

On the Right Track 4: Program Improvement Schools and Districts Making a Difference in Student Achievement

Interview with Judy Warner, Assistant Superintendent of Education Services, Oxnard Union High School District

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JULIE DUFFIELD:

Hello, this is Julie Duffield from WestEd. Thank you for accessing this SchoolsMovingUp audio interview with Judy Warner, the Assistant Superintendent of Education Services at Oxnard Union High School District. Oxnard is located in Southern California, has 6 comprehensive high schools and 3 alternative schools, and serves about 16,000 students. 4 of Oxnard's schools have exited Program Improvement status recently.

This interview was conducted by Angeline Spain from the American Institute of Research. The institute is a partner with WestEd on the California Comprehensive Center. The conversation is based on an original presentation that Judy made for the On the Right Track Symposium in April, 2006

ANGELINE SPAIN: Hi, good morning Judy.

JUDY WARNER: Good morning, Angeline.

ANGELINE SPAIN: Well, I'd like to start off with asking you how you would describe Oxnard to another district administrator, so we can get a little feel about what your district is like.

JUDY WARNER: Well, first of all, it's a secondary school only district. And as anybody that's been in this business knows, when we're working with high school teachers, staffs, and all the problems that come with that, its very difficult to make significant changes, but I think we've done just that.

I would probably describe our district as one with many, many challenges. Living in an agricultural community, we have a large migrant population, many English language learners. But, what I would tell anybody that would possibly be even thinking about coming to work with us that we are a high school district, that we have all of our pieces in place.

And, by that I mean we've worked hard to make significant changes and if those changes can

just stay in place and everybody can stay the course, we're going to have some continued growth.

ANGELINE SPAIN: Terrific. Well, let's talk a little about that growth because looking at the data; you have made quite a bit of growth on the API and your annual measurement bullet objectives.

So, for ELA, that's 35 percent of your students are proficient or above currently and 21 are at proficient or above for mathematics. And, your district has also been frozen in year one and four schools have exited program improvement this year.

So, tell us a little bit more about the changes that you have seen in student achievement over the past few years.

JUDY WARNER: Well, as many districts are seeing, we have had a big change in students that we are serving and for those teachers that have been with us for 30 years, many of them were not aware of exactly who was sitting in the classroom in front of them.

So, I think one of the biggest things we've done is made a push to have those teachers have awareness of who we are serving. Before the changes, it was pretty much business as usual. They were not exactly teaching to the standards, they were continuing to do what they had always done.

But, we've made a concerted effort so that all teachers now know exactly who is in their classroom. We begin each year with giving each teacher, along with their roster, who their special programs students are that are sitting in front of them, and then we keep that updated so that they always know.

We've encouraged our administrators and worked with them to attain a comfort zone so they can ask those hard questions when they visit the classroom. They'll have expectations of every teacher is serving the populations. If you have English language learners, we expect a high credential teacher.

We use the walkthrough method and we are looking for any techniques to work with those English language learners. So, overall, it's just being aware of who you have in your classroom and doing the best with that student for the time that you have them.

ANGELINE SPAIN: Terrific. Well, let's talk a little bit about how you've been able to get there because it sounds great that you're at this place now. But, I know that it wasn't all at once.

So, earlier when we had heard from you when you in your On the Right Track presentation, you had talked about conducting audits as a way to improve schools. So, could you describe for us what these audits consist of and what actions were taken as a result of these audits?

JUDY WARNER: The district in the past has been somewhat closed. It's a large district. We

had never asked for outside help or an outside look-see. I started four years ago, so although I had been in the district prior to leaving and was coming back home so-to-speak, one of the first things I did was ask the county office to come in.

There's a school improvement office and they helped us conduct audits and part of that audit process – the entire educational services division including myself and the other assistant superintendent in charge of HR, who also has a very strong background in educational services. All of us helped conduct audits at three of the four high schools that were in Program Improvement.

And, I will also include the fourth high school, Channel Islands, which had become an II/USP school the year prior and had a one year jump on us and that they had already conducted their audit. But, what we did is, we made sure that in those four schools, every teacher had a visit from a team of two in every classroom.

And, we had a chance to look at exactly what was going on, whether or not they were doing the standards, whether they were teaching and had good classroom management. We conducted with that audit student surveys. We conducted parent evening information sessions and also parent surveys. Every teacher at those four schools was questioned with a survey and then all of that data was put together.

And a large report came back that was shared with each staff and I think that was the beginning of the turn. And the reason I say the beginning of the turn is this is not the first time they had heard this information.

This matched exactly what many of the WASC findings were when they had the WASC visit in years prior. So, this was just a timely – this is what we see, this is what is going on in your school. Stop, let's see where we're at and then let's figure out where we're going to go.

ANGELINE SPAIN: Okay. And, was that conducted at the beginning of the school year?

JUDY WARNER: Yes, yes. We did that in October.

ANGELINE SPAIN: Okay, great. I'd also like to ask you to talk a little about – a little bit more about some of the findings from your audits. I know that one of them was about the need for increasing the engage time, which has a lot to do with the essential program component number two, on instructional time. So, how did the district kind of focus on increasing academic rigor and tightening the master schedule across sites to achieve this goal?

JUDY WARNER: Well, as I mentioned, I don't think that anybody understands what they're doing and what their classroom looks like unless you get an objective opinion. And, that was the value of the audits, about engaged time and teaching bell to bell.

When we looked at the audits and realized that out of the 55 minute period, less than 30 minutes was in direct instruction and activities and learning. I think it was a surprise to everybody. And, what they did was they turned around and said, "Well, how can we change

this and what do we need to do?”

The other major finding was they were not at grade level, their homework assignments weren't at grade level. I mean, teaching the standards and getting the teachers to realize that they're not going through a textbook chapter by chapter, but rather looking at the standards and increasing their lessons around that.

That's point one, but point two was were they actually having the kids work at grade level or were they giving assignments in class and out of class that were below? They were below.

So, that's not a good thing when you're trying to increase test scores. Some of the other findings we had was that although it was the first week of October, there were still schedule changes going on. Some of the students still didn't have textbooks, so that's all been remedied. We ordered the textbooks; we've already started right now.

They're having students come in to the schools prior to the openings to pick up all of their textbooks. We're also demanding that they come in and get all of their – if they want to change anything, to do it all before school starts. Our goal, every year, is that every student goes to class with a textbook and if any of you remember high school, that's a hard thing to do.

Everybody has changes that they have decided on over the summer. The other big push has been getting the administrators in the classrooms more to see if all of these things that we want to see in the classroom is actually happening.

The other thing is teachers getting results about who I said is in the classroom, who is making up their audience, who their kids are, what their needs are, et cetera. We have district-wide assessments that we use for all of our core classrooms developed by our teachers, used by our teachers.

And, I think also most importantly, is teaching – focusing on what goes on between eight and three. We go to a lot of conferences and they want to talk about Saturday interventions and after school interventions.

And, the bottom line is the kids that need the most help are not your kids that are eager to stay after school and many of them have families to take care of, jobs. So, what we've pushed was let's do the best with who we have in our classroom with the time that we have them.

ANGELINE SPAIN: Okay. Well, thank you for talking about all of these different improvement strategies that you've implemented because it's kind of an approach which tackles a lot of different things. So, as far – in your opinion, which of these structures has been the most successful so far and why do you think that is?

JUDY WARNER: Well, let's go back to doing the most with the students that we have and doing it between eight and three. Prior to my arriving, accountability and assessment was mostly an afterthought so we brought that to the forefront for the teachers, for the parents, and for

everyone.

And, we wanted to make sure that, in order to do these things, they had timely data. So, we invested in Edusoft, which is the best thing that ever happened to this district; that, along with designing. We had had some benchmark testing in English and Math, but the teachers never really bought into it.

So, we did a whole revamp of that process and brought the teachers in to write their own benchmarks or to pull benchmarks off of the different software programs that we purchased. We now have benchmark testing and pacing calendars for every English, Math, Social Science, Science, and ELD class.

The pacing calendars go out of the beginning of the school year. So what we are doing is making it absolutely possible for the teachers to do what they need to do in that 55 minute period and do it efficiently and to target in on what the kids truly need to learn. Does that answer your question?

ANGELINE SPAIN: Definitely. Sounds like basically you're – first you found a way to get the data available and then you actually made it available to teachers so that they can use it to improve their instruction.

JUDY WARNER: Right, right.

ANGELINE SPAIN: Alright, well now I'd like to kind of switch the focus to a little bit more broad level now and ask you what the unique challenges of implementing reform and multiple programming for different school sites was?

We talked a little bit about how, as a high school district, you've faced some unique challenges there, but as far as implementing reform across multiple sites...

JUDY WARNER: Well, as you know if you've been in education for a while, the pendulum swings and, you know, you've had site based instruction. You've had site based decision making.

But when you come into a district and you go out and you see what's going on at the different high schools and you realize it's just the same problem at all the high schools, that's when you ask the principals if they're willing to jump on board, tackle the audit findings as a group, work on it together, and basically become – take a lot more direct instruction from the district office.

So, that, I think, was the biggest change across the board. They were not exactly sure what to do. We felt we were sure of what had to happen, so we pulled the teachers in and district-wide, you know, it's district-wide pacing calendars and district-wide assessing that were almost mandated.

And, then again, this year and last year and every year the district office will go out onto a campus as a team and hit again every classroom so that they know in the classroom that we are

coming back out to see if the reforms are happening, actually in the classroom.

The bottom line to answer your question about how you move four schools at the same time is you get the buy-in of the principals to say, “We think we know what is best. Will you do what we say and work together with us?”

And, that’s what all of our principals did. So, there were more checks, more visits, and a lot more training for the administrative teams so that they would become very much experts in curriculum on their own. And that hadn’t been happening before.

ANGELINE SPAIN: I see. Might I just quickly ask you, as far as the training, what did that look like for the administrators?

JUDY WARNER: Well, we would begin each year with an overall training for all the assistant principals as well as the principals. One year we did the walk-through training. And, let me go back, when we say, “What did that look like?”

We made sure that all administrators understood walkthroughs, but then on those four campuses we trained every teacher to conduct walkthroughs for their peers. So, we started with administrators and we started with administrative training on walkthroughs on looking for different support systems for English language learners.

We instituted the co-teaching models for our special education students where, rather than sit in classes, they are now in mainstream classes and the teacher co-teaches with the subject matter teacher. That’s district-wide. We have all of our high schools involved in all of those things now. And, last year we began the school year with major training on data and each team had to put together data teams.

And, we also had English language arts and a Math resource teacher at each of the schools where we purchased, with special funding, the CAHSEE funding in fact; we used that money to put these experts on each of the campuses to not only work with the kids that hadn’t passed the CAHSEE, but to show the teachers how to work with these kids. They became peer experts and worked with them.

Other training, our county does excellent training, so we’ve had Reeves here to talk our administrators, Hollingsworth, many of the top experts, and then they carry back that message. This year we want to get those messages out to more of the teachers, not just administrators.

ANGELINE SPAIN: Wow, well that’s a very comprehensive approach. Congratulations.

JUDY WARNER: Why, thank you.

ANGELINE SPAIN: Well, wrapping up in thinking about the progress that you’ve had so far,

what do you see as your district's main goals for 2006, '07?

JUDY WARNER: Continue on; keep the focus at what goes on in the classroom. It's so easy to lose that focus and start looking at those, like I said, external things, but this year the data teams that are at the high schools, those people will have to be very carefully chosen.

We're asking that they turn the names in of their people to the superintendent this week so that they have time to do some reading over the summer. We're asking that they have data walls posted in strategic places where staff can take a look at what's going on at their own campus.

Once again, we're going to have the English language arts and Math teachers at each of the sites and we've already begun working with them as we speak. Some of them are across the street with John Hollingsworth. The co-teaching, we're going to keep a focus on that and bring more and more SPED students out of SPED classrooms and provide more support for them in the mainstream classrooms.

So, I think to summarize, you can look at administrators and students and all of these things that we've talked about, but it depends on the teacher and equipping the teacher to do the best job in the classroom when they have the kids during the day. So that will be our focus; support the teacher.

ANGELINE SPAIN: Well, we definitely wish you the best of luck with that. I just wanted to say thank you very much for joining us today, Judy, and for answering these questions and telling us so much about what you've been able to accomplish in Oxnard.

JUDY WARNER: Well, it's working and we hope that our test scores continue to spiral upward.

ANGELINE SPAIN: Alright, well thank you so much.

JUDY WARNER: And thank you.

JULIE DUFFIELD: Thanks for listening to this SchoolsMovingUp audio interview. We again thank Judy Warner, the Assistant Superintendent of Education Services at Oxnard Union High School District and Angline Spain with the American Institute of Research—a partner with WestEd on the California Comprehensive Center.

Be sure to read the full school profile for Oxnard Union High School District which is posted on the Schoolsmovingup Web site at www.schoolsmovingup.net. This is Julie Duffield for Schoolsmovingup at WestEd...thank you for listening.

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