

R&D ALERT

Low-income schools that are beating the odds

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Fixing college course placement policies

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timely knowledge for education and human development professionals





■ BRIEFLY

» WestEd study adds to growing body of evidence suggesting school climate is an important factor for school success.



» Schools that substantially outperformed demographically similar schools over a multiyear period had much more positive levels of school climate.

How Campus Climate Can Help Schools Beat the Odds

On her first day as assistant principal 10 years ago, Terry Ceja walked through the door and caught sight of a disconcerting line snaking down the hallway: 150 students standing in a tardy line — a line that took two to three hours to process each morning.

This was Sierra Vista Middle School in La Puente, California, about 20 miles east of downtown Los Angeles. The school has the highest foster, homeless, and gang-related student demographic in the Hacienda La Puente Unified School District — where lunchtime was “punch time” most days of the week and the administration processed about 30 discipline referrals from teachers each day.

When Ceja arrived, the school was struggling with academic achievement, and she and the school’s then-principal, Sue Kaiser, knew major changes were needed to turn things around. With previous experience in a variety of educational roles, they had a good idea of what to do first.

“We had learned what was often missing in lower-performing schools were strong relationships that fostered a supportive school environment and a sense of pride in the school,” she says. “Our vision was for kids, and teachers, to have the best six hours of their day at Sierra Vista.”

Ceja and Kaiser embraced the goal of improving school climate as a way for Sierra Vista to move forward. This explicit focus on strengthening relationships between students and staff, fostering a safer and more supportive campus, and setting high expectations for all students helped transform Sierra Vista into a school that “beat the odds” — performing better than expected on

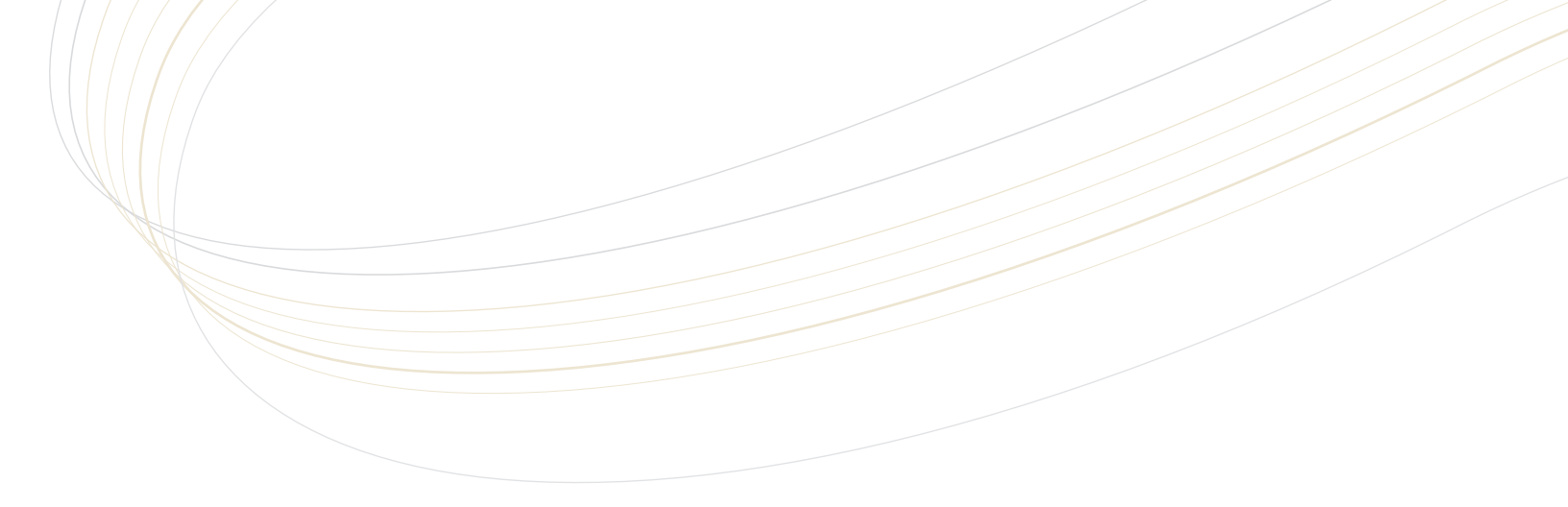
standardized tests, given the characteristics of the students it serves.

STUDY FINDINGS: CLIMATE REALLY MATTERS

A recent report from WestEd suggests that Ceja and Kaiser set Sierra Vista on the right track. *A Climate for Academic Success: How School Climate Distinguishes Schools That Are Beating the Achievement Odds* provides evidence that schools like Sierra Vista need not be an anomaly — that school climate *can* make a very big difference, particularly on student academic achievement.

Using publicly available academic performance and demographic data from the California Department of Education (CDE), WestEd identified 40 “beating-the-odds” (BTO) schools — defined by the study as those substantially outperforming demographically similar schools over a multiyear period — from among more than 1,700 California public middle and high schools. While the WestEd team expected a relationship between achievement and campus climate, they were surprised by the magnitude of difference in School Climate Index scores between non-BTO schools and BTO schools. On average, non-BTO schools were at the 49th percentile for positive school climate, while BTO schools were at the 82nd percentile. Further, the difference in average School Climate Index





scores was twice as large between BTO schools and 20 schools that consistently underperformed.

In fact, school climate was found to be a defining characteristic of BTO schools: it differentiated more strongly between non-BTO and BTO schools than student demographics or personnel resources, such as the education and experience of staff. In other words, in two schools with identical resources or demographics, the school with a better climate was far more likely to be academically successful.

“Many education outcomes are associated with factors that are difficult or impossible to change, like socioeconomic status and ethnicity or race,” says lead author Adam Voight, a research associate in WestEd’s Health and Human Development (HHD) Program. “The findings of this study don’t suggest otherwise. But the study *does* suggest that improving school climate may bring positive results; it offers another way to tackle issues related to poor academic achievement, particularly in schools whose students are predominantly low-income.”

WESTED AND CALIFORNIA: IN SYNC ON SCHOOL CLIMATE

WestEd’s HHD Program has long recognized the importance of school climate and safety. With funding from the CDE, WestEd developed and administers the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS), the oldest and largest statewide student survey of resiliency, protective factors, and risk behaviors in the nation. The CHKS — which now has companion staff and parent surveys that collectively make up the California School Climate, Health, and Learning Survey System (Cal-SCHLS) — includes measures of school environment such as safety, academic

supports, social relationships, and school connectedness, which result in data that schools can use to target strategic areas for improvement.

WestEd also provides climate-related technical assistance to schools and districts, including high schools in California, Louisiana, and South Carolina that received federally funded Safe and Supportive Schools (S3) grants. In California, after two years of implementing their S3 grant programs with assistance from WestEd, 86 percent of these schools had improved their school climate. On average, the S3 schools in California also saw an increase of 15 points in their Academic Performance Index (API), an annual measure of school and district performance on standardized tests.

“Social and emotional facets of the school experience are often left out when people are discussing hard outcomes, like test scores,” says Voight. “But it’s critical to address underlying issues that can prevent students from being socially and emotionally ready to learn and achieve at a high level.”

Failure to include school climate may account for why so many improvement efforts fall short and test scores plateau, said Greg Austin, WestEd’s HHD Program Director, in a recent presentation given at the White House.

Now, adds Voight, there’s validation at the state level for the importance of school climate: “For the first time ever, school climate is explicitly being included in how California thinks about assessing school and district performance.”

California now requires districts to develop an annual Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) for meeting annual goals for all of their students, particularly

“It’s critical to address underlying issues that can prevent students from being socially and emotionally ready to learn and achieve at a high level.”

those who are struggling most. The plan has to be aligned with eight state priority areas — one of which is school climate. “California is leading the way in this respect,” says Austin, adding that WestEd helps by consulting with districts on LCAP development to strengthen school climate.

FOSTERING A POSITIVE SCHOOL CLIMATE

While WestEd’s study showed that positive school climate is a common characteristic among all beating-the-odds schools, it didn’t specifically explore how BTO schools are fostering those supportive environments. However, feedback collected from S3 schools indicates that a schoolwide commitment to improving campus climate — together with parent and community engagement — is critical to success. Important also are implementing targeted interventions informed by the school climate data.

Improvements, says Voight, depend on laying a strong foundation of developmental supports that research has shown to mitigate risk factors. These supports include caring adult relationships, high expectations, meaningful participation by students, and increased student perception of safety.

Sierra Vista Middle School provides a case study of implementing school climate improvement strategies that result in significant improvements. Even without the benefit of S3 grants or federal programs, Sierra Vista has had high ratings on the Cal-SCHLS surveys from both students and teachers for several years running. A school whose student body is 98 percent racial/ethnic minorities and 98 percent eligible for free and reduced-price lunch, Sierra Vista has also increased its API scores from

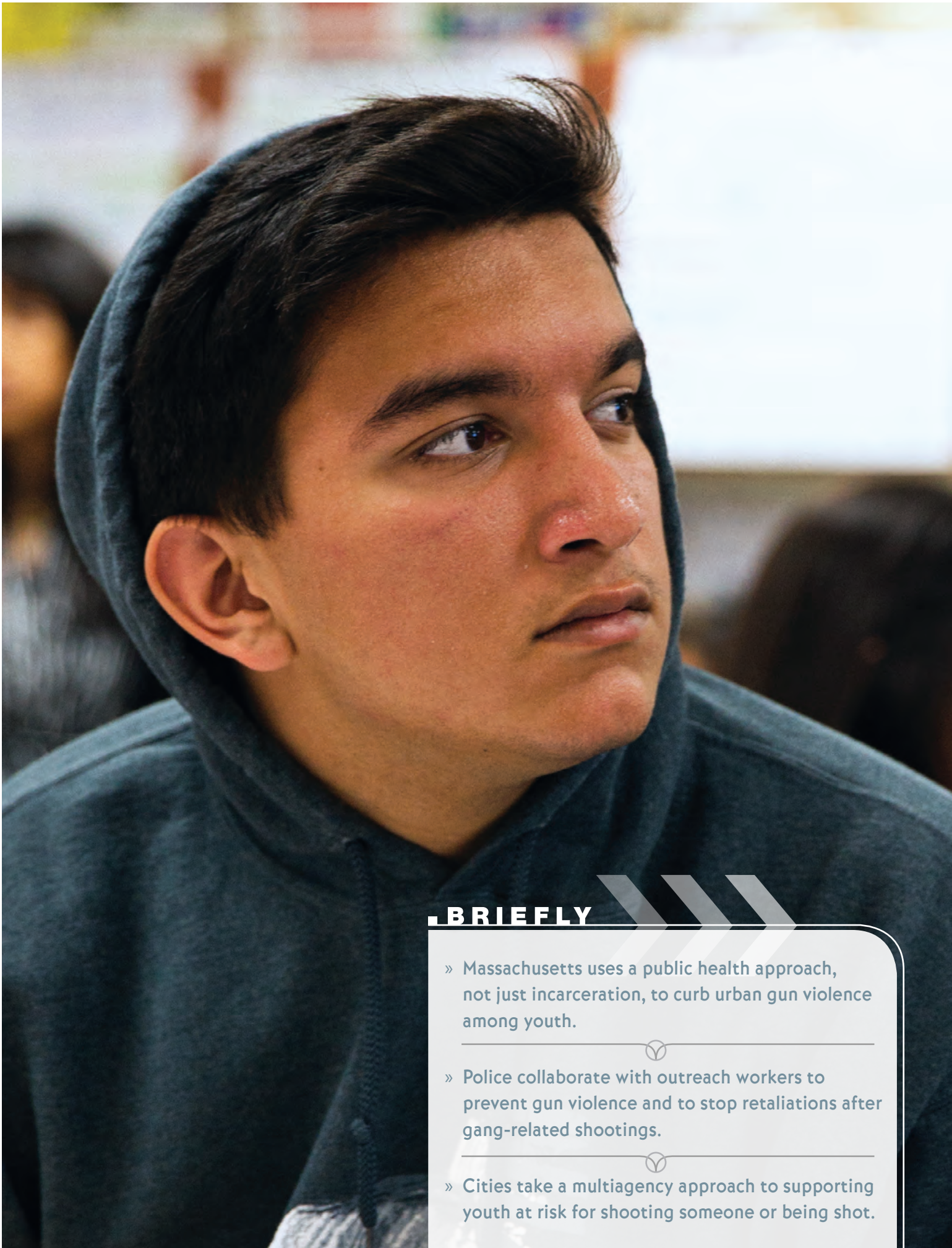
678 ten years ago to 810 — including achieving the highest API gain in its district last year.

When Ceja, who is now the principal at Sierra Vista, came on board, she started by collaborating with the teachers to address campus climate: improving the physical environment of the staff lounge, organizing and cooking for regular social gatherings, and cultivating a sense of trust and unity among the staff and administration. In addition, a four-step, schoolwide behavior management system transformed discipline from an act of blame to a process of helping students adjust their behavior so they can stay in class and participate. As part of this system, teachers stand near the doorway and greet every child by name at the start of every period.

Despite initial strong resistance, establishing a dress code helped remove visual cues of differences between students, which had sparked many earlier confrontations. “I’d say that eliminated about 20 percent of the problem,” says Ceja, who shares some common history with many of her students, having crossed the U.S. border from Mexico at age eight.

The administrators and staff at Sierra Vista have employed a range of other strategies to build not only relationships, but also structures, like the behavior management system, and high expectations. These innovations include the inauguration of a “Fun Friday” at the end of every grading period, a reward in which students with high grades in citizenship get to choose a fun activity like dance class, art class, or basketball.

“Sierra Vista has become a training ground for other schools looking to improve their school climate and student achievement,” says Austin. “And its success shows



■ BRIEFLY

- » Massachusetts uses a public health approach, not just incarceration, to curb urban gun violence among youth.
- » Police collaborate with outreach workers to prevent gun violence and to stop retaliations after gang-related shootings.
- » Cities take a multiagency approach to supporting youth at risk for shooting someone or being shot.

TAKING IT TO THE STREETS:

Bringing Research to Bear on Curbing Urban Gun Violence

Out of growing frustration with futile efforts to reduce urban gun violence by arresting young people and locking them up, some federal and city programs are taking a public health approach — using multiagency prevention and treatment strategies to address underlying sources of violence.

Since at least the 1980s, which saw an alarming escalation in handgun homicides among 15- to 24-year-olds, U.S. efforts to reduce urban street violence have emphasized law enforcement. While a tough-minded focus on criminalization and punishment may be in line with public sentiment, research indicates that these perceptions and policies have been off the mark.

In 2011, Massachusetts launched its Safe and Successful Youth Initiative (SSYI), which provides support to urban communities and offers services to young men ages 14–24 who are, in the state’s words, “at proven risk of shooting someone or being shot.” As part of this initiative, Massachusetts also funded an evaluation team — led by the American Institutes for Research with partners WestEd and Justice Resource Institute — to find and develop evidence-based guidance on violence reduction.

The team summarized findings from its initial scan of relevant research in two reports: *What Works to Prevent Urban Violence Among Proven Risk Young Men?* and a companion piece, *Strategies to Prevent Urban Violence*. The findings provide substantial support for the public health approach and shed light on the specifics of what makes this approach most effective.

EVIDENCE OF IMPACT

The evaluation team systematically searched the research literature for sound evaluations of violence-reduction

programs that, similar to SSYI, deployed multiple components, rather than relying solely on law enforcement to curb serious violence such as homicides and shootings. The researchers further targeted only those relatively recent programs (begun since 1996) whose impact had been evaluated using experimental or quasi-experimental methods.

When they discovered that no one had previously done a cross-study summary of studies that met these criteria, the team created its own summary focused on 11 studies that met its rigorous criteria. They were surprised by the consistency of findings across these studies.

“We expected the research on these 11 programs would show a wide range of effectiveness, with some being successes and some failures,” says Anthony Petrosino, a WestEd senior research associate who specializes in crime and justice research. “But much to our surprise, nearly all the studies came to the same conclusion.” Specifically, 10 of the 11 programs that took a public health approach were successful in terms of “achieving sizeable drops (10 percent or more) in homicides and other violence among youth involved with guns and gangs.”

This was a significant discovery, Petrosino notes. “The results suggest that cities or states that are *not* implementing similar kinds of public health strategies may be missing the chance to reduce street violence substantially.”



“The results suggest that cities or states that are *not* implementing similar kinds of public health strategies may be missing the chance to considerably reduce street violence.”

Although law enforcement had a role in all of the programs, the multiagency approach leveraged resources and expertise from other sectors, such as education and housing, faith-based groups, nonprofit service providers, private businesses, and community members. This approach enabled street outreach workers to guide youth to education opportunities, job training, social services, and other supports that offered alternatives to gangs and violence.

STREET OUTREACH AND MULTIAGENCY COLLABORATION IN ACTION

SSYI identifies young men at greatest risk of engaging in gun violence and assigns outreach workers to help them access education, occupational training, and social services and support. Because many of the outreach workers come from the same neighborhoods and know the culture of the streets, they can more easily gain the trust of high-risk youths and strengthen their fragile futures. In Boston, for example, to end the pattern of retaliation shootings and other gang activity, street outreach workers now go directly to hospitals to talk with gunshot victims when they are most vulnerable and open to change and attempt to get these young men involved in the SSYI program.

By collaborating with law enforcement, mental health centers, churches, and families, outreach workers also provide a comprehensive safety net that supports the men on multiple levels and also extends to their families and communities.

“[The approach] has huge implications across the board, and these communities are now organizing themselves to address street violence and related issues,” says Sarah

Guckenburg, a senior research associate with WestEd who has been studying the city of Lawrence, Massachusetts, as it implements strategies supported by the research. “The violence in these communities affects not only the individual but also entire neighborhoods, entire families, entire generations.”

LEARNING HARD LESSONS FROM LAWRENCE

Art McCabe has seen the devastation wrought by street violence firsthand. As manager of community development for Lawrence, he has watched as extreme poverty, joblessness, and violent crime among the city’s largely immigrant population wrecked families and neighborhoods.

In 2012, McCabe used an SSYI grant to create the Lawrence Youth Team, which aims to pull together community members and resources to reduce crime. The team — whose members have various professional qualifications, as well as a personal history of gang membership or other involvement in street life — enlists law enforcement personnel to identify the most violence-prone youths. The interagency rapport is so strong that team specialists sometimes work side by side with police during conflicts to try to keep young people out of the criminal justice system.

“We’ve conducted a lot of cross-training workshops for various organizations and have developed good working relationships with them all, but we also spent a lot of time working in the streets getting to know people,” says McCabe. “We’ve also worked with the secondary population: the families and teenage mothers and infants.”

The Lawrence Youth Team coordinates a jobs program that includes paying youth to clean up parks, which helps

them engage with their neighbors in positive ways as well as repairing neglected community resources. Educational assistance also prepares the youth for high school equivalency exams and college.

"A key part of the program is being consistent. These kids have never had consistency in their lives. They know there is somebody in our program they can count on 24 hours a day, seven days a week."

LISTENING TO THE VOICES OF EXPERIENCE

Hearing from someone who shared the same kinds of struggles growing up can resonate with youth. For example: The Lawrence Youth Team's chief street outreach worker spent 11 years in prison and led one of the city's major gangs during the 1990s. When he tells current gang members and "wannabes" how he watched his son grow up through a Plexiglas window, his plea to build a better life is grounded in his firsthand experience of the high costs of street violence. Similarly compelling is the story of a caseworker on the Lawrence team who had two kids by the time she was 16, yet managed to graduate from college. When she speaks about education's transformative power, her message carries instant credibility.

This year, about 40 participants in the Lawrence program will become neighborhood emissaries working with community and faith-based organizations to reach other gang-involved youths and help stabilize some of the poorest areas of the city. Some of the young men will move into permanent jobs in these organizations, city departments, and the private sector.

"A lot of kids want to give back if you give them a chance," says McCabe. "This way the kids feel like they're

doing something valuable, and you expand the capacity of the city."

McCabe acknowledges that progress with this high-risk population takes a great deal of time and effort. The 131 youths currently in the Lawrence program fall along a continuum of commitment, he says, with some continuing to "lead a double life" of gang activity alternated with responsible behavior.

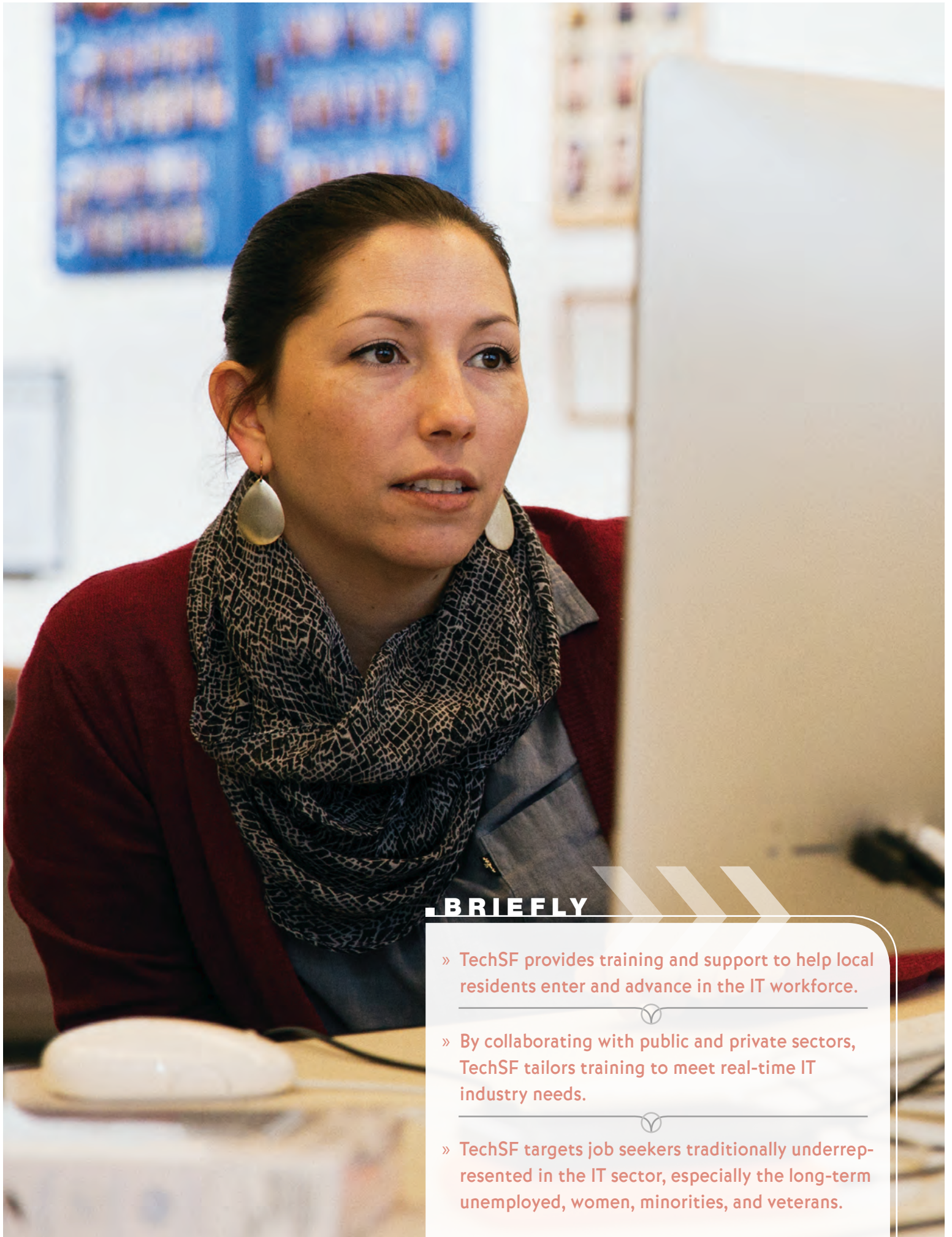
LOOKING AHEAD

While the SSYI researchers' cross-study analysis found that programs similar to those in Massachusetts have been successful with remarkable consistency, it is too soon to know the extent to which SSYI itself will have a positive impact. The evaluation team is now studying whether the cities participating in the SSYI initiative outperform comparable non-participating communities.

Meanwhile, the team will continue to follow the work in Lawrence and other Massachusetts cities in order to spread knowledge about what really works to stop violent crime in America's urban centers. In particular, researchers are focusing on the complexities of a multiagency approach to addressing violence and are looking for ways their research might support the street outreach workers who appear to be key to the violence reduction efforts that have proven effective.

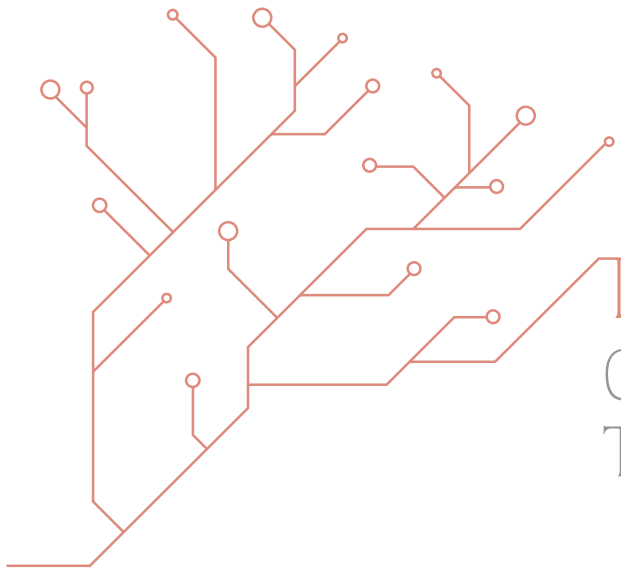


For more information about this violence prevention research, contact Anthony Petrosino at 781.481.1117 or apetros@WestEd.org.



BRIEFLY

- » TechSF provides training and support to help local residents enter and advance in the IT workforce.
- » By collaborating with public and private sectors, TechSF tailors training to meet real-time IT industry needs.
- » TechSF targets job seekers traditionally underrepresented in the IT sector, especially the long-term unemployed, women, minorities, and veterans.



TechSF

Cultivating a Home Grown Tech-Sector Workforce

From social media to mobile applications to cloud-based computing, technology permeates our daily lives in often unprecedented and rapidly changing ways. But, says Patrick D. Mitchell, Program Manager at San Francisco’s Office of Economic and Workforce Development (OEWD), “There’s a major shortage nationally of workers with advanced tech skills. Employers are doing everything they can to fill positions, including recruiting from other companies or going overseas.”

In San Francisco, where an explosion of innovation in the city’s tech sector has fueled acute demand for local talent, many local tech-sector employers are having difficulty finding qualified candidates. Meanwhile, many local jobseekers – especially those displaced by the Great Recession and the long-term unemployed – are frustrated that tech opportunities seem out of reach, with no clear pathways into the industry.

Enter TechSF, an information technology (IT) workforce development initiative that provides local unemployed individuals and incumbent employees with education, training, and placement and support services in high-need/high-growth IT industries and occupations. Launched in 2012 through two U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) grants awarded to WestEd and the San Francisco OEWD, TechSF targets job seekers traditionally underrepresented in the IT sector, especially the long-term unemployed, women, minorities, and veterans.

“TechSF is built on a dynamic partnership between San Francisco’s private and public sectors,” says Ursula M. Bischoff, TechSF Managing Partner and Senior Program Associate at WestEd, “allowing us to tap into multiple streams of expertise to develop pipelines into the IT workforce.”

By collaborating with and brokering communication among local businesses, community and four-year colleges, city agencies and offices, researchers, and community organizations, TechSF provides a continuum of education, training, and wraparound services to help local residents enter the workforce and advance in their jobs. To help sustain and expand the initiative beyond the initial DOL grants, OEWD, which coordinates San Francisco’s public workforce development system, has secured and leveraged a range of additional federal and state funding.

EMPOWERING THE LOCAL WORKFORCE

A trained but out-of-practice print designer, Marissa Mossberg held several jobs over the years – a nonprofit program manager, an elementary school teacher, a waitress, and an arts education administrator – but her passion had always been design. For some time, she wanted to get back into the field, but her skills had become outdated, and she wasn’t quite sure where to start.

“Since I attended art school, the field had shifted from print design to digital design, and I wasn’t familiar with all the digital platforms,” says Mossberg. “I also needed help navigating a move from the nonprofit to the private sector.”



“The initiative is adding diversity at all levels [of the local IT workforce], from age and gender to minority populations.”

After meeting a TechSF representative at a networking event and learning more about the program, Mossberg realized it might be what she needed to kick-start her version 2.0 design career. She became involved in an intensive 4-month, 14-hours-per-week TechSF course called Digital Directions. In addition to helping her master key graphic-design software programs like Adobe Illustrator, Photoshop, and InDesign, the immersive class gave Mossberg and her fellow classmates plenty of practical, real-world experience — including developing a marketable portfolio with real client work and learning how to brand themselves to stand out in a competitive design market.

Mossberg is part of a large and diverse group of local residents taking advantage of the targeted training and support that TechSF has to offer. Participants are earning industry-recognized credentials and degrees for free, and acquiring work experience qualifying them to enter and advance in IT career pathways, says Bischoff. “It’s exciting to collaborate with OEWD in this effort to engage industry leaders, educators, and workforce professionals to create training pathways toward new opportunities for people in San Francisco.”

Halfway through the two DOL grants, the initiative has served well over 1,100 participants, hundreds of whom are from groups underrepresented in IT careers. “The initiative is adding diversity at all levels,” says Mitchell, TechSF’s Program Manager, “from age and gender to minority populations.”

Coding boot camps — to help participants quickly build computer-programming skills — are a case in point. “We started offering them as a way to increase diversity,” Mitchell says, “and we’re targeting groups underrepresented in IT.” TechSF conducts outreach through community organizations to recruit women, veterans, people of color, and

others who might not be aware of IT career opportunities or who might think that an IT job is unattainable.

BUILDING ON SAN FRANCISCO ASSETS

Citing “incredible growth” in San Francisco over the last few years, Mitchell says the TechSF initiative is achieving economies of scale and creating networks that didn’t previously exist.

TechSF’s public-private partnership includes several major local organizations, like City College of San Francisco, San Francisco State University, Bay Area Video Coalition (BAVC), IBM, AT&T, and a consortium of other employers and community-based organizations who all play a role in creating pathways into the IT workforce. WestEd facilitates conversations and gathers data to create an ongoing feedback loop to ensure that the training offered by TechSF — through partners like City College and BAVC — corresponds directly to current industry needs. This agile approach to gaining real-time labor market intelligence is a necessity when trying to match the breakneck speed of change in the IT sector, says Bischoff.

Through TechSF, industry leaders IBM and AT&T also provide training to their incumbent workers — allowing them to retain and promote talent from within rather than having to recruit higher-skilled workers from abroad (one of the DOL grants that launched TechSF seeks to reduce local employers’ dependence on H-1B visas, which U.S. employers use to hire specialized foreign workers when they are unable to find local talent).

In addition, WestEd convenes an education pathways working group, lending the agency’s research expertise to pinpointing and addressing barriers — like the dearth of female and minority IT teachers — that affect access to or completion of IT training programs, particularly for

underrepresented groups. Through ongoing input from key workforce systems stakeholders, the group helps align and coordinate activities across secondary, post-secondary, and workforce systems to help build comprehensive and sustainable IT talent pipelines.

LANDING THE JOB

TechSF not only supplies training in the tech skills needed for high-growth IT occupations — like network programming, web development, and multimedia — it also helps participants develop the “employability skills” needed for landing the job, says Bischoff. “A major part of this initiative involves helping participants learn how to build confidence, engage clients, identify niche opportunities, and present themselves as adding value.”

To that end, mentoring, portfolio development, internships, and job placement assistance are all woven into the menu of training options — helping to ensure that once participants gain the necessary IT skills, they also have the savvy to market themselves to prospective employers. For instance, in addition to upgrading her tech skills through the digital design course, Mossberg took advantage of other TechSF workshops like Leveraging LinkedIn and Nailing the Phone Interview. “The piece I found most helpful was meeting with a counselor to practice skills like job interviewing and negotiating,” she says.

TechSF also helps bolster the prospects of its participants through regular networking events like Nerd Underground. “With Nerd Underground, we create a setting where job seekers, employers, and educators can connect, and program participants can practice their elevator pitches and learn about job opportunities,” says Mitchell.

While TechSF works with major tech organizations like Microsoft and LinkedIn to develop and implement

community engagement and local workforce recruitment plans, the initiative has also seen higher-than-anticipated job-placement success with smaller tech firms and non-tech companies, many of which take part in their networking events. “Because small tech firms are lean, they often have urgent and compelling hiring needs,” says Mitchell.

Such was the case for Mossberg, who, after multiple interviews and offers, accepted a position as a production artist at a small interactive ad agency where she is now working exclusively on Apple accounts. “This is a huge step,” says Mossberg. “This position will launch my career from a freelance designer to a designer with Apple corporation credibility.”

Moving forward, the initiative will continue to focus on the long-term unemployed, who face multiple challenges and are often harder to reach, says Bischoff. “Many are older, may have a range of financial or personal challenges, or are underemployed in lower-skill jobs — and not actively seeking opportunities,” she says. “Their confidence may have been undermined from long spells of unemployment and the associated stigma, as well as changes in the skill sets needed in the current job market.”

While building the necessary skills and know-how to land a job is often daunting, the support offered through local workforce development initiatives like TechSF can prove invaluable. “A career change can be a hard, lonely, arduous path,” says Mossberg. “TechSF helped give me the tools and the confidence to get the creative job I wanted.”



For further information about TechSF, contact Ursula Bischoff at 415.615.3384 or ubischo@WestEd.org. To learn more about WestEd's comprehensive approach to workforce development visit [WestEd.org/service/comprehensive-workforce-development](https://www.wested.org/service/comprehensive-workforce-development)



BRIEFLY

- » Over two-thirds of students entering public two-year colleges have to take remedial classes.
- » Research suggests placing students into college classes based only on standardized test results is not the most accurate approach.
- » Using multiple measures for placement is more accurate and can reduce remediation rates, while maintaining success in college-level courses.

Reducing Remediation Rates by Using Multiple Measures for Course Placement Decisions

Each year, more than two-thirds of students entering public two-year colleges in the United States are required to take one or more remedial classes before they can enroll in courses that carry college credit. While remedial classes are intended to ensure students' success in college, they are often an unnecessary or even self-defeating step — slowing student progress toward postsecondary goals or leading students to give up completely.

Low completion rates are a huge concern for community college leaders, says WestEd Senior Research Associate Kathy Reeves Bracco, because of the hefty costs in time and resources for both students and colleges. "Currently, many states are reevaluating their college readiness and college course placement policies in light of the Common Core State Standards," Bracco says. "This reassessment has created good opportunities to investigate what's working and what's not."

Bracco is part of the WestEd team evaluating Core to College, a three-year, multistate initiative aimed at bringing together personnel from K-12 and postsecondary education systems in each state to improve college enrollment and success rates in the era of Common Core. As evaluator, WestEd is helping states make informed policy and practice decisions by documenting their efforts to improve students' college readiness and success; facilitating cross-state dialogue on successful strategies and ongoing challenges; and aggregating and disseminating the latest research on timely issues.

The evaluation team has recently carefully reexamined one of those issues: how community colleges can improve course placement decisions for incoming students. "Currently, 92 percent of the nation's community colleges assign students to remedial classes based on the results of a single standardized placement test," Bracco says. "But the research shows that these tests can have high rates of 'severe error,' particularly when used as the sole basis for course placement."

As one means to improve college persistence rates, several Core to College states are implementing or testing the use of *multiple measures* — such as high school GPA or grades in core high school courses, instead of, or in addition to, a placement test — for making decisions on course placement. According to one recent study, for example, using multiple measures can reduce the remediation rate by 8 to 12 percent, while maintaining or increasing rates of success in college-level courses.

In its latest evaluation report, *Core to College Evaluation: Exploring the Use of Multiple Measures for Placement into College-Level Courses*, WestEd documented



the progress of seven Core to College states — Colorado, Florida, Hawaii, Massachusetts, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Washington — that are implementing various multiple-measures approaches to improve course placement decisions. The report includes a detailed case study of North Carolina, which is addressing college placement and completion challenges similar to those faced by many other states.

NORTH CAROLINA: "HARD TO ARGUE WITH OUR OWN DATA"

Leaders of the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) had become increasingly concerned that the system's reliance on standardized test scores alone was resulting in the majority of its students being placed into remediation — at significant cost to both the students and the system. So, in 2011, North Carolina contracted with the Community College Research Center to find better alternatives.

The results of that study were sobering. The research revealed that NCCCS's current approach was leading to approximately one-third of its students being severely misplaced — a number that would have been cut in half by using high school GPA for placement decisions. "These were our students," says John Denning, the State Director of K-12 and Postsecondary Alignment Initiatives at the time of the study, "and it was hard to argue with our own data."

Prompted by these findings, North Carolina established a hierarchy of measures that looked first at students' high school GPA to determine whether they would be placed into remedial or college-level courses. Kirby H. Moore, the admissions director at Mitchell Community College in Statesville, North Carolina, says GPA has quickly proven

to be a better predictor of performance in credit-bearing classes than traditional placement tests. "We found that we had previously been putting a lot of students in lower-level courses who didn't need to be there," says Moore.

For example, 74 percent of students who were placed in the college's entry-level, credit-bearing English class based on earning a high school GPA of 2.6 or higher completed the course with a grade of at least a C. That compares to 65 percent for those placed in the class on the basis of a placement test score or after completing a course in remedial English.

In math, 64 percent of students who were placed in College Algebra based on their high school GPA earned a grade of C or better, compared to 59 percent for those placed in the class on the basis of a placement test score or after completing a course in remedial math.

MULTIPLE MEASURES GAINING GROUND

Given such findings, it's not surprising that the use of multiple measures for college placement decisions is gaining ground, says Bracco. "The fact is, large numbers of students are being placed in remediation but still not succeeding. Everyone knows something needs to change."

In addition to the case study of North Carolina, the WestEd report identifies ways that other states and colleges are working to implement multiple measures for placement. Many approaches involve ongoing communication and collaboration between K-12 and postsecondary educators, particularly around the expectations that colleges have for incoming students and the content and expectations that high schools have for students in key courses during grades 11 and 12.

According to one recent study, using multiple measures can reduce the remediation rate by 8 to 12%, while maintaining or increasing rates of success in college-level courses.

Massachusetts officials have been concerned by the alarmingly high number of students placed into, and languishing in, remedial education. In 2010, for instance, only 20 percent of students who completed remedial math at a Massachusetts community college went on to complete a college-level math course within two years — and the percentages were even lower for African American, Latino, and low-income students.

The state recently proposed a revision to its placement policy in order to implement the use of multiple measures — including high school GPA, high school course results, and standardized test results — to determine whether students are placed into remedial or college-level courses. This new policy, which is being pilot tested during the 2014/15 academic year, allows recent Massachusetts high school graduates whose GPA is between 2.4 and 2.7 and who have successfully passed four math courses (including one class in their senior year) to be placed directly into the college-level math course needed for their field of study.

Meanwhile, Hawaii is experimenting with using grades in specific high school courses to inform whether or not students are placed into credit-bearing courses. Pilot studies under way in two of Hawaii's community colleges allow students who meet a specific cut score on their final exam in Algebra II and a B or higher in the course to be automatically placed into a college-level math course as long as they enroll within 18 months of taking the exam.

MULTIPLE MEASURES ARE BETTER PREDICTORS OF SUCCESS

Researchers believe that one reason multiple measures are better predictors of college success is because that success depends on a variety of cognitive and

non-cognitive skills and attributes — and any one measure on its own cannot assess all of them.

Some community college systems have been hesitant to use high school GPA for placement decisions, believing it may be too subjective — an assumption not borne out by the research. In fact, studies indicate that even using high school GPA as the sole measure for placement decisions decreases “severe error” in college placement by 10 to 30 percent compared to the use of a single standardized test; and using a combination of high school GPA and standardized test results is a better predictor for college placement than any one measure alone.

“This result offers evidence that the GPA, itself, is essentially a multiple measure,” says Bracco. “It incorporates performance results on numerous projects and assessments in several content areas over a sustained period of time.”

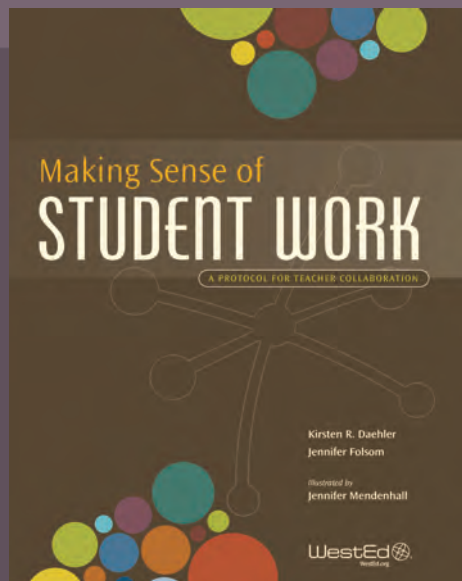
Although many states still rely on a single standardized test to determine course placement, the evidence is mounting for the need to update those policies. At a time when community college is increasingly seen as an affordable route to improved career prospects and long-term success for many students, says Bracco, “it’s critical to make sure we are doing everything we can to help community college students be successful.”



For more information about WestEd's evaluation of the Core to College initiative, contact Neal Finkelstein at 415.615.3171 or nfinkel@WestEd.org, or Kathy Reeves Bracco at 510.333.5934 or kbracco@WestEd.org.

The Core to College initiative is funded by the Lumina Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and the Carnegie Corporation of New York, with Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors as the fiscal sponsor.

Featured Resources



Making Sense of Student Work

A Protocol for Teacher Collaboration

Kirsten R. Daehler and Jennifer Folsom | ► WestEd.org/mssw

The Making Sense of Student Work protocol is a self-facilitated guide for collaborative groups of K–8 teachers to use in examining and learning from their own students' work. Developed by WestEd's Making Sense of SCIENCE project, the protocol builds on more than a decade of development and research. The protocol is divided into five two-hour sessions, each with a specific focus — exploring mental models, investigating learning gaps, thinking through instructional next steps, analyzing tasks, and modifying tasks.

WestEd offers the Making Sense of Student Work protocol as a printed book and as an eBook that can be read on personal computers and portable devices. Order a copy today!

PRINT EDITION

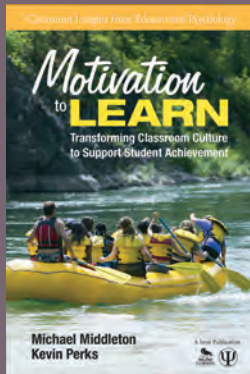
ISBN: 978-1-938287-12-1 | \$19.95 | Trade paper | 120 pages | WestEd | 2014

eBOOK EDITION

eISBN: 978-1-938287-21-3 | \$16.95 | PDF | 120 pages | WestEd | 2014

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT TASK BANKS AND FREE SAMPLES

WestEd also offers free samples of student work and a series of Formative Assessment Task Banks that complement the protocol. Available at WestEd.org/mssw



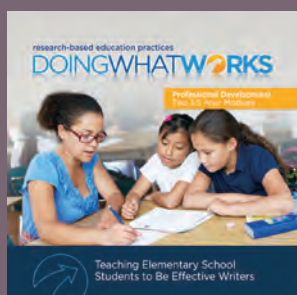
Motivation to Learn: Transforming Classroom Culture to Support Student Achievement

Michael Middleton and Kevin Perks | ► WestEd.org/motivationtolearn

Aligned with Race to the Top Initiatives for teacher evaluation and Common Core State Standards implementation, this practical guide provides field-tested techniques for identifying, harnessing, and sustaining student motivation in the classroom. This resource includes

- » Reflection activities that encourage student voice and self-efficacy
- » Case studies and best practices based on current motivation theory and research
- » Strategies for designing effective learning tasks and growing positive relationships with students and colleagues

ISBN: 978-1-412-98671-7 | \$25.95 | Trade Paper | 240 pages | Corwin | 2014



Doing What Works: Teaching Elementary School Students to Be Effective Writers

By WestEd for the U.S. Department of Education | ► WestEd.org/dwweffectivewriters

When students build strong writing skills at an early age, they gain an invaluable tool for learning, communication, and self-expression that will serve them for the rest of their lives.

This digital portfolio contains everything — including agendas, PowerPoint slides, facilitator's notes, multimedia, sample materials, and handouts — needed to conduct two three-and-a-half-hour professional development sessions on how to teach elementary school students to be effective writers.

Product #: IN-14-03 | Free | Multimedia | U.S. Department of Education | 2014

FEATURED FREE RESOURCES

R&D ALERT

R&D Alert covers issues affecting schools, communities, and human development professionals throughout the United States. Current and previous issues are available at WestEd.org/R&DAlert. Your comments are welcomed. Please address them to Noel White at rdalert@WestEd.org.

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A Climate for Academic Success: How School Climate Distinguishes Schools That Are Beating the Achievement Odds (Full Report)

Adam Voight, Gregory Austin, and Thomas Hanson

This report describes a study examining what makes successful schools different from other schools. Using data from over 1,700 California public middle and high schools, 40 schools were identified as “beating-the-odds” (BTO) schools — defined by the study as those outperforming demographically similar schools over a multi-year period. The study found that BTO schools had substantially more positive levels of school climate than other schools; BTO schools had climate scores at the 82nd percentile, on average, whereas other schools were at the 49th percentile, on average. WestEd recently released an updated list of California public schools that were identified as beating the odds, available at WestEd.org/btolist2014.

PDF | 37 pages | WestEd | 2013 | ▶ WestEd.org/schoolclimatereport

California Safe and Supportive Schools (S3) website

californias3.WestEd.org

In 2010, California received a Safe and Supportive Schools (S3) grant from the U.S. Department of Education to support statewide measurement of school climate and to improve climate in high schools with the greatest need. In particular, the initiative helps to promote safe, engaging, and healthy school environments that foster learning and well-being among both students and staff.

This website is a resource for supporting the S3 grantees, as well as supporting non-grantee schools undertaking the important task of fostering positive school climate as part of a school improvement plan. The site provides access to a wide range of publications, tools, trainings, and other technical assistance to support data-driven school climate improvement.



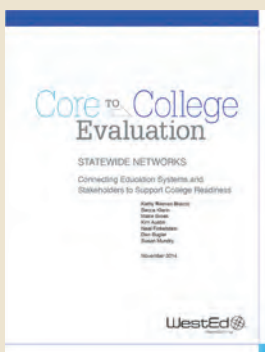
Core to College Evaluation: Exploring the Use of Multiple Measures for Placement into College-Level Courses

Kathy Reeves Bracco, Mina Dadgar, Kim Austin, Becca Klarin, Marie Broek, Neal Finkelstein, Susan Mundry, and Daniel Bugler

Standardized tests alone may not be the most accurate measure for placing students into college-level courses. WestEd researchers have identified the use of multiple measures — defined as using more than one measure, beyond just standardized test scores, to determine student placement into college-level courses — as a way to increase placement accuracy.

This report summarizes recent research on the logistics, benefits, and challenges of using multiple measures for student placement. It also includes profiles of seven states that are implementing, or planning to implement, multiple measures and/or other alternative placement measures at the local and/or state level.

PDF | 47 pages | WestEd | 2014 | ▶ WestEd.org/core2collegemultiplemeasures



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**continued
from page 5**

that progress can be made without major financial investments, just by focusing on climate and culture.”

Last year, administrators and leadership teams from 28 schools both inside and outside the district — including schools with much higher API scores — came to see what they could learn from Sierra Vista. Many were dubious at first, says Ceja, expecting to see computers and fancy technology behind the improvements. “But it doesn’t

take expensive equipment to do what’s best for our kids,” she says. “A great relationship costs nothing but accomplishes much.”



For further information about *A Climate for Academic Success*, contact Greg Austin at 562.799.5155 or gaustin@WestEd.org. For information about technical assistance in improving school climate, contact Meagan O’Malley at 562.799.5421 or momalle@WestEd.org.

The research study reported here was supported by the California Comprehensive Center through funding from the U.S. Department of Education.

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