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Walnut Middle School: Transforming Student Behavior

Learning Sciences International

Dr. Tawana Grover, who became superintendent of the Grand Island Public Schools in 2016, walked into a district that was both unique and challenging. Grand Island is an urban district surrounded by rural counties; affluent families are clustered in one area, but 68 percent of Grand Island students qualify for free and reduced lunch. With a population of approximately 50,000, the district is the major retail trade area for south central Nebraska, but there are large swathes of agricultural areas producing crops and livestock. There are 22 schools in the district, including two high schools, one of which is the largest in the state.

When Grover learned about Schools for Rigor, she was eager to develop demonstration schools in her district which the other schools could visit and learn from. In 2016, she decided to start with three schools.

Grover notes that teachers were burnt out on new initiatives. “We had several failed attempts in the past, and teachers had communicated that they didn’t feel supported. There were mandates coming down from the top.” Grover and her team wanted to make implementing academic teaming in every classroom a priority. “We felt it was a great opportunity,” she says. “But we wanted teachers to feel like it was a good opportunity, too. So, we pitched the idea to all of our campuses, and asked who wanted to participate.” Grover knew students were disengaged and were struggling academically with the social, emotional, and cognitive learning (SECL) skills that Schools for Rigor was designed to address.

We knew social-emotional learning was at the top of everyone’s list. If I asked anybody what they wanted me to work on in the school district, it was always about behavior. I really wasn’t seeing a lot of behavior problems, but the kids were bored and disengaged. We also had to address student achievement, especially in some of our buildings that truly had high numbers of underserved minority populations.

Grand Island’s district leadership had a common goal of developing a comprehensive student-centered PK to 12 education program using best practices and initiatives to meet each student’s education needs and engage students in their learning. The challenge was how to accomplish this goal with measurable, sustainable outcomes for the students and teachers. Walnut Middle, Jefferson Elementary, and Starr Elementary stepped up to begin the journey. Walnut, Jefferson, and Starr would receive intensive professional development and coaching as they transitioned to becoming Schools for Rigor. Teachers and leaders would develop enhanced knowledge and skills to build a comprehensive, student-centered, and engaging learning experience for all students. Educators at Walnut Middle School were especially keen to tackle behavioral problems through the lens of academic teaming.

When Rod Foley began his tenure as assistant principal at Walnut Middle School in 2001, Walnut was known as the toughest school in town. According to Foley, in the 1997-98 school year, the ambulance was called to Walnut 45 times. Walnut historically averaged more than 100 fights per year.

When Foley joined Walnut, about 45 percent of the student population came from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The student population was about 30 percent minority. By 2008-09, when Foley was promoted to principal, the demographics of the district had already begun to shift. Meat packing plants in the area were recruiting workers from Mexico, Guatemala, and other Central American

countries, which meant an influx of new students with specific language needs. The Sudanese and Somalian immigrant population began to grow as well. By the 2017-18 school year, Walnut had 771 students, of which 74 percent were minority, 25 percent were special education students, and 11.6 percent were English Language Learners. Eighty-five percent of students qualified for free and reduced lunch. Walnut is the only Title I secondary school in the district. As reported by the district, in the 2016-17 school year, proficiency was 46 percent in sixth grade mathematics and 22 percent in sixth grade ELA; it was 51 percent in seventh grade mathematics and 22 percent in seventh grade ELA.

Now the principal of Walnut Middle School, Foley emphasizes that despite these rapid shifts and new challenges, the teachers at Walnut have continued to be deeply committed. They care about understanding the complex needs of their students. Foley reflects,

Our teachers have a passion for helping our kids, but the way we thought we were helping them was by lowering expectations—not with behavior, but certainly with academics. Our thinking was, as long as you could behave well and show some good character, you're being successful and will go on to high school and be a good kid. But we were not getting highly rigorous work out of kids. Our mindset helped students feel successful, but we were missing the academic piece of providing our students with great opportunities because we weren't holding them to some of the higher academic standards.

Walnut Middle School has made good progress in addressing bullying and fights. In fact, the school won awards for being a National School of Character in 2004 and an Operation Respect National Model School in 2005. But they still had issues to confront.

In the 2015-16 school year, Selena Wardyn became the assistant principal of Walnut, and brought with her a strong instructional background as a former special education high school teacher. She had also been a districtwide coach for co-teaching/RTI/behavior at Grand Island Public Schools District. Wardyn's instructional expertise complemented Foley's leadership.

Walnut Middle School Demographics

Student Population	771
Number of Teachers	46
Low-Income Students	85%
Special Education Students	22%
English Language Learners	11.6%
White	28%
Black	5%
Hispanic	64%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	1.6%
American Indian/Alaska Native	0.4%

The Walnut administration team still identified the most persistent problem holding their school back as student behavioral issues. Referrals had held steady but not declined much; Walnut reported 785 negative referrals in the 2015-16 school year, and 777 negative referrals in the 2016-17 year.

While Schools for Rigor did not address student behavior directly, assistant principal Selena Wardyn immediately saw how academic teaming could help Walnut.

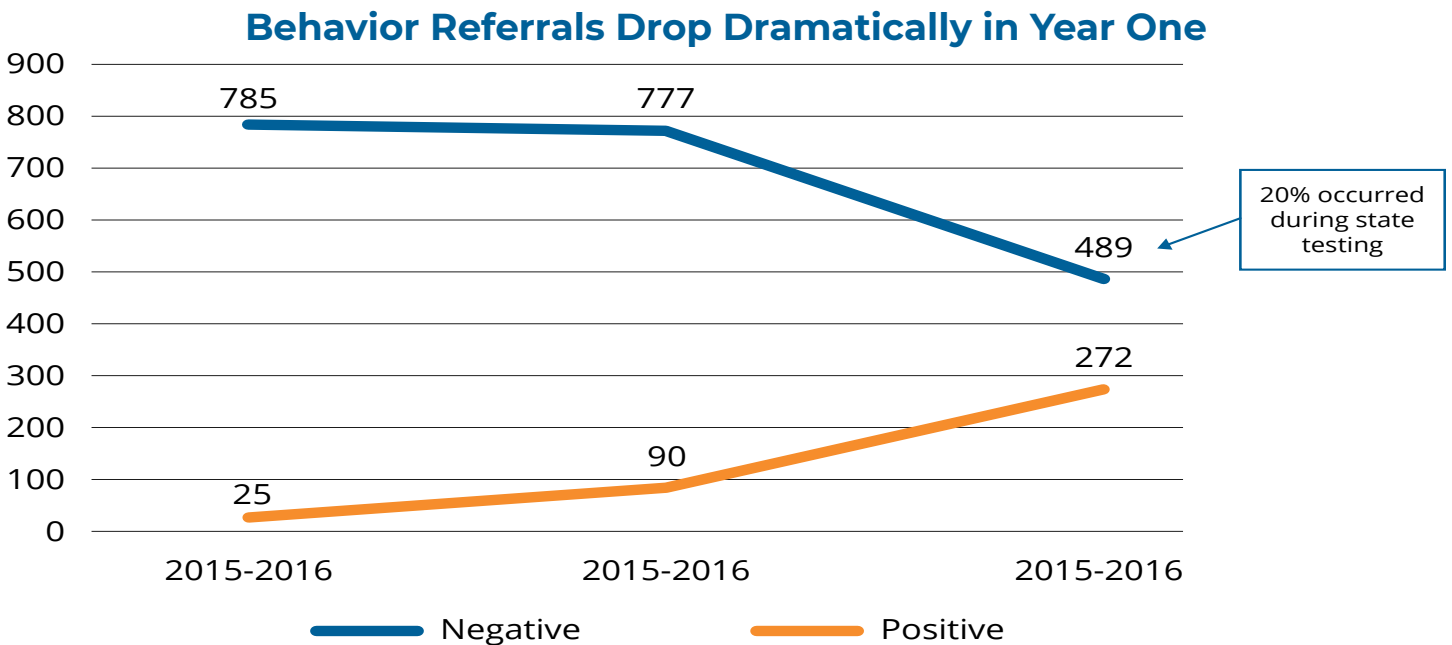
I'm sure our teachers were thinking: Why would we spend money on this? Why wouldn't we do a behavioral intervention instead? When Michael Toth and the Learning Sciences team walked our school, they told us: 'you are not at broken school. Your behaviors are very typical of schools nationwide, 80 percent of which have teacher-centered classrooms.' I understood that when you engage students, your behavior problems go down. But it was hard to get that message across to teachers. There were a lot of nervous feelings, but we agreed to do it knowing that we had to do something different, and not only on the behavior side of things.



In 2017-18, Walnut Middle School joined two other schools in the Grand Island Public Schools District to become a School for Rigor. The Schools for Rigor partnership focused on implementing and sustaining academic teaming.

Principal Rod Foley speaking with other educators about his academic teaming journey (left).

Walnut Middle School negative behavioral referrals declined by 37 percent and positive behavior referrals increased threefold (below).



Walnut Middle saw a dramatic decrease in negative office referrals in their first year of academic teaming—down from 777 to 489, a 37 percent decrease, as shown in the graph. The staff at Walnut attributes the drop to high levels of engagement in every classroom. “There was a huge decrease in referrals because our kids were just more engaged in class,” Foley says. “They were doing things that were meaningful to them and they were happy to be there.”

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Walnut also saw an increase in positive referrals, which teachers use to recognize positive behaviors in students and to celebrate improvements—those types of referrals increased by threefold during the year Walnut started using academic teaming, from 90 to 272.

Since implementation of the academic teaming model, Assistant Principal Selena Wardyn says that when students do have to be removed from class for behavior issues, their attitudes have changed:

When I talk to the students who are sent to the office, they do not want to sit down here the rest of the day. The year before, they may have said, ‘I do not want to go back to class. I already got myself kicked out. I want to stay down here.’ Now, students want to get back to the classes where they are engaged in academic teaming. They don’t want to sit in my office all day.

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Major Shifts in Social-Emotional Development and Rigorous Learning

Eighth-grade 21st Century Literacy teacher Liz Boyle notes that her students greatly improved their attention control and were better able to resist distractions while working on goal-directed tasks with their academic teams. “After implementing academic teaming, students after had a more deliberate focus on the task itself. They were able to work together toward one common goal and had to rely on one another. The biggest change, specific to social-emotional learning, was that I watched kids care for each other more than I had seen in my 16 previous years of teaching.”

Boyle also emphasizes that academic teaming is reaching kids who have traditionally struggled.

As educators, when we think about whether teaming will work for every student, we are always going to say: ‘but what about...’ Almost every teacher can name that kid. We had one student last year who had been in an alternative education setting the year before and then was allowed to come back. Even for that student who had exhibited a history in the past of being unable or unwilling to work with other students, academic teaming worked for him. That doesn’t mean that he didn’t want to sometimes push buttons, and he didn’t want to sometimes argue, but the

academic teaming environment allows students who haven't yet found their classroom voice to feel much more comfortable in asking for help, especially if they don't feel comfortable asking for help from the teacher yet.

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Boyle says that academic teaming in the classroom has also reduced the need for extra support for Special Education students.

I didn't feel like our special education students actually needed a paraprofessional educator in the room. They had enough positive peer models around them that they could comfortably function in a team, and they could take on leadership roles—they could feel comfortable in filling those roles. They knew that there would be classmates who could support them. I saw much less reliance on me as the only support. Students who had grown accustomed to asking the teacher and getting affirmation from the teacher no longer needed to do that.

ELA and Social Studies instructional coach Lisa Geist notes that teachers are holding all students, including special education and English Language Learners, to higher standards because they see these students are fully capable of functioning in teams.

I'm hearing fewer teachers saying 'my kids can't do that' because when you put students in teams with roles, it's amazing what they can do. Some kids are comfortable with verbalizing their ideas and thinking, but struggle with accessing the text or understanding what the task involves. The team can help them with that part. The kids are able to do rigorous work because of the teaming. I'm seeing teachers stepping out of the way. Kids are accountable to the team more than to the teacher; if the task is engaging and well designed, they want to do their part. I have seen kids who don't normally participate or are not as comfortable participating in a whole class setting, who will do their part for their team. That's always satisfying.

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Eighth-grade social studies teacher Tyler Madison describes the growth mindset and self-confidence his students developed once he started using academic teaming in his classroom:

With academic teaming, it's harder for kids to slip through the cracks. Some kids that I thought would never participate wrote me letters at the end of the year and said: 'thanks for making us do this, and thanks for getting me out of my shell, thanks for making me get involved.' Teaming has helped a lot of kids who would prefer to hide in the background; they discover, 'Hey, I can add something to this.'

Academic teaming has particularly helped Madison's special education students to overcome their fear of failure.

One of my kids, who is in special education, he was used to just going along in groups and letting somebody else do most of the work. With academic teams, he had less fear of sharing his thoughts because he knew nobody was judging him, they were all working to get to the same place. At the beginning of the year, before we started teaming, I don't think he was putting full effort in because it was the mindset of 'if I don't try then you don't see me fail' but after we started teaming, he put in the effort and there was less fear of failure.

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Students engaged in academic teaming in teacher Tyler Madison's classroom.



Sixth-grade mathematics teacher Holly Love says that she sees academic teams building important leadership skills, even for students she wouldn't have necessarily envisioned as leaders.

The kids are more willing to work with people and they really step up and help each other. They help each other with the success criteria and make sure everyone in the group understands and knows their roles. I've seen more kids stepping up into the leader position and really taking ownership of their team and their team's goals. Teaming has had a really positive effect on their confidence. I don't think it's as threatening in teams, among peers. My special education kids and my English Language Learner kids, their willingness to work in teams is phenomenal. They do still have struggles but it's less of a struggle because their peers are supporting them and helping them understand a little bit better.

As Walnut moves into its second year of academic teaming, Rod Foley can already tell which incoming sixth-graders went to Jefferson Elementary School the year before—Jefferson is also a School for Rigor implementing teaming. Foley says, “Our teachers have said it’s really easy to identify the kids who were at Jefferson last year. We can tell by their confidence level and how they just get right into the learning. The fact that you can see that difference right away speaks to the power of the opportunities that the Jefferson kids had last year that other students may not have had.”

Kim Madison, an eighth-grade mathematics teacher, says that teaming has made her job less stressful and more fulfilling.

When I do more academic teaming, it does make my job easier. It may seem like it’s a lot more time-consuming because there’s the upfront preparation—developing the kids’ interaction skills so they know what their work together should look like—but after we spent the time up front, it made the rest of my year go so much smoother. The kids gained a deeper level of understanding than prior groups. A deep level of understanding comes in part from being able to verbalize your thoughts. We could not have a whole group of 28 kids verbalizing their thinking in a class period unless they are in teams. I have the freedom to really listen to student conversations and understand where my kids are coming from, and I can catch the misconceptions. Academic teaming has changed me. I’m more intentional about what I’m asking my kids to do and how I’m asking them to interact with the information.

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But What do Students Think?

“The teacher’s role has changed because they’re trying to let us do most of the work, to take control of our learning. You get to speak a little bit more freely because sometimes you’re nervous to say it in front of the teacher, but you’re not when you’re in a group of friends.” – Seventh grader

“All of us in our team, the first thing we do is look at the success criteria and learning target, talk about it, and then we process it. And then once we go to our work we already know what the success criteria is and what we have to do. It makes our work easier and we know what to do better.” – Sixth grader

“Our discussions with our peers sink into our brains a lot more so we can remember the information rather than us asking the teacher or the teacher just giving us information.” – Eighth grader

“Student roles have changed a lot...we’re not just sitting there listening to the teacher. We get to communicate with our peers and we can evaluate what we’re doing and we can have really good discussions.” – Eighth grader

“Now we have more responsibility in accomplishing our goals.” – Seventh grader

School Leaders Experience Sustainable Professional Growth

Selena Wardyn emphasizes that the Schools for Rigor partnership and implementation of academic teaming has significantly upped her instructional leadership capacity.

This has been probably my most exciting year as an administrator. I did instructional leadership as a coach, but this is different. I feel like I get to lead the vision and live the vision and support the vision, like I never have had the opportunity to do before. So any administrator who gets that opportunity to have this real impact on instruction would be crazy not to do it. The level of support that Learning Sciences provides, I mean it's unparalleled, and it keeps us focused. There's so many things coming at us all the time as an administrator, but with Learning Sciences here and meeting with us, it keeps us focused.



Assistant Principal Selena Wardyn explaining one of her team's leadership tools.

Principal Rod Foley agrees. "It is the most meaningful work I've done professionally in my 25 years of education. I'm so excited to get this next year started and our teachers are too. People in our district say Walnut is like a totally different building."

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In a single year, Walnut's success has positively impacted the district as a whole. With the two other Grand Island Schools for Rigor, Walnut functions as a demonstration site where teachers and administrators from other schools in the district can visit to witness the transformation in action. Superintendent Dr. Tawana Grover says there was excitement throughout the district and community.

It was such a rapid transformation of attitudes, investment, and with it, trust in the process. People were sharing what they were seeing and experiencing on Twitter and social media—it was just explosive. It went viral, basically. They're saying how important this work is, how it's making a difference for them as educators, and making a difference for the students. Within our school district, other schools started saying, 'I want to see this.' We have our GEA, which is our teachers' union within the school district. We meet every month on various topics. One meeting they scheduled was specifically to say, 'when will the other campuses get the same training as the three schools?' To me, that's a great problem to have.

The impact is not limited just to the Grand Island Public Schools District. After the first seven months of implementing academic teaming with Schools for Rigor, Walnut Middle School hosted teachers, school leaders, and district administrators from various districts across the state of Nebraska at a school transformation summit in March 2018. Educators were able to walk



through Walnut classrooms and see the positive changes for themselves. The event was covered by the local news, with visiting educators saying how impressed they were by the level of student engagement, the sophisticated student conversations, active teacher tracking, and high student ownership.

A Walnut Middle School student explaining to a visitor how he learns in academic teams.

Major Successes in Walnut Middle School and the Grand Island Public Schools District

- Academic teaming had a positive impact on student behavioral issues. Negative referrals at Walnut decreased by 37 percent; positive referrals increased threefold.
- Educators, observers, and students themselves reported much higher levels of student engagement in classrooms that used academic teaming.
- All students—including English Language Learners and students in special education—were able to access rigorous instruction with support from their peers within academic teams.
- Students at Walnut demonstrated increased social, emotional, and cognitive skills, as well as self-confidence, growth mindset, and leadership skills; teachers and administrators attributed this skill development to academic teaming.
- As a School for Rigor, Walnut became a demonstration school for academic teaming, leading to district-wide positive impact.