

2014 TERREL H. BELL RECIPIENT

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Thomas Jefferson Elementary School is a K-6 (soon to be K-7) Title I school in Compton, California, a lower-income suburb of Los Angeles. All 655 students at Jefferson qualify for subsidized meals and 57% are non-native English speakers. When Principal Mario Marcos arrived at Jefferson in 2011, he found a school on the verge of Program Improvement with only 44% of students proficient in English and 56% in mathematics. In addition to instructional deficits, the school climate was poor and discipline was lax. Many students were chronically absent; others faced overwhelming difficulties in their home life and with neighborhood violence. Due to budget cuts, outdated facilities, and proximity to an industrial area, Jefferson was slated to close the year before. Although public protest kept it open, morale was low among teachers, students, and parents.

Fresh from leading another challenging school's turnaround, Mr. Marcos assembled the staff and stakeholders and created a vision around the motto "Excuses Perpetuate Failure." He declared adherence to district mandates "non-negotiable" (it had been optional) and instituted practices such as walkthroughs, data conferences, ongoing coaching, and collaborative teams to improve instruction. He strengthened the academic support team, scheduled both daily and afterschool Response to Intervention periods, and secured instructional materials and ready access to digital technology. Instruction at Jefferson favors project-based learning, cooperative groups, and teamwork. Students can receive digital help through programs tailored to their language and academic needs and differentiated interventions daily, after school, and on Saturdays. More advanced students participate in district and county events, such as the district GATE Writing competition, the County Art Competition, and a Department of Defense STEM camp.

Jefferson students soared from a low API of 758 to 865, moving from 15th to 3rd in the district and earning the school California Distinguished School recognition and a Title I Academic Achievement Award. Mr. Marcos points to two signature practices that helped Jefferson succeed. One was implementing a rigorous Common Core-aligned math program, coupled with a Saturday Math Academy, which features peer tutoring by sixth graders alongside tutoring focused on math's real-life presence. The other is the Jefferson After School Enrichment and Safety (ASES) Program, which provides daily academic interventions, homework assistance, and a range of enrichment opportunities, including visual and performing arts, technology, sports, recycling, animation, music, fieldtrips, and other co-curricular activities. At parents' request, Jefferson Elementary is now adding middle school grades to continue its strong academic and social benefits to students.

Mr. Marcos and the Jefferson team implemented the Positive Behavior Interventions System (PBIS), reinforcing behavioral standards and reducing discipline referrals markedly; they also formed a partnership with the Children's Institute to provide counseling to students. Students take a weekly class in social skills, which are reinforced by assemblies and personal classroom visits by Mr. Marcos. He communicates with families daily to discuss student issues. Sports are offered twice weekly, and include tennis, basketball, yoga, and calisthenics; students compete in the district Mini Olympics. In addition to a sharper focus on nutrition, Mr. Marcos persuaded skeptical citizens to implement Breakfast in the Classroom, a federally-funded program that has helped reduce student absenteeism

Cultural diversity is a priority at Jefferson, and cultural and linguistic needs always accompany educational concerns in organizing professional development. Holiday programs, multicultural events, and mandatory Spanish language classes celebrate the predominantly Hispanic and African American cultures at the school while introducing other cultures as well. Relationships with community organizations and a strengthening PTA have supported Jefferson with resources, including food and books, and twice annual "beautification" days. Tellingly, local gangs no longer "tag" the school.