

Job-Embedded Professional Learning Flips Failing Math Scores in Just Seven Months

Priority Charter Schools in Central Texas consists of four schools that serve approximately 900 students, each situated in different communities within 60 miles of each other, and each with different student populations, grade structures, enrollments, and more.

Cedar Park Academy and Georgetown Academy, for example, both serve more affluent communities. However, Cedar Park is a PreK-12 school with approximately 190 students. Georgetown serves around 80 students in grades PreK-8. In contrast, Cove Charter Academy supports 240 students in grades PreK-12, most of whom are from transient military families stationed at nearby Ft. Hood. Temple Charter Academy, Priority Charter Schools' flagship school, is its largest with an enrollment of 300 PreK-12 students.

This diversity comes with some hurdles, says Assistant Superintendent Derrick Love, Ed.D. "The challenge is meeting the unique needs of all of the students in each of the different communities which our schools serve." Superintendent Lula Turnipseed, M.Ed., elaborates: "We need to make sure we provide teachers with the necessary tools and skill sets to identify the level of instruction needed to achieve great outcomes for all students."

To achieve this goal, Priority Charter Schools leaders have implemented a number of new, differentiated resources designed to help teachers better serve the distinct needs of each campus and the students studying on them. One of those resources includes professional learning with the Consortium on Reaching Excellence in Education (CORE).

“We Needed Support in Instructional Pedagogy and Delivery”

Priority Charter Schools reached out to CORE in the fall of 2017 when math scores were trending down. After analyzing their current curricula (Envision Math, Digits, Pearson, and McGraw Hill) and instructional practices at every grade level, leaders found that the curricular content was not the problem. “Teachers’ understanding of the content and utilizing the content within the curriculum was missing. We needed to support them in instructional pedagogy and delivery,” Dr. Love says.

Previously, Priority Charter Schools had worked with CORE to provide six weeks of online English Language Arts (ELA) training to literacy coaches and instructional support staff. After seeing success with that model, they hired CORE in 2018-19 to provide monthly, on-site professional learning to 24 teachers, four instructional coaches and five principals in grades 3-12. That number increased by 15 K-12 educators in 2019-20.

CORE facilitator Patty Copeland focused Priority Charter Schools’ professional learning on improving understanding of the curriculum and implementing high-leverage instructional practices through direct work with site leadership and teachers in and out of the classroom.

Specifically, Copeland worked closely with teachers to: review and analyze student assessment data; identify specific math program implementation issues and plan appropriate supports; identify key practices of effective math instruction, plan for active student engagement and discourse; and model and observe teachers’ ability to embed key mathematical practices into instructional delivery. She often met one-on-one with teachers to coach, model and mentor them on how to deliver rigorous math instruction. Turnipseed and Dr. Love say that most importantly, Copeland made professional learning engaging and enjoyable, infusing an energy in teachers that they then took back to their classrooms.

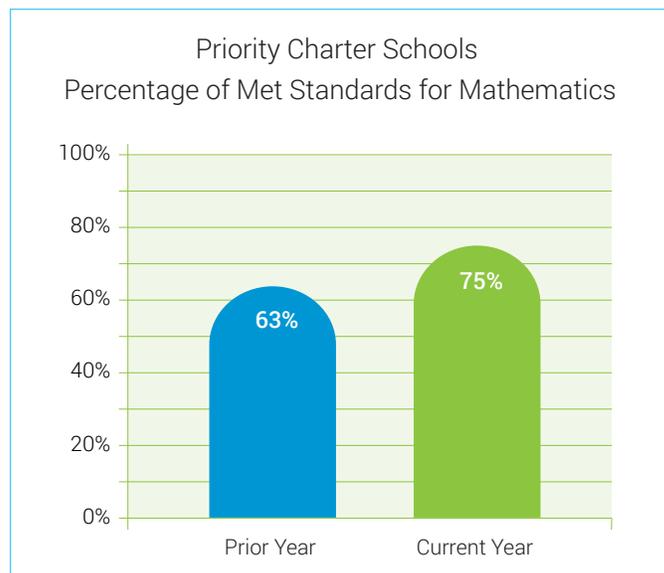


Turnipseed says Copeland's work with site leaders helped transform them from managers to instructional leaders. Copeland encouraged and showed leaders how to step inside classrooms and work hands-on with teachers, guiding them on key look-fors of effective instruction during classroom walkthroughs. She also taught leaders how to provide ongoing support to teachers to ensure sustainable program implementation. Finally, Copeland trained leaders to analyze the effectiveness of intervention programs, identify implementation issues and plan necessary improvements.

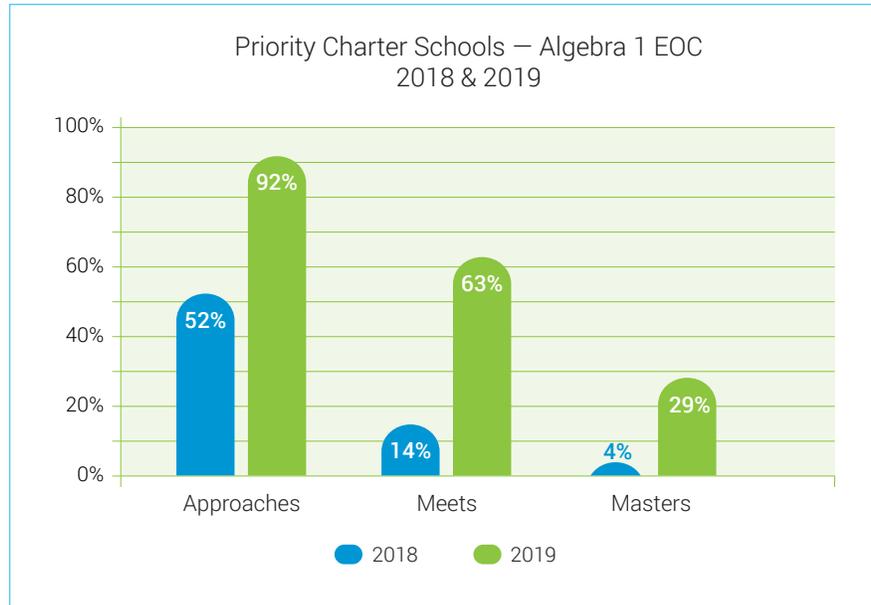
"We Doubled Gains and Grew 12 Percent"

This on-site, job-embedded professional learning with both math instructors and site leaders has impacted district and student outcomes significantly. Not only has Priority Charter Schools made impressive strides in student achievement, but also teachers have a renewed sense of confidence and pride in instruction.

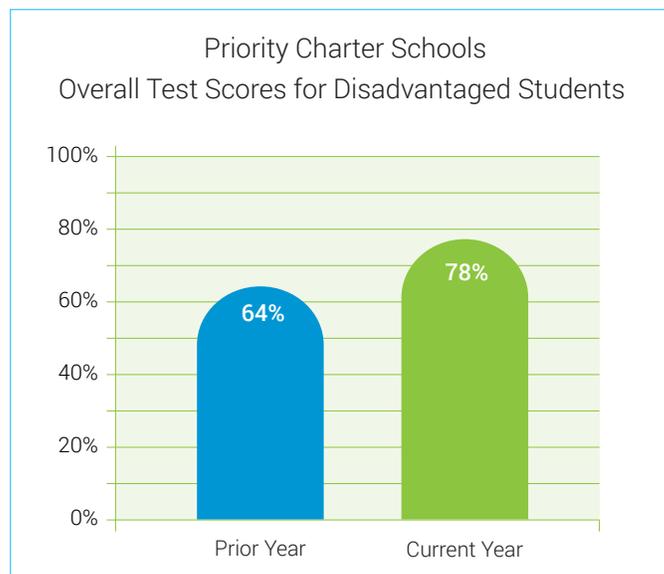
Prior to working with CORE, Priority Charter Schools' overall Texas report card rating was an F. In less than one year, it grew to a B+. Niche math scores on the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) exams also increased considerably in 2018-19. "We doubled gains and grew 12 percent in overall math achievement," Dr. Love says.



The highest gains were achieved in Algebra 1. In 2019, across all three high schools, 90 percent or more of students passed the End of Course exam for Algebra 1. Just about half passed in 2018.



By focusing on improving instructional practice through professional learning, Priority Charter Schools also closed achievement gaps among specific subpopulations of students. For example, scores among economically disadvantaged students rose overall from 64 percent to 78 percent.





When teachers witnessed scores rise, their confidence rose with them. “Those math teachers walk around like mathematicians now,” Turnipseed says. And they should. CORE helped create a command of the content and empowered teachers with the knowledge and skills to provide high-quality math instruction. “Teachers gained a new sense of pride,” Dr. Love continues. “CORE helped build self-confidence and morale, especially among our generalist teachers, which improved instructional delivery and effectiveness.”

“Our Data Doesn’t Lie”

After achieving these results, Priority Charter Schools has become an advocate for CORE’s evidence-based approach to sustained, long-term professional learning that builds instructional knowledge while providing job-embedded support to ensure true transformation. In fact, Turnipseed recently talked with a colleague whose district also is struggling with low math scores. Her first recommendation was to contact CORE, because it works. “Our data doesn’t lie,” she says. “We were at an F. Seven months later, we were at a B+.”