Elementary School listens to the teacher's instructions before writing in her journal.*



*A sophomore at Bolsa Grande High School studies in chemistry class. The school district invested more than \$1.9 million over the past two years to renovate and modernize science labs in all high schools.*

careful attention to the preparation students need to succeed in the courses, they will not yield the desired results. Using our Mount Everest analogy again, the guide does not simply rush climbers up the mountain without paying attention to whether they are acclimated to the altitude. Strengthening academic preparation in P-8 and developing “Bridge Builder” readiness classes can help acclimate students to advanced courses in middle school and high school.

For example, in adopting a policy of encouraging students to take algebra in the eighth grade, the district has had to confront the question of what to do with students who are poorly prepared for algebra. Three previously used traditional alternatives each seem to be less than satisfactory. The first alternative is to keep the students out of algebra until they are ready; a second alternative would place students in a lower-track version of the course, say, algebra spread out over two years instead of one. In both cases, without student role models in these classes of homogeneously grouped lower performers, students tend to lose motivation, and the likelihood of success is reduced.

A third alternative, putting the less-prepared students into heterogeneously grouped algebra classes with limited or no support — a solution that is increasingly supplanting the first two approaches — causes many students in this “sink or swim” environment to sink.

Either they fail the course, or the teacher gives them credit for it even though they didn’t learn the material.

Garden Grove is piloting a fourth alternative, consisting of placing the marginally prepared students into the class with the better-prepared students, but simultaneously enrolling them in a parallel “extra support” class in the same subject. This special form of double-blocking enables teachers in the support class to use strategies that are not necessary in a class with better-prepared students. For example, the support class might provide extensive previews or “foreshadowing” of coming material and additional review of material during and after the time that it is taught in the regular class.

Since this double-blocking strategy would be difficult to apply to a full roster of advanced courses, it should be clear that the only long-term solution to the problem of preparing all students for college and skilled careers is to prepare students better from preschool through seventh grade.

### **MONITORING: COMPILATION, ANALYSIS, AND USE OF DATA**

To keep track of student learning, Garden Grove has invested in an interim-assessment system that provides information on each student’s progress at four times during the year. For high school courses, the fourth assessment consists of an end-of-course exam that provides information on the student’s overall mastery of the course content.

The district has also implemented a data system that provides detailed information on each student for each course objective and also allows data to be aggregated at the classroom, school, or district levels. However, it is not enough to put a set of computer printouts into the hands of teachers. A guided discussion must occur about what kinds of questions the data might help to answer and how the information on those printouts can be used. Garden Grove is working to make sure that these discussions take place whenever data are handed out.

Likewise, the district has developed a standards-based report card at the K-6 level that shows parents their child's progress in meeting expectations on each instructional objective. Just as teachers benefit from a guided discussion of the information they receive, parents benefit from an explanation of the instructional objectives on the report card and of how their child's progress was evaluated.

Garden Grove also compares the data from the interim assessments with the letter grades that teachers have assigned students. The district has provided this information to teachers and encouraged discussions about the comparisons. Interesting questions and patterns have emerged. In the case of students who receive poor grades but do well on assessments, it might be that the students learned the material but did not bother to turn in all of their assignments. In the case of students who receive high grades but do poorly on assessments, it might be that the students learned the material but do not test well, or perhaps a portion of the grade was based on attitude and effort, rather than actual learning.

When they are presented with previously unavailable data of this kind, teachers are quick to move the discussion forward by asking thoughtful questions and seeking to influence next steps. Addressing these questions is essential to developing a clearer understanding of what grades mean, so that students and parents can be informed.

## RECOGNITION, INTERVENTION, AND ADJUSTMENT

Garden Grove subscribes to the philosophy that “prevention is the best intervention.” A critical strategy for making this philosophy a reality is increasing teachers' ability to differentiate instruction in the classroom so that the instruction students receive comes closer to meeting their individual needs. The district uses data to determine the need for specially designed programs as well as to place students in and exit them from these programs.

The philosophy of early intervention based on data is also used to identify and assist schools that are struggling to reach set targets. Early identification of these schools coupled with multiple levels of support and targeted staff development have been so successful that these schools often become models of best practices for other district schools.<sup>17</sup>

The teacher union has been an important partner in the district's work and in school- and classroom-level interventions. The district sees the union leaders

as well-informed advocates for teachers and students who recognize that the profession is best served when all students succeed. The union leaders appropriately insist that teachers be given the tools and training necessary to make this a reality. By working together, the district and the union have helped create a culture of collaboration and continuous improvement.

## LESSONS FOR OTHER DISTRICTS

Schools and school districts face a tension between the desire to produce results quickly and the need to develop strategies that are not just quick fixes. Some goals can indeed be accomplished relatively quickly — such as putting already well-prepared students into advanced courses in high school. Others take more time — such as making sure that *every* student is well prepared academically to succeed in those courses.

Some lessons that can be taken from Garden Grove's experience include:

1. Adopt a long-term focus on getting all students to high standards of college and career readiness and avoid any quick solution that works against that long-term goal. The troubling practices some districts have adopted in response to accountability pressure all trade long-term aims for anticipated short-term gains.

2. Use a conceptual framework — NCEA's Best Practice Framework is one example — to organize thinking about the changes that need to be made.

3. Focus on meticulously implementing a relatively small number of changes.

4. Measure to make sure that accomplishments are real. Accumulating student credits in “advanced courses,” for example, can be an illusory benefit unless students actually learn the content implied by the course titles.

5. Build support for staying the course in the pursuit of long-term goals among such constituencies as the school board, the unions, parents, and local business and community leaders. A district cannot succeed without their sustained support.

By adopting a long-term perspective, paying close attention to data and implementation, and building community support, school districts can increase their odds of preparing all students for college and skilled careers.

1. For evidence that, without these precautions, large numbers of students are likely to receive credit for courses whose titles do not reflect what has been taught and learned, see Chrys Dougherty, Lynn Mellor, and Shuling Jian, “Orange Juice or Orange Drink? Ensuring That ‘Advanced Courses’ Live Up to Their Labels,” 2006, at [www.just4kids.org](http://www.just4kids.org).

2. California has begun measuring college readiness by adding supple-

mental items to the California Standards Tests that students take in 11th grade. However, completing these Early Assessment Program (EAP) items has been voluntary for students, so accurate measures of college-readiness rates depend on persuading nearly all students to complete these additional items. Garden Grove has worked hard to increase the percentage of EAP-participating students; between 2004 and 2006, Garden Grove's EAP participation rate increased from 40% to 87% in English language arts and from 82% to 91% in mathematics.

3. Districts that perform the worst seem to need the most "reforming," but these districts' ills are probably worsened by the proliferation of many poorly coordinated cures. The plight of such districts reminds one of that of a patient made sicker by taking too many different kinds of pills.

4. These same themes can be used to categorize efforts to reach a particular goal, such as helping more students succeed in algebra I. The first theme (curriculum and academic goals) points to defining the curriculum to be taught and learned in algebra I and in all of its precursor courses; the second focuses on strategies for increasing the knowledge and skills of the teaching staff; the third covers the process for identifying the best materials, textbooks, and strategies for teaching the courses; the fourth pertains to benchmark tests and end-of-course exams to monitor student learning; and the fifth relates to the provision of timely assistance for students encountering difficulty. See [www.just4kids.org](http://www.just4kids.org) for additional information on NCEA's Best Practice Framework.

5. The self-audit checklist attached to the framework has been particularly valuable in reviewing the district's own practices.

6. See Chrys Dougherty, Lynn Mellor, and Nancy Smith, "Identifying Appropriate College Readiness Standards for All Students," April 2006, at [www.just4kids.org](http://www.just4kids.org).

7. Though introducing these activities for young children has been criticized in some places as "developmentally inappropriate," the district notes that gifted teachers do find developmentally appropriate strategies to help young students acquire the skills necessary to ensure their success. Moreover, district leaders say that most parents in advantaged families provide these activities to their children, so that it is mainly the disadvantaged students who are at risk of not receiving appropriate early learning.

8. The district is validating this assumption by, among other things, analyzing the percentage of proficient eighth-graders who later are able to answer correctly most of the supplementary items on the California Standards Test that are intended to assess college readiness. This analysis has not been conducted statewide because California lacks a statewide longitudinal student data system.

9. The district has defined four performance levels below proficient: far

below basic, below basic, low basic, and high basic. The district's goal for academic growth is that each student who is below proficient will move up one level per year.

10. English proficiency on this test is defined as reaching the "Early Advanced/Advanced" level overall, while scoring at least at the "Intermediate" level on all subskills.

11. Since the district invests heavily in the mentoring and professional development of each teacher, it places a high priority on hiring the right people, even in relative "shortage" areas.


12. The instructional strategies, such as "reciprocal teaching," taught in Garden Grove's professional development program are designed to provide diverse learners access to the core curriculum and are based on supporting research.

13. The literature on productivity growth emphasizes that most productivity improvement comes from many small incremental improvements made by workers on the job (often called "learning by doing"), as well as from improvements embodied in innumerable small patented refinements to existing products. The key to this kind of improvement in any field comes in establishing a shared professional understanding of what has worked, coupled with the ability to keep the good while discarding the not-so-good.

14. An interview with a reading expert in the 1970s revealed that the schools that were most successful at teaching reading were not using different programs from those that other schools were using; they were just keeping the same program for a longer time so that teachers had time to adapt and refine it rather than having to start over.

15. Many programs have floundered because they were difficult to implement under conditions prevalent in the field. For example, some programs labeled "fuzzy math" made too many assumptions about the mathematical understanding of the teacher and the likelihood that the teacher would know to fill in certain missing information.

16. Traditionally, counselors in many districts have focused on maximizing the odds that each student will graduate, which in many cases has led them to encourage students to take the easiest route to graduation. Maximizing the odds that students will graduate ready for college and skilled careers entails a different set of recommendations to students. Garden Grove recognizes the need to send a clear message that high school graduation is necessary but not sufficient.

17. So far, the district has been successful either in helping schools avoid being identified for "program improvement" under NCLB or in helping them exit this status within the first two years. 

File Name and Bibliographic Information

**k0711dou.pdf**

**Chrys Dougherty and Heather Zavadsky, Giving All Students the Keys to College and Skilled Careers: One District's Approach, Vol. 89, No. 03, November 2007, pp. 194-199.**

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