

**Distinguished School Model Practice:** Vertical Teaming—aligning instructional and assessment practices across the grades

**Description of Practice:**

In 2012, *Redwood Academy of Ukiah* conducted a WASC self-study, during which the staff identified the need to better build students' academic abilities vertically, and, thereby, increase students' preparedness for the demanding academic expectations and coursework in their junior and senior years. Specifically, the staff saw room for improvement in *Redwood Academy's* Advanced Placement course enrollment numbers and felt that ensuring vertical alignment, especially in the areas of English and math, would better prepare students for these, as well as other, challenging courses. The following year, in 2013-14, the *Redwood Academy* staff began meeting in monthly vertical teams to align instructional practices and assessments in ways that would allow students to experience consistency in instructional approaches from classroom to classroom along with developmentally appropriate increases in expectations from year to year. The need for the professional development provided within these vertical teams was compounded when the state announced its transition to the Common Core State Standards whereby students would now be challenged to higher levels of critical thinking.

Today, *Redwood Academy of Ukiah's* vertical teams still meet monthly and include one team for English literacy for both English and history teachers, one team for mathematics, and one team for science. The English literacy vertical team supports the development of English skills beginning with grade 7 through Advanced Placement in grades 11 and 12; math has similar continuity building from pre-Algebra in grade 7 to Trigonometry/Pre-Calculus and AP Calculus in grade 12; and science seeks to build sound inquiry, experimentation, and real world problem-solving skills across the different scientific content areas, from life sciences to physical sciences.

Within the three teams, staff plan and assess instruction for key state content standards with coordination across classes and with articulation among grades on a monthly basis. The teams identify state standards for cross-curricular lessons and assessment as well as shared vocabulary on a quarterly basis. Vertical team time is also used to norm instructional approaches and grading practices. The teams spend time looking at teacher lessons/assessments and student work from across the grades in order to ensure that students can go from one teacher to another without having to learn an entirely new set of academic vocabulary, processes, or grading expectations. For example, teachers on the English literacy team share the acronym PEE (which stands for point, evidence, explanation). Students learn how to apply this acronym to their written responses during 7th grade and then expand upon it in 8th grade, where the standard written response calls for a PEEEE. By the time students reach their high school years, this shared acronym becomes the foundation upon which they build their body paragraphs for essays in English, history, and science classes. The teams not only make use of their own classroom instruction and assessment data, but they also spend time analyzing CAASPP interim and summative data as well as PSAT and AP Exam data. The team engages in data-driven decision making whereby they identify patterns in students' scores that indicate areas in need of further instructional focus. Over the years, the English literacy and mathematics teams have made very targeted use of the CAASPP interim assessment data to help them identify the key state standards for cross-curricular lessons and assessment as well as identify critical shared vocabulary by grade level. Finally, the teams evaluate all adopted

classroom materials and are empowered to make their own curriculum adoption decisions. The teams are led by highly-skilled teachers who are paid an additional yearly stipend to ensure the time spent together is meaningful and aimed at improving curricular alignment.

The vertical teams support two of *Redwood Academy's* current LCAP goals. The first goal is to graduate college prepared students as determined by the Dashboard's College and Career Indicator (CCI). The vertical teams, by way of their analysis and alignment, help to ensure that all students have solid access to the rigorous coursework and/or assessments required to achieve a designation of "prepared." The second goal is to successfully align all instruction with state standards, something the vertical teams work to do at every monthly meeting.

### **Implementation and Monitoring:**

Since the implementation of the vertical teams, monitoring of this practice has taken two forms: 1) The teams themselves are responsible for producing documentation of the work that takes place during team time. This monitoring includes documents that encapsulate key standards, shared vocabulary, and shared lessons/assessments. 2) Student assessment results are used to monitor effectiveness of the team's curricular alignment.

While student assessment results are monitored consistently by the teams themselves, the larger of these assessments, such as CAASPP testing and College Board testing, is also monitored by the school's principal, the School Site Council (comprised of staff, students, and parents), and by the Board of Directors (comprised of parents), all of whom oversee *Redwood Academy's* progress towards its various goals. Specifically, vertical teams are a critical action by which *Redwood Academy* seeks to achieve two of its LCAP goals, both of which have measurable outcomes related to CDE Dashboard academic indicators. For the first goal, the CCI is used as a measure, and for the second goal, the CAASPP testing measures are used.

In all, much of the effectiveness of *Redwood Academy's* vertical teaming practice is monitored by way of the current state accountability system as well as in the documentation produced by the teams themselves.

### **Results and Outcomes:**

In the years since *Redwood Academy* implemented vertical teaming, student CAASPP results in both English literacy and mathematics have increased over time. In the year 2014-15, the initial CAASPP testing year, *Redwood Academy* had 77% of students who met or exceeded the standard in English and 59% of students in math. In 15-16, that grew to 85% and 65% respectively, and for the last two years, in 17-18 and 18-19, those numbers rose to 89% and 77% respectively. Additionally, the number of *Redwood Academy* graduates who have successfully qualified as college "prepared" according to the Dashboard's CCI has also risen steadily, with 68% qualifying in 2015, to 91% in 2016, and 100% in 2017. State accountability measures suggest that students are better accessing the high levels of learning expected both by the state and by *Redwood Academy's* instructional design.

Aside from state accountability measures, our vertical team members also look at College Board testing data such as the PSAT results (which all sophomores and juniors at *Redwood Academy* take) and AP Exam results to determine what adjustments may need to be made to instruction. AP Exam pass rates (students scoring a 3 or higher) have not been as rich a data source due to the fact that not every student who enrolls in an AP courses takes the AP

Exam; however, pass rates have risen from 50% in 2015 to 84% in 2018. Meanwhile, the percentage of students that are determined by the College Board to show AP Potential in one or more AP Subject based on their PSAT results has stayed fairly consistent with 43% in 2015 and again 43% in 2018. While the College Board data is not as consistent in its year to year growth, it does provide feedback to the vertical teams about student areas of strength and weakness that is then used to inform instructional design.

Finally, the results of vertical teaming can also be seen in the numbers of students attaining passing grades in their classes, indicating that they are meeting state standards as they are assessed on them in the classroom by their teachers. This is perhaps the most important measure, as these measures are the most frequent. The number of students at *Redwood Academy* on Academic Probation (earning less than a 2.0) has steadily declined from 24% at the end of 2014-2015 to 13% at the end of 2017-18.

In sum, *Redwood Academy* teachers, through vertical teaming, have successfully managed to align their instruction and assessment in order to continually improve student outcomes as determined by multiple measures.



