Middle school close-up: Palms Middle succeeds by investing in teacher training

Sarah Favot | December 13, 2016

*UPDATED

Palms Middle School Principal Derek Moriuchi jokes with fellow administrators that one must be “kind of special” to want to teach middle schoolers.

“They do do weird things and their hormones are all over the place,” he said. “But we get that.”

Palms Middle School, on the westside of Los Angeles, is among the highest-performing middle schools in the district and has made significant improvements in its rankings over the two years of state testing data.

The school of about 1,400 students climbed two rungs in the “similar students” category in the CCSA rankings. It was an 8 in 2015, then moved up to a 10 — the top rung — in 2016. It also went up in the overall statewide rank from 7 to 8.

One of the factors that could account for Palms’ high test scores is that about 60 to 65 percent of its students are enrolled in honors programs.

Palms has a Gifted/High Ability Magnet program, which requires that students are assessed to determine if they can complete work at two grade levels above their age level. The school also has a School of Advanced Studies. Moriuchi said that students who do not qualify for the magnet program are usually admitted into the SAS program.

About one-third of the student population comes from five feeder elementary schools, three of which are generally high-performing and in wealthier
socioeconomic areas: Overland Avenue, Clover Avenue and Castle Heights in Beverlywood.

The school’s poverty rate is 56 percent, compared to 76 percent for the district, and about 5 percent of students are English-language learners. In the district overall, 25 percent are English learners.

Moriuchi noted that his students’ demographics also differ from LA Unified’s as a whole.

According to 2015-16 California Department of Education data, the school is 42 percent Hispanic, 25 percent African-American, 14 percent white, 14 percent Asian and 5 percent other.

The demographic breakdown of LA Unified, according to CDE data, is 74 percent Hispanic, 10 percent white, 9 percent African-American, 4 percent Asian and 3 percent other.

Moriuchi, who has been principal at Palms for five years, accounts for the success of his students on the Smarter Balanced tests to two years of committed professional development for teachers. He describes the school’s teaching staff as “very dedicated and very committed.”

He said teachers, especially those teaching sixth grade, researched and developed their own curriculum for teaching the Common Core standards. He said they found a curriculum program developed by the New York State Education Department called EngageNY and found it to be a valuable tool in creating lesson plans.

He said the district now provides a program to help teachers called StudySync, but in 2015 the district didn’t provide those resources.

He said he paid extra to his teachers who worked to develop lesson plans during their conference periods and who met after school.

Moriuchi also attributes the success of his students to a generous Friends of Palms, the school’s parent organization, which donates about $60,000 to $90,000 a year to the school. Most of the money is given to teachers who express a need for materials in their classrooms, like microscopes. The parent group also pays for a greeter to stand at the entrance of the school.

“I’m very happy to be here at Palms,” Moriuchi said. “I feel very blessed to be with a staff who’s very hard working, very dedicated to their students.”

* This article has been updated to include the LA Unified poverty rate.*