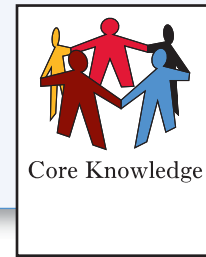


# VIII. Nathaniel Hawthorne Academy San Antonio, Texas



## Grades PK–8

**Enrollment: 500**

**Low-Income: 100%**

**Non-White: 92%**

Located just north of where the McCallister Freeway meets the Pan Am Expressway in downtown San Antonio, Hawthorne Academy offers a compelling story of urban education with more dramatic twists than any twice-told tale penned by its namesake.

In an article recently published in the *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR)*, Debra Mentzer and Tricia Shaughnessy—two long-time Hawthorne teachers—wrote, “In 1987, Hawthorne Elementary School battled all of the problems common to inner-city schools: low achievement, inconsistent attendance, and a transient population with student behaviors ranging from apathetic to disruptive. We could see that if we did not do something to break the cycle of failure, our students would end up on the streets or dead.”<sup>1</sup>

Hawthorne and several other San Antonio schools entered into a partnership with nearby Trinity University. Trinity would help Hawthorne improve, and in return Hawthorne would provide a real-world setting for the “clinical training” of its teacher education students. The search for solutions eventually led the partners to a new curriculum successfully being piloted at Three Oaks Elementary School in Fort Myers, Florida. Hawthorne became the third school in the nation to implement the Core Knowledge Sequence in 1992.

Hawthorne’s spectacular initial success with Core Knowledge prompted national news stories and lent the school a solid reputation for academic excellence. However, by the late 1990s, the school’s principal and local superintendent had retired, and the new leadership questioned whether past reforms were the right vehicles for achieving a fresh round of improvement to meet the state accountability system’s ever greater demands for better results. Core Knowledge was put on the chopping block.

Mentzer and Shaughnessy admit that Hawthorne had entered an “Era of Coasting” during the mid-to-late 1990s. Test scores had plateaued and enthusiasm ebbed as the staff coasted on past successes. But a group of teachers assumed instructional leadership, vowing to hold on to a curriculum they knew had been good for kids while finding ways to keep the spark of continuous improvement alive.

Teacher leaders recognized the need to adapt. “Finally, the staff designed and redesigned our curriculum to be driven by state standards and use the Core Knowledge Sequence as the vehicle content for the development of these skills and standards,” write Mentzer and Shaughnessy. With support from Trinity, the entire staff met for a full week during the summer of 2001-2 aligning the Core Knowledge curriculum with recently updated state standards, now known as the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills. “This was a laborious task, but one that has provided us with a seamless

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1 Mentzer, D., & Shaughnessy, T. (2005). Hawthorne Academy: The teachers’ perspective. *Journal of Education of Students Placed at Risk*, 10(2), 157–164

integration of the Core Knowledge Sequence and the state standards that will, in tandem, lead to student success.”

School principal, Guadalupe Rodriguez-Pollock says that flexibility from the district helped as well. In 2001 Hawthorne became an “internal charter school” of the San Antonio Independent School District. The charter offered a waiver allowing the staff to depart from following the district’s scope and sequence, but on a limited basis. “It gives us a little waiver in the area of science and social studies so we don’t have to follow the scope and sequence exactly, but by end of year we have to have covered it,” says the principal.

The charter also allowed Hawthorne to eventually add preschool, seventh grade, and eighth grade classes. In the process, Hawthorne Elementary School was a reborn as the Hawthorne PK-8 Academy.

Today, visitors encounter a vastly different school than the one that existed here twenty years ago. Sam Stringfield and Kirsten Ewart Sundell, the editors of JESPAR, describe what they found last fall:

During our visit, classroom activities ranged from readings of Edgar Allan Poe and books on the earliest Americans, to a practical demonstration of batteries and electric power, to a counting and rhyming sing-along that lead to an integrated reading, writing, and coloring exercise for a busy kindergarten class. After school, an ebullient group of seventh graders met in a computer-filled classroom with their teacher sponsor ... to build sophisticated robots out of Lego equipment.<sup>2</sup>

The results are evident in state assessment scores. In 2004, Hawthorne’s students far outpaced both district and state averages on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills, earning an 80 percent overall passing rate compared with 53 percent district-wide and 68 percent across the state. The Texas Education Agency awarded Hawthorne two Gold Performance Acknowledgements: “Commended on Reading/ELA” and “Commended on Writing.”

Hawthorne also offers evidence that a sequenced, richly specific curriculum can help close the achievement gaps that have long plagued American education. In 2004, Hawthorne’s seventh grade Hispanic students (most of whom are low-income) closed the achievement gap with white seventh graders statewide. Indeed, Hawthorne’s Hispanic seventh graders surpassed the state average for white students by nearly 10 percentage points.

But the staff has learned the importance of never being satisfied, and teachers continue to spend much time outside the classroom working on curriculum and instruction. “We have found it’s very instrumental to have some planning time during the work week to collaborate, as well as some time after school. And that’s what helps us pull it all together. One of the keys to success is having the planning time to collaborate,” says Ms. Rodriguez-Pollock. Teacher teams meet for at least 90 minutes each week, and the entire staff works on “vertical alignment” during staff development days at the end of every nine week period. “And sometimes,” says Ms. Rodriguez-Pollock, “it means meeting after school.”

Hawthorne’s leaders have learned another valuable lesson. “We’re thinking the only way this campus can continue to be successful is to grow our own administrators,” says Ms. Rodriguez-Pollock. “Some of us are getting near retirement and so we’re training the younger ones to follow through. ...And I think that’s why we’ve continued to do well. We follow our philosophy and vision and we work together as a team.”

The results are evident for all to see. As researchers Stringfield and Sundell summed up after their visit to San Antonio last fall, “Academically rich and culturally vibrant, Hawthorne is clear proof of what can happen when administrators, teachers, parents, and students make a strong and lasting commitment to learning, community-building, and sustaining reform.”

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2 Stringfield, S. S. & Sundell, K. E. (2005). Editors’ introduction: Where are they now? A tenth-anniversary retrospective. *Journal for Education of Students Placed at Risk*,10(2), 149–155.

## Hawthorne Now Far Outscores District and State Averages

