

# DOINGWHATWORKS



Audio

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

## Setting High Standards

Waterford High School, California • May 2008

Topic: Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools

Practice: Focus on Instruction

### Highlights

- Waterford High School breaks up its tests by standard; students must get 80% or above on each standard, but may keep trying until they do.
- When retaking a test, students receive only half of the points above 80; a 90 on a retaken test results in an adjusted 85, regardless of the initial test score.
- This approach brought with it an increase in API\* from 475 to 762, and Waterford now has the highest college attendance rate of any public school in the county.

### About the Site

**Waterford High School**

**Waterford, CA**

### Demographics

55% White

40% Hispanic

1% Asian

1% Black

46% Free or Reduced-Price Lunch

13% English Language Learners

9% Special Education

Waterford High School had several components to its successful turnaround process:

- Collaborative agreement on the school’s mission statement, which includes the school’s vision, beliefs, and expected student outcomes
- Collaborative decision-making processes as part of creating new instructional norms for the school
- Use of a data-driven approach and collaboration among teachers in planning instruction

## Full Transcript

My name is William Broderick-Villa. I have been teaching at Waterford High School for seven years, since the high school opened. There are two teachers at our school that teach geometry, I and one other geometry teacher.

One thing we do that’s different than the way grading was done when I was in school—when I was in high school, if I got 90% on this test and 90% on that test and 90% on the other test and 95% on the other test, I knew that test seven, I had room; I could fudge a little. I didn’t have to work as hard. I could even get away with a 60% and still pull off an A in the class or a B or whatever. We don’t allow that. We break up our tests by standard and a student has to get 80% or above on every standard. So a student, let’s say, gets above an 80 on Standard 1 and on Standard 2 and on Standard 3 and on every standard except Standard 17. If on Standard 17 they got a 60%, then we say the student’s semester grade is going to be a D. The highest it can be is a D, because they are not proficient on a single standard. We are not going to allow students to have gaps, but what we do is we allow students to retake that standard as many times as they want. They can retake it again and again and again until they get above 80%, that way students don’t go on to Algebra 2 knowing every standard except Standard 17 and having a gap, and this way we find students aren’t having gaps. It’s almost a Draconian grading policy and at first, it was hard to sell to students four years ago, but now we have been doing it for so long that it’s second nature, because students would say, “What do you mean, I passed everything else. For one little standard, I got a 72% and my grade in the class is going to be a D?” Well, yes, unless you retake it, and that really encourages. It lights a fire under students to retake those standards and get everything above 80%.

At the other end, to make sure that we don’t overly reward students who procrastinate, what we say is, on a retake you get half the points above 80, so if you get a 90 on the retake then—it was a 40 the first time around, but a 90 on the retake, we don’t feel it’s fair to give an A on the retake, what we give is half the points above 80. So for a 90 that’s 10 points above 80, half of that is 5, so we give an 85 on the retake, which is still pretty fair, but we reserve the A for the person who not only got it, but got it the first time.

A B is above average and an A is above average and even if a student doesn't get it the first time around, they can still get a B or a C in the class. On an individual test, though, we thought that A means super above average—means you nailed it the first time around. If the student gets a 45% the first time around and then gets 100% on the retake, because it's half the points above 80, a 100 is 20 points above 80, so they get really 10 of those points, so 10 plus 80, they would get a 90. So they could still get an A- conceivably. You just have to really, really nail it on the retake, you have to get 100% to get that A- right there. If you get a 98%, that's 18 points, so 9 would be half of that, so you would get an 89 on the retake, which is a B+ which is still decent, it's above average, it's really well, but we felt it was important also, so that we wouldn't encourage procrastination. So that the student wouldn't say, "Well, I don't really have to study hard for tomorrow's test because I can just retake it the next week and still get an A," so we didn't want to be encouraging that behavior.

I hear teachers all the time saying things—not at this campus, but, you know, when I go to countywide meetings—saying, "Oh, I hate teaching to the test" or "I hate the emphasis on tests and on standards" and so on and so forth. And they say things like "The pendulum has swung one way and it will swing back the other way." But having taught at a school, Waterford High School, which had an API score of 475 and now has an API score of 762, I can say not only is there quantitative difference, there is a qualitative difference. That the students are happier, the students are more engaged, there is more of a feeling of accomplishment. Our college attendance rate has shot up to now we have the highest college attendance rate of any public high school in the whole county. So it's been a dramatic turnaround.

\* The Academic Performance Index (API) is a measurement in California of academic performance and progress of individuals schools in the state. It is one of the main components of the Public Schools Accountability Act passed by the California legislature in 1999. A numeric API score ranges from a low of 200 to a high of 1000. The interim statewide API performance target for all schools is 800. A school's growth is measured by how well it is moving toward or past that goal.