

Editorial: Del Mar High's stunning success

STATE AWARD RECOGNIZES VALUE OF HIGH ENERGY, HIGH EXPECTATIONS

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This month, the state Department of Education announced that 171 high schools and middle schools are California Distinguished Schools (elementary schools are awarded on alternate years).

The 11 in Santa Clara County included three predictable high achievers from the Fremont Union district in Cupertino and some rising stars: San Jose Unified's Pioneer High and Alum Rock's Renaissance Academy, a new small middle school.

But no school has worked harder and deserved the honor more than Del Mar High in West San Jose. It was evidence to a community of doubters of an impressive transformation.

Four years ago, many teachers who had stuck around the 50-year-old school were miserable; test scores were abysmal. The school was on a short leash of tentative accreditation. It had lost middle class families when boundary lines were redrawn for reopening Branham High (another 2007 Distinguished School).

That was when Jim Russell came out of semi-retirement to become principal. While it takes a collective effort to make change, there's no question who was most responsible for the turnaround. "With the new principal came new hope," Del Mar grad and now social studies teacher Stacey Sampson wrote in an e-mail.

Russell, 55, is a Campbell native and former principal at Leigh High for a decade. He had the advantage of coming in knowledgeable and respected.

Researchers for the Stanford-led project, Getting Down to Facts, have cited several factors behind highly successful schools: teacher support and training, control over hiring, effectiveness in removing teachers, assessment data informing instruction, high expectations for students, parental involvement and teacher collaboration.

These, too, were Russell's priorities.

Because of turnover, Russell hired 50 percent of his staff in the past three years. Many of these are young, energetic teachers whom Russell put in leadership positions. A few veterans who left Del Mar also have returned.

Early on, he changed the atmosphere and raised expectations. Every day, Russell is out talking with students at the lunch hour. He created a Wall of Scholars celebrating students with a 4.0 average and a principal's honor roll for students over 3.25. He confronted gang problems by bringing in Catholic Charities to work with at-risk teens and by hiring two off-duty police officers. Expulsions dropped from an unacceptable 46 last year to only 4 this year.

Del Mar has put in place strategies to identify early students at risk of not passing the high school exit exam. They get after-school tutoring and support classes in math and English. At the same time, there is open enrollment for Advanced Placement courses; minority students are encouraged to take them.

The school has reached out especially to Latino parents, creating the group Padres Unidos, which meets monthly. "More parents are involved," says parent leader Blanca Diaz. "It makes a difference."

For teachers, the focus has been on research-based strategies, like note-taking techniques. Teachers are creating common lesson plans and using pacing guides. They post the state standard that each class is addressing so students know what they're supposed to learn.

In the past two years, the school's API score, the primary standardized test, rose 102 points, to 700, a large gain made more impressive by the narrowing of the achievement gap. Hispanic scores rose 125 points, and low-income students gained 137.

Del Mar's score is still 100 points below the state target of 800 and the lowest in the five-school Campbell Union High School District. But one-third of students at Del Mar are English learners, and the mobility rate - the percentage of students who will transfer over the course of their four years in high school - is 40 percent.

With 1,150 students, Del Mar is under-enrolled. It has been the school that families fled if they could. Now that it's a Distinguished School, parents may want to take a second look. And under-performing schools in other districts should, too; lessons can be learned from Del Mar's experience.