

# Clovis East High School

Clovis, California



## A PASTORAL SETTING

Surrounded by sports facilities and the fields, greenhouse, barns and classrooms of its own agricultural center, Clovis East High School is set on a spacious modern campus adjacent to the middle school from which come most of its students. It is located on the eastern side of Clovis, where recently built housing occupies what was farm land.



*The campus resembles a college campus.*

Clovis itself is situated midway between Los Angeles and San Francisco, bordering Fresno, in the agriculturally rich San Joaquin Valley. Lying at the foot of the Sierra Nevada Mountain Range, which includes Yosemite, Kings Canyon, and Sequoia National Parks, Clovis has been known as the "Gateway to the Sierras" since its incorporation in 1912.

In an area where there historically been a split between the academic achievements of the children of land and business owners and those of migrants who worked the land, Clovis East has set out to provide all its students, including its many English learners, with a universally high-quality education. Through attentive leadership, a well-developed organizational structure, and clear values, Clovis East High School provides its students with the many resources that a large school can marshal in a manner that students experience as personally attentive, supportive, and respectful.

### Student Demographics

Clovis East High School, Clovis CA

[www.cusd.com](http://www.cusd.com)

2,640 students, 9 – 12

African American	4%
Hispanic	27%
White	42%
Asian	26%
Native American	1%
Students eligible for free/reduced price meals	40%
Students with Limited English Proficiency	16%
Special Education Students	6%
Average Teacher Turnover rate, past 5 years	4%
Student/Teacher Ratio	27:1

## CORE BELIEFS

“What separates us from other schools,” says

Clovis East High School principal Steve Martinez, “are our core beliefs.” These beliefs guide decisions at every point. For example, during a review of student work and results on assessments to ensure that they were teaching to the state standards rather than to their interests, members of the mathematics department realized that a number of students were taking lower division geometry in the 11th grade.

These students were arriving at Clovis requiring math remediation, so from one perspective the sequence that led to their taking lower level coursework was logical. From another perspective, however, it limited their access to the math they would require for higher education and technical careers. A discussion of values ensued. “How can you put kids in the lower division geometry class if we truly believe all kids can learn?” asked a teacher.

This led the math department to examine long-held assumptions it had about how the math program should be structured, and to change its structure. Students who would have been relegated to lower division geometry in the 11th grade now receive a double math period so that they can cover the ground they need to increase their career and learning options.

This and similar discussions in other departments, based on the belief that all students can learn and achieve state standards, are moving Clovis East toward using mastery learning strategies, with re-teaching and re-testing.

The magic of Clovis East High School is that these core beliefs are the basis of decisions about instructional programming, staffing, organizational structure, and resource allocation, even when they require difficult conversations that explore strongly held assumptions or ingrained practices. The core beliefs guide the school’s expected learning results, which address body, mind, and spirit, by maximizing student achievement, physical and mental wellness, and student involvement and inclusion.

### ***Clovis East Core Beliefs***

- We believe in high standards and expectations.
- We believe in putting our students first.
- We believe in providing a quality education for all students.
- We believe education revolves around teamwork and trust.
- We believe in a fair break for every kid.
- We believe that whatever we do should be done first class.
- We believe in treating our students with respect.
- We believe all decisions must always be based on what is best for students.

## **LEARNING COMMUNITIES AND DATA USE**

Underlying the commitment to do whatever it takes to enable all students to achieve state standards are departmental teacher learning communities.

With the leadership and support of the administration, departments regularly examine data from state and district benchmark and departmental assessments to determine how effectively they are teaching. “We came to realize,” said one teacher, “that it didn’t matter what students came with or without. We could not change who the students were, so we stopped complaining and focused on the one thing we could control, which was what students could learn.”

Gradually a culture of trust and mutual sharing has been built. Departmental meetings have agendas and teachers come prepared. They use data, made easily accessible and usable via commercial software, to learn what students are and are not learning, and to change practices as a result.

Teachers are expected to analyze data, identify where students are not performing well, hypothesize multiple reasons why this might be, and finally look for answers. If there is not deep alignment between instruction and outcomes, that becomes the focus for a department improvement goal. During a science learning community meeting, for instance, a teacher identified an item that her students missed on the quiz, then on the test, and again on the final. “This is a flashing light to me,” she said, “I have asked myself, ‘What can I do—what can we as a group do—to move more kids to master this content?’ My class is doing poorly on this standard. If all classes are doing poorly, then maybe we should talk about providing a short-term intervention on just that.”



*Teacher learning communities explore issues of practice.*

The shift to these kinds of conversation was enabled by the use of common assessments within departments. And such discussions have led to experiments as part of the move to mastery learning. There have been conversations, for example, on whether the current grading system promotes the belief that all students can learn and achieve the standards, which have also led teachers to experiments such as eliminating Ds and giving students opportunities to demonstrate additional learning. Some teachers now offer after-school study classes for those who wish to re-take assessments; others take time to review benchmark assessments during class.

If it becomes evident that many students have not learned something, teachers analyze incorrect answer choices to identify misunderstandings, review test items to ensure that the test is testing student knowledge accurately, and revisit instructional practices and materials to ensure that students are engaged and learning. They may also ask students for their perspectives on why they are not learning. The school administration gives departments a great deal of latitude in what they try, providing they adhere to the school’s core beliefs.

Learning community discussions are also anchored in concrete departmental goals. The English department established both departmental and grade-level SMART (i.e., specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and timely) goals for the 2007-2008 school year, and reviewed the progress toward these goals throughout the school year. Every grade-level meeting started and ended with how students could achieve the measurable goal and how the changes in instruction that resulted from the learning community discussion would enable this to occur. The statewide assessment results reinforced this core belief. When reported in August of 2008, English scores in the 9th

grade rose from 55% to 62% proficient and above, while 10th grade ELA scores grew 9% in a single year. This success provides teachers with the hard data needed to sustain the effort they put in.

The math department's goals for 2008-2009 are to focus on instruction and assessment results, to use re-teaching strategies to help all students reach mastery, and to increase the number of students achieving at the proficient and advanced levels on state assessments from 23% to 46%. More detailed goals are also set for each math department course.

Trust-building and sharing within departments have in turn led to increased cross-departmental collaboration.

## STUDENT PERSPECTIVES

Despite the school's size, students report that they feel individually cared for. Said one, "We have talented and passionate teachers who want to succeed and strive to help you learn. It is their passion as much as yours." "Our teachers are very encouraging. We work our butts off, but it is worth it," said another. Students also praised the number of electives available to them.

Clovis East has an eight period block schedule, which offers a wide range of choices, even though it means that teachers have a heavier class load than most in surrounding districts. Students are also required to amass more elective credits to graduate than their peers in other schools. In exchange, students who require intensive intervention in an extra period are able to receive this support within the school day as well as have the opportunity to take an elective course of their choice. This enables students who are reading several years below grade level to benefit from programs such as Corrective Reading and to receive the specialized and intensive instruction required to gain the reading skills necessary to be successful in high school. Most high schools do not have the ability or opportunity to provide these to their students. Additionally, students have access to many high-quality electives. "We have so many opportunities and so many choices. Our schedule is flexible and we are excited to come to school," another student explained.



*A student chorus practices.*

Electives also provide options for students to incorporate their culture into their education. The school has, for example, begun offering a course in Hmong dancing, primarily for students in its sizeable Hmong population. Hmong students in this course tap the knowledge of their parents and other elders in the Hmong community to inform the dances they design and learn with the guidance of a dance instructor. An Asian cultural night enables Hmong

students, who are often expected by their families to look after younger family members after school and have difficulty participating routinely in after-school activities, to bring their parents, relatives, and younger family members to the school to demonstrate their skills and knowledge.

Administrators and staff seek to make Clovis East a school that students want to be part of. They do this in countless ways and it shows. Students are engaged, taking leadership in making the school effective and assuming responsibility for their own learning.

Students also play a significant part in maintaining the school culture. Students who transfer into the school are each assigned two veteran students to welcome them to the school and introduce its rules and expectations. “There has never been disrespect here. From the beginning you enter a culture where there is respect,” said a student who had transferred into Clovis East.

School counselors help students with the choices presented to them and maintaining the balance between body, mind, and spirit. Located in a single counseling department, counselors are assigned individuals students over the course of their time at Clovis East, but work as a team to ensure that all students have access to the same information. They use technology to maintain accurate and up-to-date records on students, and also use the school website to make guidance information widely available to students and their parents.

## HIGH EXPECTATIONS, HIGH LEVELS OF SUPPORT

Closely allied to the school’s core beliefs are high expectations and correspondingly high levels of support for all students—all of whom are expected to apply themselves as learners. “I’ve seen our students change over the last eight years. They went from ‘What are you going to give me?’ to ‘What can I get?’ and it’s really cool to see that change,” said the head of the school’s agriculture department. He attributed it to working directly with students on study skills and note-taking, which led to increased questions in class as students sought to ensure they understood what they were learning.

The principal takes time to have conversations with students about the reasoning behind decisions that affect them as a body, and students in turn are expected to play their part in the learning community. They are encouraged to take pride in their school. An enforced dress code,



*The agricultural program includes ovines.*

for example, results in a student body that is not only well-dressed but also respectful and disciplined. Principal Steve Martinez explains that students are expected to excel in all they do. That they graduate and go on to post-secondary education is accepted by students as integral to the school culture.

Targeted interventions make these expectations possible for groups of students who might otherwise not succeed. In order to ensure that students with beginning and intermediate English language proficiency have access to the same core content as those proficient in English, the school has instituted a series of what it calls English Learner (EL) pathway courses in core subject areas. These EL pathway courses cover the same college preparatory curriculum as native English speakers receive with additional support provided. Courses are taught by teachers credentialed in each subject area, many of whom also teach Advanced Placement courses. Primary language support, supplementary materials, specialized instructional strategies, and reduced student to adult ratios support the acquisition of the English Language while students master the content area concepts. The result are English Learners who feel a part of the school culture and community from the first day they step foot on campus. They may receive more support, but they take the very same classes as their native speaking peers and have many of the same instructors.

In another targeted intervention, students whom their teachers judge are at risk of not passing the California High School Exit Exam may participate in a “boot camp” seminar. Ten one-and-a-half hour boot camp sessions are offered during the school day on a pull-out basis. There are about 12 students in each seminar, which is taught by an experienced teacher with assistance from cross-age peer tutors. The school hires substitutes to free staff for these seminars. The result of this combination of support and expectations is that Clovis East has had an average graduation rate of 95% for the past five years.

Students are also expected to succeed beyond core academics. Electives and extra-curricular activities are part of the promise to attend to body and spirit as well as mind. School sports are well-supported and closely followed by the community, and the school has an excellent record. The high school chorus has sung in Carnegie Hall, and the fine and performing arts programs have not been subject to cuts during trying economic times because they are considered so important to student life and learning. The forensics and debate team is regarded as one of the top ten in the nation. A member of last year’s graduating class was national president of Future Farmers of America.

Teachers from other schools ask teachers at Clovis East, “How do you get those kids to eye that desire to drive and succeed?” says the agriculture department head. He believes that success breeds success, and students believe that they can achieve at such a high standard because others before them have done so. He adds, “No one can even imagine the amount of hours that the staff and those kids put in to compete at that level.” As part of the school culture, students are taught to be gracious winners and losers.

### ***Mission Statement***

*The mission of Clovis East High School is to graduate students who possess the background knowledge, academic skills, and technological expertise that they will need to become life-long learners, productive workers, and civic-minded community members. Clovis East also believes that participation in school activities builds stronger relationships, improves self-esteem, and develops the skill students need to prepare themselves to meet the future challenges in college and the workforce.*

## LEADERSHIP

Leadership at Clovis East is shared, devolved as far as possible, and all are encouraged to lead as long as their efforts are aligned with the school's mission and beliefs. "There's power in creating small leadership positions; it makes my job easier," says one of the school's learning directors. Teachers and department heads are given a great deal of authority to make decisions and experiment with ways to improve student learning.

This extends, for example, to a teacher's offer of voluntary after-school sessions for students to re-learn material on which they tested poorly; the sessions, for which the administration found funding, is open both to her own students and those of other teachers. Departments determine their own professional development needs and receive the funds to meet these needs and to experiment with other models, such as additional tutoring classes.

In critical ways, students are part of the leadership structure. They are taught how to take responsibility for their own learning and in turn have many leadership opportunities, most of them as part of elective courses. Advanced students may serve as academic tutors in lower level courses. Some assist sports coaches, both at Clovis East and in its feeder schools in the district, conveying to elementary students the cultural values they will experience when they arrive at the high school. Other students tutor reading in the district's elementary schools.

Within Clovis East, leadership courses enable students to build cultural values through discussions and creation of banners to which other students subscribe and sign. Examples of banners currently displayed in the school's multipurpose hall and covered with students' signatures read, "I promise to remember that the smallest gestures can have a positive influence on others," "I promise never to forget that every action of racial prejudice is harmful to me as well as to others," and "I believe meeting someone different from ourselves can have a rich impact on our lives and promise to positively impact others with my life."



*Principal Steve Martinez*

The department heads work under the supervision of four learning directors, whose role is to help departments and department heads change their instruction to improve student outcomes. "The state determines what will be taught and the district determines what will be used to teach it (curriculum). It is up to the teachers to determine how to teach it," said a learning director. Learning directors provide necessary resources, ensuring that staff members have the needed conversations, and coach department heads as they work with teachers to help them learn collectively and improve their practice.

The learning director responsible for special education also supervises the student responsibility center. All student behavioral matters are dealt with by this center's staff, with the result that school rules are consistently

applied, to the approval of both staff and students. (Teachers receive information on discipline referrals they have made within 24 hours.) As a result, behavioral problems have diminished, freeing teachers and students to turn their full attention to teaching and learning. It has also meant that the counselors in the guidance department are solely advocates for the students assigned to them.

Principal Steve Martinez, with the support of an assistant principal who deals with many management tasks, sees his role as ensuring that improvement efforts are aligned, finding and assigning resources to support his staff, and minimizing organizational hindrances to teaching and learning. “We’ve done really well at pointing the arrows [of initiatives, programs, and departments] in the same direction,” he says.

He has regular conversations with his learning directors about when and how to support the school’s ongoing changes and improvement efforts. He also sees his role as asking questions about proposals and ideas brought to him to ensure that they are well thought out and take into account the needs and requirements of the whole school. “Leadership,” says the principal, “likes to get answers to questions from teachers rather than have the principal enunciate them.”

## **ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE**

The organizational structure and culture of the school are framed by a district structure that communicates clear values, provides high levels of support for its schools, has very high standards, and permits a great deal of decision-making freedom for its principals, along with a high degree of accountability. One outcome is that Clovis East is the third high school in the district to achieve Blue Ribbon status. Others are Buchanan and Clovis High Schools.

District leadership has developed such trust in the community that the community in turn has been willing to provide it with the funding to make Clovis East campus one in which community, students, and staff can take pride.

District leaders model attention to core beliefs. Through its hiring practices, for example, the district communicates that it values every one of its professional staff. New hires go through five levels of interviews. Within the school, they are initially interviewed by department heads, then by learning directors, and finally by the principal. They are then interviewed by the relevant area assistant superintendent, and ultimately by the district superintendent. At each stage those involved in the earlier interviews accompany the interviewee to communicate their support for that person as a long-term asset to the district. School staff members at each level of this chain are careful whom they choose so that they can defend their choice to their superiors.

The strong department structure at Clovis East itself, the strong departmental structure, with scheduled department meetings every Wednesday, provides opportunities for continuous skills and leadership development. Learning directors are selected with a view to grooming them to become principals or assistant principals in the district. In this way, the school and district have designed a way to communicate the levels of support, the concern for solid core beliefs in a changing environment, and strategies for leadership development that will enable Clovis East to sustain its commitment to serving the whole student and high levels of achievement for the long term.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- How does the school involve parents in the life of the school? How does the school communicate student progress or lack of it to the parents? Are there programs to involve the parents of children in special populations such as Special Education and ELLs?
- Has the school tracked any of the students who participated in the “boot camp” to see how they have fared academically if they went on to higher education?
- What criteria do the departments use in determining their own professional development needs—observations, evaluations, peer reviews, student test scores?

<b>Clovis East High School Percent of Students Passing CAHSEE 2003- 2004 to 2007-2008 10th grade English Language Arts</b>					
	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
All students	86	81	85	83	87
African American	83	67	88	50	89
Asian	78	73	78	79	77
Hispanic/Latino	84	77	81	76	87
White (not Hispanic)	90	87	90	92	92
Economically disadvantaged	75	70	77	74	79
Students with disabilities	53	36	31	37	45
English learners	69	59	64	59	62
California average					79
<b>Percent of Students Passing CAHSEE 10th grade Mathematics</b>					
	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
All students	85	81	81	86	87
African American	67	63	67	53	78
Asian	89	82	83	87	87
Hispanic/Latino	78	74	74	79	85
White (not Hispanic)	90	86	86	90	90
Economically disadvantaged	80	72	73	80	80
Students with disabilities	48	46	35	49	38
English learners	76	73	67	73	73
California average	74	74	76	76	78

### High School Graduation Rate, 2004 – 2008

2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
95%	96%	93%	94%	95%