

# MORGAN HILL TIMES

## Model school makes its mark

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By Lindsay Bryant ([lbryant@morganhilltimes.com](mailto:lbryant@morganhilltimes.com))

At a school in a land not so far away - Watsonville - lies a microcosm of how to successfully teach elementary children how to read, write and advance in English learning.

Landmark Elementary is leading the discussion in utilizing the best practices from many sources, curriculum, studies and books on helping schools achieve.

A four-hour whirlwind tour last week with Principal Jennifer Wildman showed how the school has increased its Academic Performance Index by almost 100 points since 2005 - a huge leap for any school.

In 2006, Landmark received a High Priority Schools Grant from the California Department of Education - and the rest is Landmark history.

"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," Wildman said.

The grant was used to employ The Leadership and Learning Center of which author Douglas Reeves founded; Reeves is known for his 90/90/90 school strategies that have helped schools with high numbers of minority and poor students achieve upward of 90 percent proficiency.

"What if we made this a really collaborative place?" Wildman said about what she pitched to the staff. "The idea is that teachers need to learn too, not just pull out the Halloween worksheets every year and expect to do better."

Standing in Landmark's office, the bulletin boards dripping with pie charts are first to catch a visitor's eye. Every grade is represented with streaming data taken from their writing goals and every grade's writing rubric is displayed - something student's know by heart, Wildman said.

"Oh no, never, never," Wildman said, with a look of repugnance when asked if they "teach to the state test." Landmark teachers want their children to have the tools needed to be successful first and foremost, and if the test scores increases it's an added bonus.



Landmark Elementary School Principal Jennifer Wildman goes through an ELD support kit during a staff meeting after school April 14. The school meets as a group at least once a month.  
Photo by: Lora Schraft



First-grader Layla Ruiz celebrates after spelling a word correctly during a daily Targeted Instruction Groups lesson at Landmark Elementary School in Watsonville.  
Photo by: Lora Schraft

In California, teaching English-learning students has been qualified as a "deficit" by some, said Marcos Pizarro, a professor of Mexican American Studies at San Jose State University. Some say, "well this is what's missing and this is what we need to give them. That can be really problematic. There's a lot resources and power and potential to tap into, it takes somebody with a keen eye to tap into it."

Pizarro said educators must consider the culture of those students, their family's relationship with education and that they want a good education for themselves - it's the means of doing that that is complicated.

When the school of 24 classroom teachers, 30 students in each class, took on the task of radically changing the face of Landmark - a meaningful system of assessment was lacking.

"We were swimming in data. We just needed some focus on which part to look at, what to do with it all," Wildman said. So, Landmark, with added guidance from a book all teachers read, "Results Now" by Mike Schmoker, found a way to break it down and use it.

When the bell rings at Landmark, children are moving around their grade-level specific building for their next class, similar to high school. The 600 Landmark Dragonflies - 89 percent Hispanic, 84 percent are on free or reduced lunch and 62 percent are English language learners - are placed in groups based on skills. Children who need intensive help are designated to receive instruction in the smallest groups of as few as five to seven.

"It's really easy to look at your state test scores ... and go this is horrible, we're terrible. But if you only look at one score, yeah you're going to feel terrible," Wildman said. The constant flow of data - done by "data teams" or the group of teachers in each grade - tracks each and every student and has provided real statistics - making Landmark a true cultivation of learning.

"The teamwork is amazing here ... what helps us work so well as a staff is that our goal is about the children and making sure that they're successful and feeling confident and supported," said Holly Hatch, a fifth-grade teacher.

Nonfiction writing is now the No. 1 priority. Before, writing instruction was weak and little instruction was based in teaching children how to write. Wildman pointed to a board with papers by fifth-graders stapled to it: a compare-and-contrast essay on two important African American leaders.

"That's like what I did in college!" Wildman said, "it's just amazing, so awesome."

Collaboration was another part of the plan, Wildman said. She said she and the teachers were willing to jump into the unknown together and with their focus in mind - the children - they even negotiated with the teacher's union to add two extra hours to their week in the first year of the new plan.

"We meet a lot ... Last week we were talking for three hours. The contract hours are until 2:45 (p.m.). But we wouldn't get anything done in 30 minutes," first-grade teacher Cindy Galos said of the 2:15 p.m. dismissal time.

Vice Principal Roberto Torres said he and Wildman are a great team and they "remember what it's like" to teach as they did at Salsipuedes before becoming the leaders of Landmark in 2004.

"We need to be very transparent with what we are doing, talking a lot about what our actual mission is," Torres said. "Vision, too. What we see our kids being able to do," Wildman said.

So with that in mind, Wildman said they began pre-testing and post-testing "all of the time." Targeted Instructional Groups, known as TIGs in conversation, happens four days a week for 45 minutes. Wildman gushed - "I just love TIGs." Students are tested every six to 10 weeks and regrouped into three groups based on their reading levels. For the 45 minutes, volunteers, aides, intervention teachers, migrant and special education teachers are utilized to decrease the size of the TIG groups.

Landmark is making strident gains on California's standardized STAR test: Its subgroup scores, such as Hispanic and English learners, have increased throughout the entire school every year since the strategies were in place; the number of English learners proficient in language arts has doubled; and the achievement gap is decreasing as the Hispanic and poor students near proficiency.

"You get a goal you want to reach and your pre-test them and post-test. We're very organized. You start something and work on it all the time, bi-weekly tests, it's a constant conversation," Galos said. The collaborative discussions at Landmark have evolved into a deep and meaningful dialogue about expectations and academic rigor, according to The Leadership and Learning Center that wrote a 10-page paper on Landmark's use of best practices.

"Even when there might be situations, it's not perfect, it's not dancing unicorns and everybody's happy all of the time," Hatch said. "But, I think there's a high level of respect for each other here. I think we respect each other as professionals and as experts in what we do."

The brand "Landmark" seems not to be a simple coincidence or stroke of creativity in school-naming. The staff and students are a shining example on a hill of how to pull together when times are tough and do all they can for the children.

"Focus on the big picture," Wildman told the teachers at their staff meeting after school that day, "and our sphere of influence."

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**Lindsay Bryant**

Lindsay Bryant is a reporter for South Valley Newspapers.