

White Paper Series

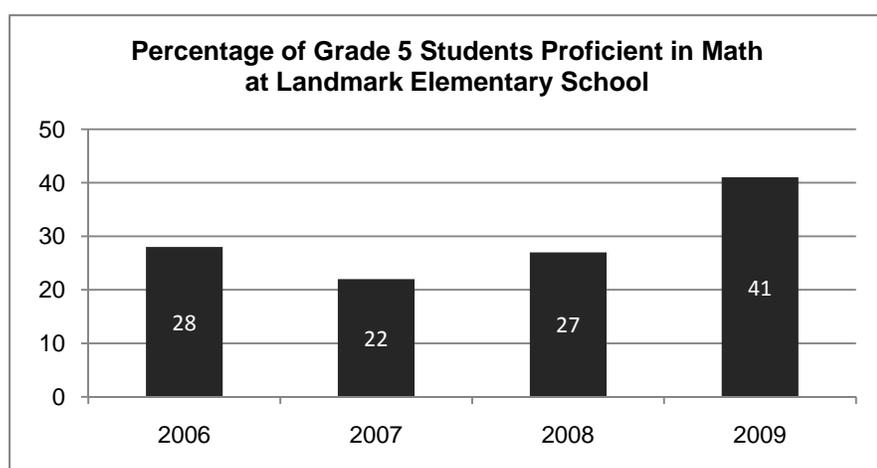
Landmark Elementary School

Pajaro Valley Unified School District

Watsonville, California

The
Leadership
and Learning
Center™

Landmark Elementary School student achievement scores have risen in every grade level across tested subject areas, according to data from California standardized tests.



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Issues

- Teachers at Landmark Elementary School had pursued numerous professional development initiatives, but these efforts had lacked cohesion and focus.
- Writing was not an area of emphasis in daily lesson planning, and many educators did not teach the basics of good writing.
- Landmark Elementary School educators administered many tests, but they had no method for formal assessments and results analysis.

Solutions Provided by The Leadership and Learning Center

- The Leadership and Learning Center worked with Landmark educators to create a comprehensive professional development plan tied to school achievement goals as well as to the specific needs of the educators.
- Landmark Elementary School teachers attended a customized Center seminar, *Writing to Learn*, that reviewed the essentials of the writing process, focused on nonfiction writing, and provided strategies that teachers could implement immediately across grade levels and subject areas.
- Teachers learned The Center's six-step *Data-Driven Decision Making* process that showed them how to examine student performance data to guide instruction.

1.0 Executive Summary

Landmark Elementary School, located in Watsonville, California, serves grades K–5 in the Pajaro Valley Unified School District. The school has about 800 students, 95 percent of whom are minorities, 63 percent are English language learners, and 81 percent are eligible for free and reduced lunch. In 2006, the school received a High Priority Schools Grant from the California Department of Education and sought new strategies to deal with poor student achievement. The proficiency levels of students at Landmark Elementary School were very low, especially in language arts, and instruction in writing was minimal.

Landmark’s leadership team knew that significant school-wide changes were necessary for real improvement in student achievement scores to occur. School leaders realized that Landmark’s professional development efforts were not tied to academic goals and teachers were asked to pursue too many disjointed initiatives. In addition, Landmark educators did not have a true assessment system and had no way to monitor student results and analyze data.

In the three years since Landmark Elementary School has worked with The Leadership and Learning Center, the school has made excellent strides in improving its professional development efforts and strengthening its writing program. Moreover, the school now has common formative assessments that are aligned directly with district standards. Since 2005 Landmark student achievement scores have risen in every grade level across tested subject areas according to data from California standardized tests.

2.0 The Needs of Landmark Elementary School

Landmark Elementary School has been in Program Improvement¹ since 2006. In 2008, the school placed lower in the five-step program declining from stage 2 to stage 3. Landmark educators became determined to stop this decline and improve meeting the school's goals for Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP).

School leaders were searching for strategies to deal with the low student achievement scores. Landmark educators understood that there was no magic formula for school improvement, but they were familiar with 90/90/90² schools and knew that these schools had identified best practices to help all students succeed. Landmark educators also read the book, *Results Now* by Mike Schmoker,³ and quickly realized that they had to change course radically. According to school principal, Jennifer Wildman, "It was a critical move. Teachers knew it was time to do something drastic. They still describe this period of change at our school as 'jumping off a cliff'—it really felt like we were jumping into the unknown . . ."

The first step in the change process was to identify Landmark's specific needs. Leaders recognized that student proficiency levels were too low, especially in language arts. After further analysis, Landmark leaders also concluded that writing instruction was quite weak. Educators seldom required students to write and, when they did, teachers provided little direction in *how* to write. There were instances of good writing instruction, but these efforts were insufficient. Students were not receiving adequate instruction in this vitally important skill.

Second, leaders realized that the school's improvement efforts lacked focus. Although the staff was very dedicated, they had been asked to undertake too many initiatives. As a result, Landmark teachers felt overwhelmed. As one teacher put it, "I feel like I don't have time to teach because I'm so busy trying to keep up with all of the things I'm being asked to do!"

Third, teachers were required to administer a great number of tests without the benefit of meaningful assessment. Moreover, no opportunity existed to reflect and change course by asking, "What happens when the kids don't learn what we wanted them to learn?"

Last, and most significantly, although Landmark educators were setting goals and collaboratively trying to reach them, they never completed an improvement measure cycle. Furthermore, when teachers did not meet a goal, they simply dropped that goal and headed off in another direction.

¹ Program Improvement is a five-stage process for monitoring, improving, and if necessary, reorganizing any school that receives federal money under the Title I section of No Child Left Behind.

² 90/90/90 schools—schools meeting the following three criteria: 90 percent of students are identified as minority, 90 percent of students qualify for free or reduced lunch, and 90 percent of students meet state academic standards.

³ From Mike Schmoker, *Results Now* (Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 2006).

3.0 The Role of The Leadership and Learning Center

To reverse the negative trend in student learning, Landmark Elementary School leaders formulated a long-term comprehensive professional development plan that incorporated several Leadership and Learning Center seminars. Strategies in this plan were aligned directly with both school and district goals and included the use of student performance data.

Since 2006, Landmark staff and faculty have participated in the following Center seminars and services:

Power Standards and “Unwrapping” the Standards (now combined with *Making Standards Work* and retitled *Engaging Classroom Assessments*): *Power Standards* and “Unwrapping” the *Standards* are one-day seminars designed to assist educators in utilizing classroom standards. Power Standards are a subset of the complete list of standards for each grade and for each subject. They represent the essential standards that each teacher should ensure that all students learn prior to leaving their current grade. Students who acquire this “safety net” of knowledge and skills will exit one grade better prepared for the next grade.

In the seminar, “Unwrapping” the *Standards*, Landmark educators learned a powerful practice that they can use to effectively teach the academic content standards to their students. Participants “unwrapped” Power Standards and determined the Big Ideas or enduring understandings from these standards. Next, they wrote Essential Questions to guide instruction and assessment and discussed ways to “work smarter, not harder” by involving their fellow teachers in the “unwrapping” process. Participants also had an opportunity during the seminar to deepen personal understanding of the process by practicing and applying the methods. Finally, they acquired strategies to implement “unwrapped” standards in their instruction immediately.

Data Teams and Data-Driven Decision Making (recently updated, now titled *Decision Making for Results*): These seminars provided Landmark attendees the tools to differentiate between unnecessary student data and the relevant data that they should use to drive instruction. Additionally, participants learned new strategies to collaboratively analyze student data, create measurable indicators, implement intervention, and track progress.

The primary goal of the *Data Teams* seminar is to maximize effective instructional practice via constant monitoring of prescribed materials. This seminar works in conjunction with The Center’s *Decision Making for Results* seminar. Together, these seminars give participants the tools to analyze relevant student data effectively in collaborative teams. Results are applied

not only to inform instruction for individual students, but also to evaluate and improve core general education practices and the overall effectiveness of interventions.

Center consultants customized these seminars to align with the needs of Landmark’s educators and the school’s grade-level teams. As a result of attending these seminars, data teams are now in place at Landmark Elementary School, and these teams have changed the fundamental leadership structure of the school. Instead of the typical hierarchy of school leaders and committees, leadership at Landmark is now comprised of data team leaders and junior data team leaders. Furthermore, everyone participates on a data team and also selects a vertical curriculum team to work with. While the data teams analyze data and recommend the revision or addition of teaching strategies, the vertical curriculum teams examine the research on what teaching practices have proven to be most effective across multiple content areas.

Writing to Learn: The Center’s *Writing to Learn* seminar promotes the understanding that clear, concise writing is critical for success in every subject. For Landmark, the seminar reviewed the essentials of the writing process and focused on nonfiction writing. Participants left the seminar with writing prompts and assignments, an action plan, and nonfiction writing strategies that they could implement in Landmark classrooms immediately. As a follow-up, Landmark leaders scheduled time for staff members to practice their own writing at each data team meeting and they were encouraged to reflect on their teaching practices and teamwork.

Leadership Coaching: In the 2008–2009 school year, Center professional development associates provided individualized leadership coaching for Landmark leaders. Each coaching session was designed specifically to meet the school’s goals and tied to the school’s focus on using data.

Each session was designed to:

- Reinforce attention on the instructional and learning focus of the school’s data team work to ensure that this work was aligned with the school’s annual improvement plans
- Gather data on instructional strategies and student learning to supplement other data on educators’ practices and student performance
- Stimulate collegial conversation about teaching and learning
- Identify proven strategies and learn from other participants through sharing observations, experiences, and perspectives, and engaging in inquiry
- Deepen understandings and practices by specific, ongoing feedback

Implementation Visits: The Center’s professional development associates and Landmark leaders recognized that focusing on implementation was essential for the success of school change and improvement. At Landmark, the implementation visits focused on the work of its data teams.

Certification Training: Certification training builds long-term support for professional development initiatives by building internal capacity and saving significant costs. In Center certification trainings, school leaders are prepared to guide professional development and effectively teach the content and implementation of The Center’s seminars within their own school and district. Certified Landmark trainers gained a deeper understanding of the seminar content and learned new tools to support fellow educators who were applying the content in their classrooms. Landmark leaders attended certification training in *Data-Driven Decision Making* and *Data Teams*. Each certification training was directly aligned with Landmark’s goal to provide implementation support for utilizing student data.

Conference Attendance: Landmark’s principal and assistant principal attended The Center’s annual Leaders in Transition Institute (now updated and titled The Leadership Institute) held in Boston, Massachusetts. This three-day conference is designed exclusively for educational leaders such as superintendents, board presidents, chief academic officers, principals, and others who face the unique challenges of senior educational leadership. In the Leadership Institute, participants worked to:

- Identify and prioritize essential leadership actions
- Improve personal leadership effectiveness
- More successfully direct teams to achieve desired results
- More productively resolve dissenting opinions
- More efficiently identify and address conflicting priorities
- Inform decision-making processes with the latest research
- More easily prioritize and tackle new initiatives

Working with Leadership and Learning Center consultants who were already familiar with the school’s strategies, Landmark attendees were able to align their school goals with the recommendations from the Institute.

4.0 Landmark Elementary School Results

The state of California uses the Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) program to measure student learning in grades 2 through 11. STAR is designed to help schools understand how well they are preparing their students. It is a high-profile accountability tool and decisions about specific schools and students are often based on the results.

The STAR program⁴ includes:

- The California Standards Tests (CST)—a series of standards-based assessments
- The California Modified Assessment (CMA)—a standards-based test for many students with individualized education programs
- The California Alternate Performance Assessment (CAPA)—a test for students with significant cognitive disabilities who are unable to take the CSTs or CMA
- The Standards-Based Tests in Spanish (STS)—tests for students who either received instruction in Spanish or were enrolled in a school in the United States for less than 12 months

The California Standards Tests are a series of standards-based assessments developed to measure whether students are mastering the specific skills defined for each grade by the state of California. The CSTs are given in English language arts in grades 2 through 11; math in grades 2 through 7; science in grades 5, 8, and 10; and history/social science in grades 8 and 11.

CST results show the level of a student's proficiency in each of the subjects tested. Students receive one of five ratings on the tests: advanced, proficient, basic, below basic, or far below basic. The goal is for all students to score at or above the proficient level.

Landmark Elementary School has made continuous gains on STAR.

- Subgroup scores have increased significantly throughout the entire school.
- According to STAR results, the number of English learners who are proficient in language arts has doubled.
- STAR English language arts results indicate that students who attended Landmark consecutively from 2006 to 2009 showed a rise in proficiency from 17 percent to 26 percent.

⁴ Prior to 2008-2009, the STAR also included the California Achievement Test, a national norm-referenced test.

- Fourth-grade CST writing scores rose from 7 percent in 2007 to 15 percent in 2008, and jumped to 26 percent in 2009.
- Landmark students identified as low socioeconomic status (SES) and Hispanic, a group that makes up nearly 90 percent of Landmark's student population, are closing the achievement gap and nearing the same average of proficiency as the whole school percentage.

Landmark Elementary School leaders recognize that results are not measured by standardized tests alone. They acknowledge that the implementation and application of proven professional development strategies can dramatically affect teaching and learning at the classroom level.

Landmark has made significant gains in the following areas:

- Attention to writing has increased tremendously at Landmark and teachers have learned strategies for teaching students how to write. Today, every student in the school writes each morning for 30 minutes and students write in all subjects. Expectations have soared as well. Now, teachers expect all students to attain proficiency. And, because of this emphasis on writing, the majority of Landmark's students can now write proficiently.
- The school climate has improved tremendously. Students have become empowered to think and engage. Teachers are seeing that students are more creative and seeking ways to contribute. As the students become increasingly capable, teachers are able to begin each school year teaching at a much higher level.
- Teachers have begun to recognize that their actions really do make a difference. Throughout the last three years, the collaborative discussions of Landmark staff members have evolved into a very deep and meaningful dialogue about expectations and academic rigor. This, in turn, has led to highly effective decision making regarding teaching practices.

5.0 Lessons Learned at Landmark Elementary School

School leaders and The Leadership and Learning Center recognize the following specific practices as critical to Landmark's success:

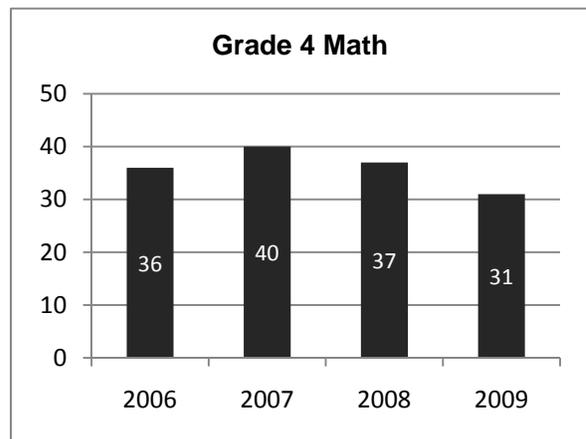
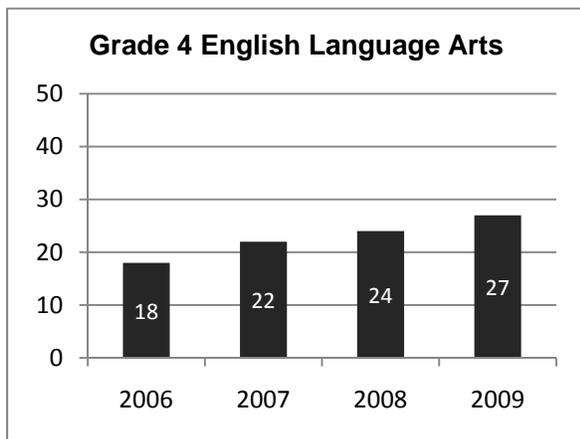
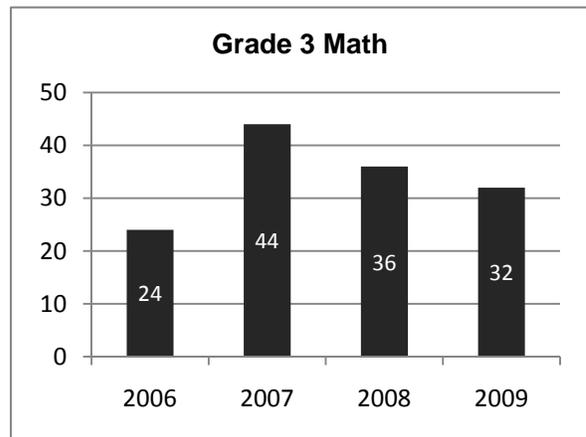
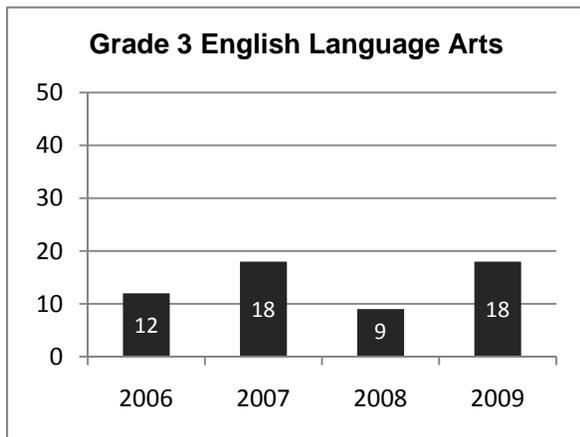
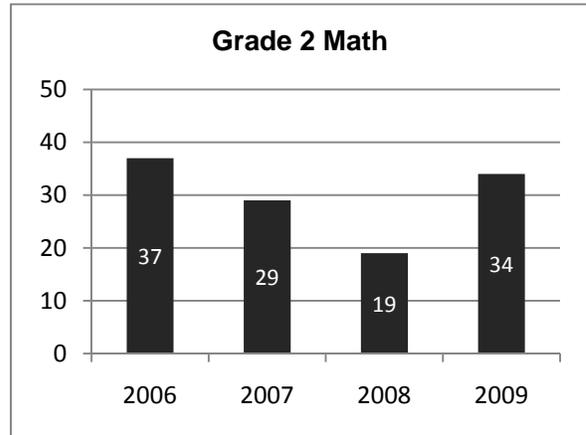
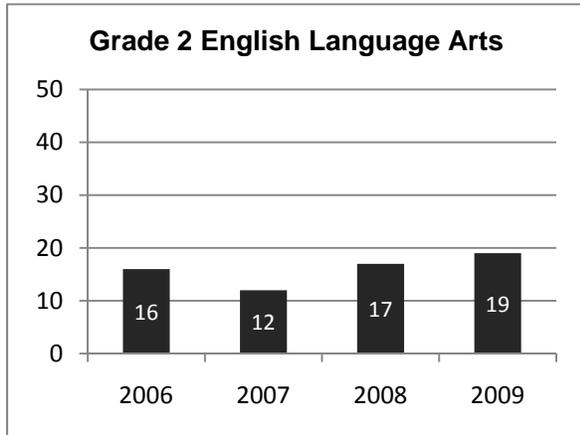
- **Identify Best Practices:** When a data team needs assistance, school leaders immediately contact all potential resources, including the school district or county office of education to locate an expert to help. Also, Landmark teachers keep records of all data team work, and not simply the numbers. As the teams go through their data analysis, they record and reflect on each step of the process.
- **Tenacity:** Landmark Elementary School considers itself the “poster child” of incremental improvement. While many other district schools have test scores that fluctuate upward and downward, Landmark's overall scores have moved steadily upward each year. On STAR, the number of proficient students has increased each year since 2006 in each grade level across all subject areas, and the number of students below or far below proficiency has decreased.
- **Set Goals:** Educators at Landmark learned that behavior precedes belief. According to principal Jennifer Wildman, “We always wanted to believe students could achieve, but since we had never really made that happen consistently, it was hard to believe. Now we know exactly what to do to get results . . . it's a process of goal setting, taking action, trial and error, and replicating what works. We can see the path to lead students from where they are to where we want them to be.”
- **Attend Outside Conferences:** Landmark's principal and assistant principal have had the opportunity to attend The Leadership Institute in Boston, Massachusetts, where professional development associates of The Leadership and Learning Center aligned conference work directly with Landmark's strategies and goals. In addition, they received tools to implement work from the conference at their school and receive ongoing follow-up and support from Center associates.

Landmark Elementary School is continuing to make tremendous progress in improving student achievement. There is still a long way to go, but Landmark educators and The Leadership and Learning Center are continuing in their work together to further increase learning for all students.

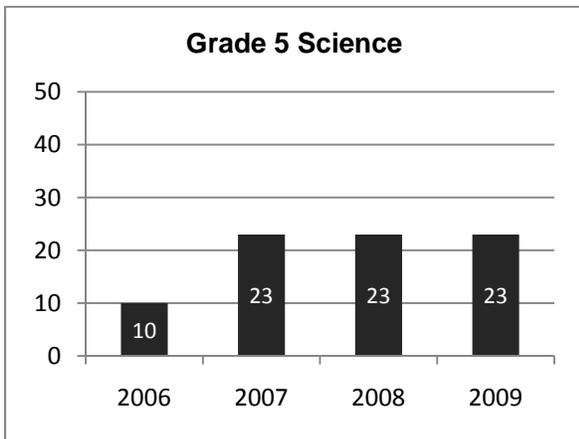
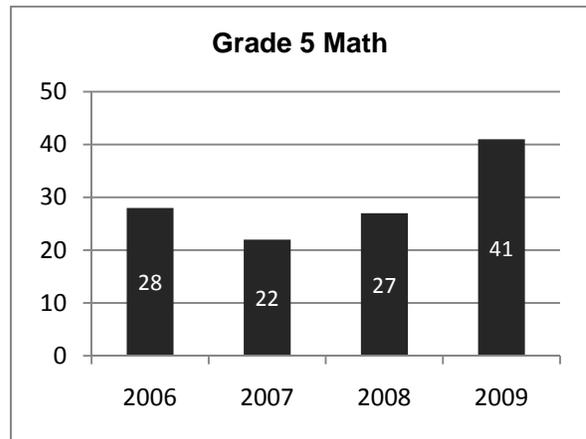
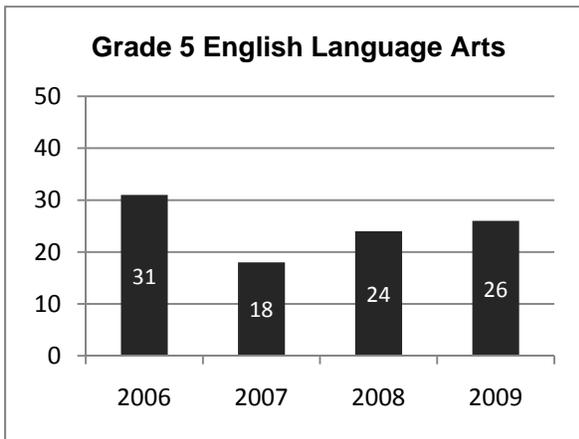
Appendix One

Landmark Elementary School STAR Results

Percentage of Students Scoring Proficient or Above 2006–2009



Appendix One (Continued)



Appendix Two

Landmark STAR Results by Subgroup

2008-2009 Percentage of Students in a Designated Group Scoring Proficient or Above in Comparison to Students in the General Population

Subgroup	Grade 2 English Language Arts	Grade 2 Math	Grade 3 English Language Arts	Grade 3 Math
All Students	19%	34%	18%	32%
Females	21%	28%	24%	40%
Males	17%	40%	12%	24%
African American	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Asian	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Filipino	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Hispanic or Latino	14%	29%	15%	29%
Economically Disadvantaged	17%	31%	11%	23%
English Learner	13%	27%	8%	24%
Fluent—English Proficient and English Only	32%	47%	39%	47%
Migrant Education	0%	14%	6%	19%

Subgroup	Grade 4 English Language Arts	Grade 4 Math	Grade 5 English Language Arts	Grade 5 Math	Grade 5 Science
All Students	27%	36%	26%	41%	23%
Females	22%	29%	23%	41%	16%
Males	31%	43%	30%	42%	29%
African American	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Asian	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Filipino	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Hispanic or Latino	25%	33%	21%	38%	16%
Economically Disadvantaged	26%	35%	24%	36%	18%
English Learner	15%	31%	2%	17%	2%
Fluent—English Proficient and English Only	50%	46%	48%	64%	40%
Migrant Education	25%	37%	N/A	N/A	0%

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