

## **San Diego City School District's Small School Successes: The Stanley E. Foster Construction Tech Academy and the School of International Business**

San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD)<sup>a</sup> is the second-largest school district in California and the eighth-largest district in the United States. The student population is high-challenge, high-poverty, and high-minority; of the more than 130,000 students, nearly three-quarters are racial minorities, more than half are eligible for free and reduced-price meals, and one in three are English language learners (ELLs). As is often the case in large cities, too many of the district's students were leaving high school without preparation for success. In 1999, only 67 percent of ninth graders in the district's twenty-seven high schools graduated within four years with a regular high school diploma.<sup>1</sup> Just over one third of the students met the minimum requirements for California's state university systems.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, of the graduates who went on to enroll in a California state university, 53 percent of them required remedial English courses and 46 percent required remedial mathematics courses.<sup>3</sup>

In early 2000, to improve these unsatisfactory outcomes, SDUSD implemented a comprehensive reform initiative dubbed the "Blueprint for Student Success." Strategies included the use of a new literacy framework, the deployment of peer instructional coaches to all schools, adding a requirement for additional literacy courses and extended-learning time for struggling students, and the tightening of promotion policies.<sup>4</sup> District leaders immediately noticed results at the elementary school level—test scores increased and the achievement gap decreased—but little change was seen at the high school level.

Over the next few years, SDUSD devised and implemented a new strategy for improving high school outcomes that would provide students with a portfolio of high schools designed to engage them in a personalized environment that supports their academic and social needs. With support from the American Institutes for Research and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the district developed this portfolio by establishing alternative high schools, redesigning existing schools, and opening new schools.

As part of this initiative, three of SDUSD's largest- and lowest-performing high schools—Crawford, Kearny, and San Diego High—were closed and reopened as a series of smaller schools. In September 2004, they reopened as three "educational complexes" housing a total of fourteen autonomous small schools, each with a unique theme and a focus on rigorous academic coursework, real-world experiences, and the goal of college- and career-readiness for all.

As is the case in many large districts implementing districtwide reform, SDUSD has faced considerable challenges including significant leadership turnover and budget cuts. There have been

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<sup>a</sup> Also known as San Diego City School District

hurdles to conquer in implementing the new schools, including the increased cost of operating small schools, balancing collaboration and a shared vision with increased autonomy and diverse leadership styles; increased demands on principals, staff, and teachers; and establishing and maintaining community engagement, buy-in, and trust.<sup>5</sup>

Yet overall, the district is seeing promising results in these small high schools including improved test scores, attendance, graduation rates, and engagement with the community. Some of the schools have received national recognition for their approaches and successes. The following is a brief description of two such small schools, the Stanley E. Foster Construction Tech Academy and the School of International Business.

## **The Kearny High Educational Complex**

The Kearny High Educational Complex now houses four smaller schools: the School of Digital Media and Designs, the School of Science Connections and Technology, the Stanley E. Foster Construction Tech Academy, and the School of International Business. These schools share several design features that optimize student academic achievement and school productivity. This includes the use of project-based learning, interdisciplinary courses, block scheduling, ample academic and career guidance, involvement with community partners, and strategic use of data to inform decisionmaking.

Two of Kearney’s schools, the Stanley E. Foster Construction Tech Academy and the School of International Business, have shown considerable progress in preparing their students for entrance into a career or postsecondary education.

### **Stanley E. Foster Construction Tech Academy**

The Stanley E. Foster Construction Tech Academy (CTA) initially operated as an academy within Kearny High designed to prepare students for jobs in construction, architecture, and engineering. In 2002, the first class included 120 freshman students; since reopening in 2004 as one of the small autonomous schools, CTA has grown to enroll 474 students in grades nine through twelve.

The school integrates high academic standards in traditional high school courses with hands-on curriculum in classes like “Principles of Engineering” and “Architecture and Design.” School leaders strive to personalize students’ experiences through the use of small learning communities (organized by grade level) and advisory periods. To ensure educators have critical student information and necessary time for collaboration, teachers meet in common preparatory periods to discuss student needs, to develop common assessments, and to review data to adjust instruction.

#### **Snapshot: Construction Tech Academy**

- Opened in 2002 as an academy within Kearny High
- Reopened as autonomous school in 2004
- Grades 9–12
- 474 students
- 68% qualify for free or reduced-price lunch
- 54% Hispanic, 18 % white, 14% African American, 1% Asian, 4% Filipino, and 9% Indochinese
- 25% English language learners
- 16% students with disabilities

Source: SDUSD Research and Reporting Department based on CBEDS fall 2008 data.

The support and participation of local industry has been vital to CTA’s success since its founding. Local businesses donated over \$1 million in goods and services to ensure that the facilities were



conducive to the new smaller learning community. Industry leaders are also critical partners in implementing the academic program. Teachers collaborate with industry mentors to design curricula and school projects, coteach classes, mentor students during completion of their projects, evaluate student projects and presentations, and offer advice, resources, and job-learning opportunities to students.

Positive results for CTA students include:

- School Year (SY) 2006–07 showed a 98.6 percent graduation rate.<sup>6</sup> (SY 2007–08 data will not be available until approximately spring 2009.)
- In SY 2007–08, CTA achieved a 95 percent attendance rate.<sup>7</sup>
- The percentage of CTA’s students reaching proficient levels on state exams has increased in all grades. For example, the percent of ninth graders proficient in English Language Arts increased from 46 percent in 2005 to 47.7 percent in 2007; these percentages were higher than both the district and state averages.<sup>8</sup>
- By June 2008, 75 percent of seniors had taken at least one three-unit college class and 52 percent of seniors had completed an internship in a corporation.<sup>9</sup>
- According to CTA’s annual survey of alumni, every student in the Class of 2008 went on to enroll in some form of postsecondary training—9 percent joined the military; 7 percent secured an apprenticeship; 43 percent enrolled in community college, and 41 percent enrolled in a four-year postsecondary institution (up 5 percentage points from the prior year’s class).<sup>10</sup>

## The School of International Business

The School of International Business (SIB) is designed to prepare ninth- through twelfth-grade students for careers in business, government, and nonprofit organizations. SIB offers specialized coursework in business, accounting, and computer applications; opportunities for internships and job shadowing; and access to community college courses free of charge through the “Fast Track Program”—a partnership with nearby Mesa College that allows students to attend college classes during regular school hours.

The smaller enrollment size and community feel of the school allows students to receive specialized instruction and help. For example, all students are assigned a staff member to provide additional support throughout the year and during “advocacy periods.”

SIB also implemented an English language learner (ELL) support program to address the needs of its high percentage of students who are ELLs. The ELL support program includes one-on-one assessments, extensive teacher training, peer support, intervention meetings, and extended-day support programs. As a result, the students in this program perform very near the same level as non-ELL students at SIB, out-perform other ELL students in the district, and, according to the school’s principal, have a 94 percent graduation rate.<sup>11</sup>

### Snapshot: School of International Business

- Opened in 2004
- Grades 9–12
- 453 students
- 68% qualify for free or reduced-price lunch
- 44% Latino, 15% African American, 15% Indochinese, 15% White, 5% Asian, 4% Filipino, 1% Pacific Islander
- 28% English language learners
- 9% students with disabilities

Source: SDUSD Research and Reporting Department based on CBEDS fall 2008 data.



Other positive results for SIB students include:

- In School Year (SY) 2006–07, SIB had a graduation rate of 92.6 percent.<sup>12</sup> (SY 2007–08 data will not be available until approximately spring 2009.)
- In SY 2007–08, SIB achieved a 90 percent attendance rate.<sup>13</sup>
- The percentage of SIB’s students reaching proficient levels on state exams has increased steadily in all grades. For example, the percent of tenth graders proficient in English Language Arts increased from 27.3 percent in 2005 to 51.1 percent in 2007; these percentages were higher than both the district and state averages.<sup>14</sup>
- By June 2008, every senior had taken at least one college course through the “Fast Track Program,” 66 percent had completed nine college credits, and 25 percent had at least twenty-seven college credits.<sup>15</sup>
- Nearly 80 percent of seniors graduated a semester early to attend Mesa College full-time during the spring semester.<sup>16</sup>
- Ninety-six percent of the Class of 2008 attended a college or university in the fall following their graduation.<sup>17</sup>

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> “Thinking SMALL: High School Transformation at San Diego City Schools,” (San Diego, CA: San Diego City Schools, 2006) [http://www.sandi.net/events/small\\_schools/smallschools\\_r6.pdf](http://www.sandi.net/events/small_schools/smallschools_r6.pdf) (Accessed February 14, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> “San Diego City Schools High School Renewal Overview,” slide show presented at SRN 2006 Summer Institutes, Through the Looking Glass: Reinventing Districts and Schools Through Redesigning Teaching and Learning, June 21, 2006, Stanford, CA. [http://www.srnleads.org/data/ppt/si\\_redesign\\_san\\_diego.ppt](http://www.srnleads.org/data/ppt/si_redesign_san_diego.ppt) (accessed February 14, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> J. R. Betts, A. C. Zau, and K. King, *From Blueprint to Reality: San Diego’s Education Reforms* (San Francisco: Public Policy Institute of California, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> “San Diego City Schools High School Renewal Overview,” slide show presented at SRN 2006 Summer Institutes.

<sup>6</sup> California Department of Education, Educational Demographics Unit, “Graduation Rates Based on NCES Definition—School Report, Kearny Construction Tech Academy,” (accessed February 14, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> “Construction Tech Academy,” *School Accountability Report Card*, short version, spring 2008 for academic year 2006–07 (San Diego: San Diego City Schools District, 2008) <http://studata.sandi.net/research/sarcs/2007-08/SARC736short.pdf> (accessed February 14, 2009).

<sup>9</sup> “Construction Tech Academy (CTA) @ Kearny – Quick Facts.” (San Diego: SIB, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> “CTA Senior Graduate Exit Survey Data.” (San Diego, CTA, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Ana Diaz-Booz, “Student Academic Programs That Work” paper presented at High School Renewal: Big Success for San Diego’s Small Schools, Alliance for Excellent Education event, February 25, 2009, Washington, DC.

<sup>12</sup> SDUSD Research and Reporting Department.

<sup>13</sup> SDUSD Research and Reporting Department.

<sup>14</sup> “School of International Business,” *School Accountability Report Card*, short version, spring 2008 for academic year 2006–07 (San Diego: San Diego Unified School District, 2008) <http://studata.sandi.net/research/sarcs/2007-08/SARC735short.pdf> (accessed February 14, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> Ana Diaz-Booz, “Student Academic Programs That Work.”

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

