

Rebuilding a Rural Texas High School

Mustang High School is a rural 3A high school that was lead for five years by Joseph Rodriguez. Mr. Rodriguez began his career in education more than 24 years ago as a teacher in a very large, urban school district in west Texas. He began as a high school chemistry teacher in an ethnically diverse high school and was advised by an administrator in the district that he should move into school administration. The administrator told Rodriguez that “you have more control of your students . . .they respond to you and you are handling some of the worst kids on the campus—that I get in my office every day—really well. . . .” That led him to earn his Master’s degree in educational administration and obtain his certification for school administration. Looking back on his decision, he says, “I wanted to make a bigger difference”.

Prior to his current position as the high school principal at a rural 3A high school, in south-central Texas, and after several years in other administrative positions—high school assistant principal and principal—Mr. Rodriguez found himself appointed as the high school principal for Mustang High School (MHS), in the Mustang Independent School District (MISD). MISD is a rural 3A school district with about 2000 students, located 25 miles south of one of the largest cities in Texas. The school district, like most small, rural school districts in Texas, is the heart of the community it serves. The community actively supports the school, and on Friday nights, in the fall, the whole community turns out to cheer for their Mustang varsity football team. While MHS has been a part of the community for more than century, the current high school building was constructed in the late 1990’s.

During Mr. Rodriguez’ tenure as principal, Mustang High School housed about 520 students, with more than 80% of the students being Hispanic, 19% of the students Anglo, and about 1% African-American. More than 80% of the students qualified for the federal free and reduced price lunch program. There were 38 teachers at MHS: 15 Hispanic and 23 Anglo. The support staff numbered 11, and there were two school administrators.

Mr. Rodriguez describes himself as practicing a “laid back” leadership style. He seeks a lot of input from his teachers and allows them to have a voice in the decision-making process at the school. There were numerous teacher-led committees at MHS, by design, but he is quick to add that when it comes to accepting accountability for the decisions made, Rodriguez will accept full responsibility for any decisions made in conjunction with the committees, “When we have decisions to make, we make them by committee and I always stand by my teachers, in public.” He continues, “In private, if they are wrong, I’m going to let them know what they did wrong and then I will help them to learn from their mistakes. . . .and we will work to correct.” A large part of his leadership style involves having an “open door” policy and he is easily approachable for students, faculty and staff, parents, and community.

Mr. Rodriguez described his graduate studies as a “very thorough” preparation for his role as a school leader. He worked as an administrative “intern” in a suburban school district in

far west Texas and that experience was “very helpful. I got to see the whole gamut of junior high school through senior high school....I had really good training.” Rodriguez credits his graduate school coursework and administrative intern experience as fully preparing him to take over as principal of a “low-performing” high school, and that was the status held by MHS—according to the Texas accountability ratings—for the school year previous to Rodriguez assuming his duties as MHS principal.

When asked how the job description for high school principal at MHS described the actual duties of the principal at MHS, he laughed as he quickly replied,

Wow! [Laughing] Not even close! The job description as the leader of instruction and curriculum is a misnomer. You wear many hats and you're a counselor and a teacher, and you are a conciliator and a moderator and there is all kinds of custodial work...you name it. The job description is not even close to the work that we [as principals] do, the hours that we put in.

Rodriguez went on to describe a “typical” work-week as at least 50 hours, and usually more. He makes every attempt to visit classrooms and deal with a lot of “fires.” Among the activities he may have to manage in a “typical” work-week are: handling student discipline issues, dealing with angry parents, counseling teaches, and responding to community concerns. Rodriguez ends his description of the typical work-week with, “there is no typical work-week.”

When Mr. Rodriguez arrived as the new principal for Mustang High School, he had not been briefed on many of the problems he subsequently discovered. The school had not met the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act standards for Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) for the previous three years. The school was rated as “Academically Unacceptable” by the Texas Education Agency (TEA). He found that he had many “toxic” teachers on his staff.

One of his first actions, upon assuming leadership of MHS was to implement a new class schedule that included a “cluster” period. During the cluster period the teachers would meet to discuss problem areas in curriculum and instruction, especially for “core” classes: math, science, English, and social studies. Changes were made, instruction was improved, and mastery checks of student progress were developed and implemented. Rodriguez began reviewing the teachers’ instruction and confirming the TEKS (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills) that they were covering in class to ensure that what was to be tested was being taught in class. The teachers began to collect large amounts of data on their students’ progress and identifying the areas in which students needed assistance. Rodriguez actively monitored and participated in all of these efforts. The results of their year-long efforts were an “Academically Acceptable” rating from TEA and being found to have met the “Adequate Yearly Progress” standards under NCLB.

At the same time he had found himself dealing with “low performing school” issues, Rodriguez also discovered that he had too many “toxic” teachers on staff. In order to get the campus headed in the right direction, he decided that there needed to be personnel changes made. He quickly identified the teachers who were impeding the academic progress of the school and,

with his superintendent's full support, Mr. Rodriguez used various strategies that included: targeted professional development, coaching and counseling teachers himself, and strategic transfers of personnel to reconfigure his faculty. As he began his second year as principal, he had replaced 14 teachers and had the faculty he was confident could carry the school to academic success.

After moving the school to be "academically acceptable" under both TEA and NCLB standards, Mr. Rodriguez moved to improve the academic standards and raise academic expectations at Mustang High School. He focused on the academic standards of the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) mandated by the State of Texas.

Academically, we just focused on the standards. We focused on the student expectations. We did not deviate, we used that cluster period to visit and do the mini assessments, and at the end of the semester we would do a two hour final exam that covered the student expectations. We would take that data, at the end of December, and use that to bring in students. We had the flex schedule and that was another thing that we used. So we had those flex days. The semester exams that we gave, we used that data to exempt students from those flex days or bring students in for those flex days. And we had two sets of five and five [flex days]. Five right before testing and five at the end of year for the kids going into summer school. So they had an extra week, basically, of summer school.

Mr. Rodriguez believes that aspiring principals and those practicing principals who are seeking was to improve their school and student performance should concentrate first on teachers. He elaborated on his primary belief:

You have to start with the teachers. You have to have the right kind of people on board. You know, people who are going to build relationships with the students, people who care about the students, people that feel education is a calling. You have to start with the people, they have to understand that this is not a business, it's a calling. You know it's not a paycheck, you're going to help children be the best that they can be. So, you have to have those kinds of people on board. If you don't have that, it's very toxic to the system. It takes away from the learning, it's a war, it's a battle every day with students, you're fighting teachers and it wears you out. So, you got to make the right personnel choices and pull the trigger, right away, if you make a bad choice. Don't bring them back for another year. There's some that you know right away, if they're probationary, they didn't cut it, they're not going to cut it, get rid of them. There are some that have potential, they just need another year of seasoning, another year of help and they'll be fine. You know, you keep those for another year. If the second year gets worse, boom, you get rid of them, you know. But, don't keep going after it. Don't keep hoping that people are going to change, when there is no chance.

When Rodriguez was asked what he thinks the community expects of him, he said:

Well, honestly, I think what the community wants is for me to make sure that the students, their children, have the proper education to graduate from high school and have some sort of post-secondary success. I am not sure if they care about their [students'] EOCs, but I know my Board does. And the Board is part of the community and it does have an integral part in all of the decision making that I do because, if they [students] don't pass those tests, they don't graduate. But, essentially what I think is the community as a whole wants to be able to trust us to make the right decisions for their children.

Rodriguez has some pretty big plans for school improvement as he moves forward as the principal at his new school. He wants to move his new school into Texas' "Early College High School" program. This program requires accepted high schools to partner with a college or university and change their high school program to offer its students the opportunity to earn college credits, and in some cases an Associate's degree or trade certification, during their high school years. If Rodriguez's high school is accepted into the Early College High School Program, the school will be required to substantially raise academic standards and expectations for both students and teachers. Additional courses will have to be offered, and the infrastructure—personnel and hardware—put into place to facilitate the changes to curriculum and staff required to affect the program. The challenges for Rodriguez are numerous, but he believes the students and staff are ready. He firmly believes "...if they [students] can see somebody else succeed, they will think, 'that guy's no better than me, I can do that.'"

For Mr. Rodriguez, the biggest reward that comes from being a high school principal is the impact that he can have on his students' lives. He enjoys "talking to them, visiting with them, giving them hope." He values those relationships and believes that is the greatest reward he can receive as a high school principal.

For Mr. Rodriguez, everything is about the students.