

**John Wash Elementary School
Sanger Unified School District
Fresno, California**



TRANSCRIPT: “Defining Moments of School Change”

MARC JOHNSON, SUPERINTENDENT: I am Marc Johnson and I am superintendent of Sanger Unified School District. I think it is important for anyone who’s leading an educational organization to understand what the main thing is – and for us that’s kids. We have a deep seated belief that every student in this district should have the opportunity to reach their fullest potential and that’s what we do.

Historically, let’s back up a little bit, and go to 2004 when we were named one of the first 98 program improvement districts in California, which was really not a place we desired to be in. For us, it was a wake-up call. We accepted it as a challenge. We realized that that label really did not correlate with what we believe to be true about ourselves. It kind of became a defining moment for us in terms of what we have we missed and what do we need to get better at.

We had 6 schools in program improvement at the time. It meant that we needed to focus on exactly the same expectations and beliefs across the district and implement the same practices across the district. There are non-negotiables. For us there are 4 things: you will establish PLCs, you will develop pyramids of intervention – it’s that response to intervention. You will use Explicit Direct Instruction (EDI) as your instructional vehicle. And you will provide support for English Language Learners.

So with those four points being well defined, these are the things we are tight on – you will do them. The loose part of that then is each of our principals was charged with designing, defining, and implementing the structures necessary at their sites.

Everybody needs a starting place. For us, it was defining three guiding principles in the district. The first is, “Hope is not a strategy.” We began a conversation; we can’t *hope* we get better, guys. We have to do something about it. Our kids had changed around us and we had not changed to meet their needs. Therefore, we couldn’t hope things got better. We needed to change our actions and in so doing, we would change the outcomes.

The second thing that we very clearly communicated is, “You can’t blame the kids.” There is not a family in the district who doesn’t send us the best kids that they have, every day.

The last thing we said is, “It’s not about teaching – it’s about learning.” Now, there’s a defining point there – it is critical that every one of our teachers is a highly skilled practitioner. The pedagogy has to be there, the classroom practice has got to be solid.

But the conversations have to be around the learning. It’s not the process; it’s the outcome that we have to continually focus our efforts on. For too many years you’d hear people in our profession say “I don’t know what happened, I taught it, they just did not learn it, and then we would turn the page and move on. We realized that that can no longer happen.

But John Wash’s story may be one of the more fascinating. Because at the same time they were developing and responding to the expectations we set for them, their reality changed dramatically. Five years ago John Wash had 6 English Language Learners. John Wash was not a Title 1 School. It was a predominately white, middle class student population. Today our white students are no longer a statistically significant subgroup. They are a Title 1 school because of the increase in poverty and 25% of the students are English Language Learners.

That is a dramatic shift in demographics. But one thing that we realize is that you cannot allow demographics to influence your beliefs, your expectations, or your practice. And they are a prime example of that because as their world transitioned, so did they. And it changed quickly, so did they. But what drove that was a deep-seated belief that every child will be successful and the only thing that can guarantee that is the response of the adult to meet the needs of the children that come to us. Teams of teachers sharing expertise. Teams of teachers focusing on meeting the needs of our kids – that’s the answer.

And that’s what has happened in the last 5 years at John Wash. As that collaborative culture has strengthened, as teams of teachers have stood beside one another and leant their strengths and expertise to one another. Their practice has increased dramatically and their student achievement has increased. When you believe in children and they see that in you, they begin to believe in themselves. And the outcome is dramatic.