Model Practice: Whitney High School’s Support Systems for Accelerated Learners

Description of the Model

Gretchen Whitney High School is a comprehensive high school for accelerated learners in grades 7-12. Our student population is comprised of the top 10% of our district’s high-achieving, gifted learners from every elementary and middle school across the ABC Unified School District. By its very nature, our 7th-12th grade continuum makes our model unique, and so does our unparalleled system of supports that meets the academic and socioemotional needs of our students while simultaneously teaching them to approach their education purposefully.

This system of supports begins with each student’s first meeting with his or her counselor to develop an in-depth, personalized, six-year learning plan that incorporates the student’s personal interests, goals, and appropriate levels of academic rigor. The revision and further development of this plan continues throughout each student’s six years at Whitney, and at each new grade level he or she is provided different learning activities that focus on academics, wellness, and college and career readiness. Ultimately, this personalized learning plan helps us ensure that every Whitney student will graduate college and career ready and maximize his or her potential.

During 7th and 8th grades, we encourage our students to explore and discover; however, we also recognize the immense pressures that come from attending an academically accelerated school. Therefore, we have intentionally created and implemented systems of support for our new students’ transition to Whitney, and our Big Buddy Program was designed for this very purpose. The Big Buddy Program was established in conjunction with Whitney High School’s National Honor Society and our wellness team. This vital program matches each new middle and high school student with a trained, upperclassman mentor and is structured around monthly meetings during an extended lunch. This is when their mentor buddies guide our new middle and high school students through discussions related to stress, time management, and building healthy relationships.

Another facet of our system of supports for 7th and 8th graders is our counselors’ collaboration with individual students to discuss high school course offerings, such as world languages and common core mathematics classes that can be taken in middle school, align with California’s College and Career Readiness Standards, and are modeled after the UC/CSU a-g requirements. Our counseling team also introduces our middle school students and their parents to Naviance, a web-based college and career readiness tool.

Because all of our students have the specialized needs of those seeking postsecondary education at highly selective public and private universities, we have developed additional support services to assist each high school student with meeting his or her college and career goals. The counseling team guides 9th grade students through a Strengths Explorer Assessment and a subsequent reflection activity to help them identify careers that match their personal qualities and the soft skills they possess. Our counselors then work with students in 10th grade to review their a-g progress and complete a Career Cluster Finder Assessment that matches their academic and personal interests to careers. The counseling team actively engages 11th grade students in the college application process; throughout their junior year they are asked to discuss and complete various assignments, such as researching a wide
variety of colleges, writing personal statements, exploring majors, and creating lists of their extracurricular activities. They are also required to attend our College Series lunchtime presentations on various aspects of the college application process. In addition, they work with our counselors to further narrow their career search and college major options through the Career Interest Profiler assessment. All of this ensures that our 11th graders are fully prepared for the college application process. We then continue our support for 12th grade students as they take the final steps toward postsecondary education. The counseling team read and edit students’ college applications, assist them with financial aid applications, write letters of recommendation, and provide myriad activities that help our students make the transition to postsecondary education. In addition, to further promote all students’ involvement in appropriate guidance and support activities, Whitney has extended lunch to 40 minutes. This provides students more time to participate in mentoring and advisement activities with their teachers, guidance and wellness presentations, tutorials, and college workshops.

Our 9th-12th grade students continue to use Naviance extensively to facilitate their conversations with counselors, teachers, and families about their college and career readiness. Students and parents are provided additional Naviance training during classroom presentations and workshops to foster their understanding of this tool and to build their capacity in using it. Our counselors utilize Naviance to gather information regarding students’ college and career interests and then meet one-on-one to discuss options for courses that are aligned with their interests and passions. In addition to Naviance, Whitney High School offers opportunities to explore college and career options through college visits; job shadowing; participation in the ABC Unified School District College Fair; and various college and career presentations. Furthermore, our counseling team partners with local businesses such as St. Mary’s Medical Center, Kaiser Permanente, SAHARA (a helpline agency), and Boeing; the latter provides five or six internships annually to our rising, engineering-oriented seniors.

During their final two years at Whitney High School, the focus of our juniors and seniors becomes the preparation and completion of their college applications. Programs such as the Summer Senior Workshop have been implemented to support all students in achieving this goal. During this program, students engage in workshops led by counselors and admissions professionals. Our upperclassmen are also invited to share their personal statements with English department faculty and subsequently receive valuable feedback. Furthermore, students have the opportunity to take part in a full-day college visit to three universities.

It is important to note that our Support Systems for Accelerated Learners are identified within our School Plan for Student Achievement and directly aligned to the ABC Unified School District’s LCAP priorities and the Eight State Priorities—specifically, Implementation of State Standards, Course Access, Student Achievement, Other Student Outcomes, Student Engagement, and Parent Involvement. Furthermore, Whitney High School’s system of supports ensures the success of our students in state standards-aligned curriculum, Career Technical Education (CTE) pathways, and AP coursework.

Our staff also promote students’ academic success by providing supports for their socioemotional and academic needs through a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework and through collaboration between administrators, counselors, teachers, wellness coordinators, counseling interns, and families. Our MTSS system is highly effective because it begins with universal monitoring of students’ progress, attendance, behavior, and other
wellness indicators, and it quickly evolves into personalized supports that match their individual needs.

**Implementation & Monitoring of the Model**

To ensure our students remain a-g compliant and admissible to highly selective colleges, Whitney High School offers a challenging, personalized, and rigorous curriculum. During spring registration, our counselors evaluate students’ course requests to gauge their interests and help us determine course offerings for the next school year. Students meet one-on-one with their assigned counselors to design the best possible, progressively rigorous academic program that is aligned to their educational goals. Furthermore, to ensure we provide a rigorous, academic program that also meets California’s career readiness requirements, Whitney has established multi-year Career Technical Education pathways in digital/media arts, game design, and computer science/artificial intelligence. These pathways were specifically created for students who are seeking postsecondary education and careers in multimedia production, the computer gaming industry, and high tech fields with an emphasis on coding. Students who express interest in these fields work with our counselors to identify appropriate career pathways.

To educate and engage all stakeholders, particularly our parents, in the educational process, we have forged partnerships with our five parent cultural associations, PTSA, and the Whitney High School Foundation for Educational Excellence. Parents are invited to attend workshops and meetings, and they are encouraged to provide feedback regarding our programs and processes. To communicate our efforts, we support our families with weekly newsletters that provide detailed information regarding upcoming college/career events, internship opportunities, college summer program offerings, and available scholarships. Our team also invites our parents and stakeholders to attend monthly “Coffee with the Counselors” events and evening presentations that are topic and grade-level specific. Furthermore, to understand the effectiveness of our stakeholder engagement, the Whitney team monitors the percentage of email open rates and tracks event participation through the use of Google Forms and sign-in sheets. Parents’ and other stakeholders’ opinions and input have been gathered and tracked through a variety of site-developed surveys, as well as the California Healthy Kids Surveys.

To further support our model practice and better meet students’ ever-changing needs, we also provide professional learning opportunities for our teachers, administrators, and school support staff. Some of the training topics we have offered include the implementation of technology into our practices, cultural proficiency, best practices for supporting students from specific sub-groups (i.e. Autism, LGBTQ, GATE, etc.), and specialized information sessions regarding the college application process and available supports. The effectiveness of these professional development opportunities has been evaluated through formal observation and the use of surveys created with Google Forms.

Finally, we monitor the effectiveness of our model through the analysis of multiple other forms of qualitative and quantitative data, such as standardized state test scores, district benchmark exam scores, a-g completion rates, course grades, counseling and wellness teams’ documentation, attendance and behavior records, SAT and ACT scores, AP exam scores, and much more.
Results of the Model and Pupil Outcomes

Our efforts on behalf of the accelerated learners at Whitney High School have met with spectacular results, but this success has not been the product of guesswork. Instead, our ongoing analysis of relevant hard and soft data, drawn from multiple sources, informs our decision-making and ensures that we continue to provide students with optimal academic and socioemotional supports that meet their changing needs.

The quantitative and qualitative data presented below illustrates some of the successes promoted by our system of supports for accelerated learners. There have been no real surprises in the resulting student outcomes because the nature of our program naturally requires close, continual monitoring of our students.

- In 2018 Whitney was named the #1 high school in California and was ranked the #12 STEM school in the nation by *US News and World Report*.
- Whitney’s attendance rate has averaged 98.2% over the past three years.
- We have had no expulsions and only 6 suspensions over the past three years.
- Nearly two-thirds of all Whitney High School students in grades 9-12 are enrolled in AP coursework, and they take more than 800 AP exams each year.
- Over the past three years, the percentage of Whitney AP students with scores of 3+ has averaged 94.3%.
- The percentages of “D” and “F” grades continue to be very low in all disciplines and subjects. For example, in 2017-18 the average combined semester “D” and “F” percentages by core subject were as follows: English 1.5%, Mathematics 5.1%, Science 1.7%, and Social Science 2.3%.
- The 2017-18 Early Assessment Program results indicated that 99% of all Whitney 11th graders were college ready or conditionally ready in English and 95% were identified as college ready or conditionally ready in mathematics.
- Whitney High School Seniors have averaged a total SAT score of 1,374 since the 1600-point scale was reintroduced in 2016-17. This is 299 points higher than the national average during that same period!
- Our graduates’ a-g completion rate averages 97.26% over the past three years.
- Whitney’s cohort graduation rate has been 100% for the past three years.
- 100% of the Class of 2018 applied to a college or university, and those 163 students reported more than 700 acceptances to 176 different colleges and universities, including Ivy League acceptances at Cornell, Harvard, University of Pennsylvania and Yale.
- The Class of 2018 also earned more than 250 acceptances to top-ranked national universities (according to the *US News and World Report* rankings).