

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

Interview with Steve Liles, Principal of Rio Linda High School, Grant Joint Union High School District

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Introduction:

JULIE DUFFIELD:

Thank you for accessing this SchoolsMovingUp audio interview with Angeline Spain from the American Institute of Research. The institute is a partner with WestEd on the California Comprehensive Center.

Today's interview features Steve Liles, Principal of Rio Linda High School in California's Central Valley.

The conversation is based on an original presentation that Steve made for the On the Right Track Symposium in April, 2006.

Angeline and Steve will discuss how Rio Linda High School is creating learning objectives related to the essential program components for standards based instruction.

A full profile for Rio Linda High School can be found on the SchoolsMovingUp Website, and without further ado, here's Angeline and Steve, thank you

ANGELINE SPAIN : Good morning.

STEVE LILES: Good morning.

ANGELINE SPAIN : I'd like to start off, I know that you've been principal for about five years at Rio Linda, how would you describe your school to another high school administrator?

STEVE LILES : Well I really like the designation that we received at the conference, and that was urban fringe . Before I used to refer to the school as a suburban urban school, actually suburban rural school, because we have a mixture of all three environments at our school. But we're an almost middle sized school nowadays because we're at the 2000 market with students.

And the school was built in 1962, so it's a baby boomer school, originally, and suburban school that's also within an urban environment, but also within a rural environment, so the urban fringe, I think is a very accurate statement.

ANGELINE SPAIN : All right. Well looking at your track record over the last few years, you've made quite a bit of growth on your API and your annual measurable objective, the AMOs. And as of the last STAR, you have about 33 percent of your students at proficient or above for English language arts, and 20 percent of your students at proficient or above for mathematics. And that's quite a bit of change. So could you tell us a little bit more about the changes you've seen on student achievement while you've been at Rio Linda?

STEVE LILES : Sure. When I first came here, which was June of 2001, I had just left Highland's High School, which was also an under performing school but we had raised the API over 120 points in two years at Highland's. And I looked at doing some of the same things at Rio Linda, but I wanted to make sure that I got a real feel for the culture and climate of the school before we instituted anything sweeping and drastic.

So as I came into the school in the fall, I meet with the leadership of the school, which at that time were the department chairs, and we created a school leadership which we also invited in other members that were under represented as far as members of curriculum groups. So we ended up with a group of about 15 people, that represented pretty much every discipline within the school.

And then, I started to look at what we were doing, how we were doing it. But at the same time, we had the perfect storm of school improvement, which was being an II/USP school and being the first year of implementation. And also being designated as an underperforming school. So there were resources immediately available and actually our external provider was WestEd at that time.

So as we began that new year, we were beginning with implementation of a plan that I hadn't written, but yet was in place. So we had to modify that plan, to the needs of the school. And what we found, and I say we, because it was a group effort, we found that there really wasn't a focus on standards and frameworks. There wasn't a cohesive format, so to speak for lesson planning. And there also wasn't a safety net for students in regards to academic triage, I'd call it, working with ELA and working with math on the most basic level, getting students ready for high school and beyond. That wasn't there. So we had to put those things in place. And also, part of it too, with test awareness, test prep, we needed to make some immediate changes at the beginning of the year, which we did.

ANGELINE SPAIN : Okay. So, how would you say that that has influenced your academic growth?

STEVE LILES : Considerably. We started out with over 14 sections of reading that first year. And we were using – at that time, we were using a High Point series, which we continue to use – actually, I'm sorry, SRA. We started with SRA, and we're now at High Point. We're now down to three sections of reading, total. So going from 14 to three is huge. And at the same time, we

needed some remediation from math. We needed some remediation for ELA. So we put in place a remediation program for those students in the bottom quartile, so then the lowest 25 percent they were designated as needing assistance in ELA or needing assistance in algebra for example. And we put in place classes, that were remediation support classes for ELA and also for mathematics, for algebra.

And on top of that, we also created an advisory class, an advisory period. And that advisory period was a place where students were grouped by alpha, by grade, with a teacher that would be with them one day per week for 25 minutes, and that would be with that student the entire time they were in high school to their senior year, so that there would be some cohesiveness and familiarity between teacher and student. And also, when it came to testing, the school was automatically organized for testing purposes. And we could also deliver pertinent information to students about their transcript, about their grades, about testing, testing skills, and just basic information without taking away from instruction time, during the regular school day. And we put that in place, the second semester of that first year. So in spring of 2002, we put that program into place.

ANGELINE SPAIN : It sounds like it was a pretty busy year.

STEVE LILES : It was, very much.

ANGELINE SPAIN : So in terms of kind of thinking about you talked a lot about kind of moving from a lot of different classrooms to three sections of reading, and kind of focusing on math, and providing a lot of remediation opportunities for students, how did – you also started with at the beginning that you were thinking about kind of the standards aligned part of the essential program component number one.

So thinking – I guess, starting with the school leadership team, but then also as far as the teachers at your school, how did you move from talking about the standards to creating learning objectives, and examining how they relate to standards?

STEVE LILES : OK. Well we did some initial work, and we continued with that work all the way through this year, with folks from the county office of education, from the Sacramento County Office of Education, SCOE. And working with training teachers on standards based curriculum. And we worked with Neil Malvetti and Linda Bursinger . And they've now gone on to be consultants, they no longer work with the county. But we worked with them in creating some in service opportunities for our teachers to focus on standards base, lesson planning standards based instruction that muted eventually into EDI explicit direct instruction using some of Dr. Ibarra's work with Data Works. And creating that as sort of the school wide methodology for instruction. And it's really taken Madeline Hunter's early work and moving on to a more codified sort of instructional base.

And we also did that through weekly staff development and in service that was every Wednesday, we would have a late start day, and we spent an hour-and-a-half with staff development, every Wednesday. And our entire school district has not moved to that move. So every one of our schools in our whole district now, has a late start Wednesday. And the staff at the school is actually responsible for the in service. It's not from our district office down to our

classroom teachers telling them what they need to work on or how they need to work on it. Our school site leadership team is responsible for designating what we will do and how we will do it for the entire year. And those are the types of things that we've been working on for the past four-and-a-half years.

ANGELINE SPAIN : Great. So you have a lot of professional development going on. It sounds like it's lead actually the school level. Let's talk about how that affects what goes on in your classroom. Basically the teachers

STEVE LILES : Well what it looks like right now, it's a cultural shift for the school and a climatic shift for the school in regards to going into a classroom, there's an expectation that there will be a learning objective for that day. Some sort of communication between the teacher and the students about what they will encounter, what they will learn that day. Not necessarily for the week, not necessarily for the unit, but that particular day in instruction in that day.

The other part of that would be some sort of methodology of assessment throughout that class period, that would give the teacher feedback as to whether or not the students are getting it. So they checking for understanding is there, built in to the lesson planning. And you'll find that in virtually every one of our classrooms, some sort of an assessment about the learning objective. And those are key elements, but they're primarily to improvement. So that's one thing that you will see, and you wouldn't have seen five years ago.

You also would not have seen a cohesiveness from teacher A to teacher X in regards to how they were approaching the lesson, just for example, within English nine, or English 10 or algebra one. No pacing. No assessments on a regular basis. There wasn't even a finals schedule, frankly, when I first go there which I just thought was amazing, but yet, that was the culture of the school. That's how they had been used to performing. So that was the difference.

ANGELINE SPAIN : So in terms of kind of having the teachers get on the same page in terms of, I guess, their instruction, was that through the working on the standards that that came about? How did that happen?

STEVE LILES : The most effective change and the most dramatic change occurred when teachers began to teach teachers. It wasn't someone from the county. It wasn't someone from the state. It wasn't something coming in as a consultant. It was when we actually had teachers trained to train teachers that we saw the pendulum start to move, and that was right about the middle of the year, after the first semester. And it was very dramatic, the change in culture, the academic culture of the school was significant when we finally got to that point, where teachers were leading teachers. And they were being led into standards based instruction. And methodologies of instruction that made sense, and actually made their jobs easier. And when that came across, it was just amazing, to see the shift in how people thought of what they were doing and how they were doing it.

And we're not perfect yet, and we probably never will be but we continue to move towards that, to where we get everyone on the same page in regards to methodologies, and also the pacing and

the assessment. And the assessment is just huge for us, because we continue to be more and more data driven because we're getting better and better data. And that made huge sense to most people because it's very clear. And we're also getting feedback back to the teachers about that data and it comes directly out of instruction.

ANGELINE SPAIN : Great. Well you've talked a lot about kind of very interesting things that you've been able to implement, it sounds like very successfully. What are they unique challenges of those at the high school level?

STEVE LILES : The unique what? I'm sorry.

ANGELINE SPAIN : The unique challenges of kind of these -- you've implemented this cohesive structure across your school -- within your departments and across what teachers are doing in terms of at the classroom level.

STEVE LILES : I think the most difficult hurdle was past practice. In other words, I've been teaching this subject this way for 35 years, now you're asking me to change how I teach. The answer is no, I'm not asking you to change. I'm asking you to look at how you teach and ask yourself questions about how you teach and how you could teach more effectively. So it wasn't to come in and say everything has to change. It would just say, you're doing this, and this is actually what you're supposed to be doing in regards to this method.

But the biggest hurdle, within a large high school environment that has been in existence now for over 44 years is that past practice. And past practice was no assessment, no pacing, no methodology that was cohesive, so those were huge.

ANGELINE SPAIN : All right. Great. Well wrapping up and thinking about your progress so far, what do you see as your main goals for 2006-07, the coming school year?

STEVE LILES : Well the incredibly wonderful thing is that we're not longer an underperforming school. We're no longer under program improvement. Now that opens new doors for us dramatically. And some of those new doors can be to ascend to higher levels, as blue ribbon distinguished school. Continue also, at the same time that we've been doing all of our work with remediation, increasing other rigor. For example, we've gone from three AP classes, to now 11 AP honors classes in the school. We've done at that the same time we've done the remediation.

So bringing the rigor across the board into the school, adding new courses, adding new subjects, adding more advanced opportunities for students is key. And we've been able to do that also while keeping our vocational and fine arts programs in tact. And we've done through some very creative uses of ROP programs, and other funding that has come into our school district. And we currently lead the district in vocational education as well. So we're trying to hit every area that we can in regards to student need, because we simplified our mission, and our mission is very simple, it's prepare students for higher education and the world of work. That's it.

ANGELINE SPAIN : Great. Well thank you very much for spending the time to talk with us today. This has been Steve Liles, the Principal at Rio Linda in Sacramento County, California. Thank you very much, Steve.

STEVE LILES : Thank you.

JULIE DUFFIELD:

Thanks for listening to this SchoolsMovingUp audio interview. We again thank Steve Liles, Principal of Rio Linda High School, 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 Rio Linda at www.schoolsmovingup.net. This is Julie Duffield from Schoolamovingup thank you..

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