

# Park View High School



## A World of Achievement

Entering the lobby of Park View High School in Sterling, VA, is like entering another world. The diversity in the student body is reflected in flags from 63 of the 80 countries that are represented in the student population and in a special project for Hispanic Heritage Month, which covers the walls of an entire hallway.

The school walls, hallways, and stairwells are a celebration of outstanding achievement, featuring students' academic work, photos of high achievers on Virginia state tests, student honors and trophies, class murals, paintings, sculptures, and other artwork. Diversity is also reflected among class officers and student representatives and by a notable sense of friendship among different cultures and races.

Evidence of the commitment to supporting all students is abundant. In the ESL Department,

which works with 20% of the 1,200 students in the school, there are eight teachers, nine assistants, a dedicated counselor, and a parent liaison. An equity facilitation team that is composed of counselors and classroom teachers provides basic equity training to help teachers create culturally responsive classrooms. One of the school's goals is to provide equal access and outreach for underserved minorities to upper-level honors and AP courses.

To prepare students for this rigorous curriculum, the school has instituted numerous programs, including AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination), to help improve skills and meet the wide variety of student needs.

Other areas of emphasis on equity include ensuring that the library is open to all students before and after school (until 6 p.m.) for students who do not have a computer and other re-

sources at home. Inclusion is practiced, and one of the most unique examples is the team-taught Universal Design for Learning biology class.

At all times, Principal Virginia Minshew clearly communicates high expectations for staff members and students. She supports those expectations with 90-minute common instructional planning time every other day to ensure that the schoolwide goals of meeting the demands of Virginia's state test and preparing students for real-world experiences are accomplished through well thought-out teaching strategies and the use of technology.

All curricular and cocurricular programs work together toward the common goal of college access for all. Beginning in grade 9, students are assigned to an administrator and a counselor for their first two years. In their junior year,



*Personalized support sustains students from ninth grade to graduation.*

they are assigned another administrator and counselor who stay with them until graduation.

When asked to provide a short description of the teachers at their school, the department chairs described them as fearless, responsible, proud, and collaborative, with a sense of family, a strong work ethic, and a commitment to providing a safe place for students.

Those characteristics explain some of the reasons why, despite its extreme diversity and many challenges, Park View is a thriving, successful comprehensive high school and are illustrated perfectly by the following statement from

John Gabriel, the assistant principal for 11th and 12th grades: “I often tell prospective teachers that if they went into teaching to make a difference in the lives of students, they can do that more so at Park View High School than at any other school in Loudoun County. Our students genuinely appreciate our efforts—not just because they know how hard we work, but because they recognize that we choose to work here. That goes a long way with many of our students.

“We often have to work harder to be effective as well as go above and beyond on a regular basis. For example, to better reach out to students

and their families, the school’s parent liaison and I conducted home visits that we dubbed ‘saving seniors’ during the final two marking periods last year. We visited families whose students were in danger of not graduating because of their attendance or grades. These unannounced visits were well-received because the parents realized that we were truly working in the best interest of the student and doing so on our own free time after the school day had ended.

“Before coming to Park View, I would never have imagined doing something like this; now I cannot imagine how I didn’t start doing this earlier.”

*The expectations are high and clear for both students and teachers. Results are not relegated to the annual report card.*



## Respecting and Reshaping



**When Principal Virginia Minshew was asked, What are the most important actions you took to improve student achievement at Park View at the beginning of your tenure as principal and what are the most important things you do now? her response emphasized a schoolwide effort.**

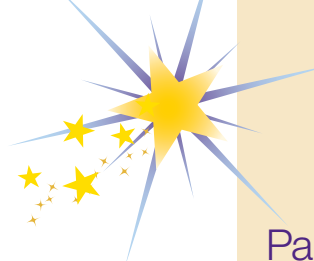
The question implies that one person can change a school; I do not believe that is accurate. I have not done anything alone. When I arrived at Park View five years ago, I found a core of teachers, students, and parents who wanted change. They believed, as do I, that

when you work in a school that is experiencing challenges, you cannot continue to do things the way that they have always been done. You have to look, listen, and think outside the box to experience success. You have to set high expectations for everyone and you have to model those expectations on a daily basis. It is with this premise in mind that the journey for our school community began.

### **Relationships and Collaboration**

Coming from a very successful middle school experience provided me with a unique mind-





## Park View High School

STERLING, VA

**Principal**  
Virginia  
Minshew



**Grades**  
9–12

**Enrollment**  
1,246

**Community**  
Suburban

**Demographics**  
38% Hispanic,  
37% White, 9% Black,  
14% Asian/Pacific  
Islander, 1% American  
Indian; 42% free or  
reduced-price meals  
eligible; 20% English  
language learners

set for what a successful high school should look like. While at the middle school, I learned many lessons about the importance of relationships, collaboration, and rigor. I learned that transitioning and moving a school in a new direction was like driving an ocean liner: changing course can be a slow process, and if you move too fast, the ship will capsize.

We started with collaboration: how could teachers work together to benefit students if there was no time built into the school day? At the middle school, interdisciplinary teams were a cornerstone, but high school is not structured in the same way. There were ninth-grade teams, but the focus appeared to be on behavior and discipline, not teaching and learning. After much thought and discussion, we started to make changes in the math department, partly because two middle school math teachers had come to Park View with me, and they knew what could be accomplished.

First, all math teachers were given a common planning block so they could collaborate on lessons, materials, and assessments. That enabled them to form relationships with one another and to combine their individual strengths for a common goal. It also supported vertical articulation so that students moved from one course to the next with the necessary skills. Finally, it permitted the math department to look at their teaching and students' learning beyond what occurred in their classroom. Common expectations emerged and those that worked together were successful. In the last three years, six of our nine instructional departments began working in this manner. At this time, they are at different places in their journey, but they are on their way.

Three years ago we began to explore the AVID program to complement our ninth-grade transition program, and we liked the common expectations and instructional strategies. In 2009–10, we have two AVID classes and have trained many of our ninth- and tenth-grade teachers in the use of AVID strategies. We talk about the strategies with the entire staff because they are best practices and they should be used with all students, not just those who are enrolled in AVID.

To foster relationships with students, we implemented a high school version of looping. When students make the transition from middle school to ninth grade, they are assigned an administrator and guidance counselor who stay with them until their junior year, when they are assigned another administrator and a guidance counselor who stay with them until they graduate. This model permits the staff to focus on the needs of each individual grade level. It also makes certain that our ninth graders do not get lost in the shuffle and that our counselors and administrators are able to collaborate in a more effective manner on student issues and concerns.

### Shared Leadership

I quickly realized I could not control everything and that I needed to build leadership capacity in both formal and informal ways. Beginning with the core leadership group was one way, but there had to be more. The assistant principals work directly with instruction and are viewed as instructional leaders in our school. They confer with the department chairs on instructional issues and discuss them with me on a weekly basis.

The department chairs at Park View have now had two years of leadership training and have designed a rubric of their role and responsibilities within the department. The department chair is responsible for making certain that the expectations for the common planning time are being met. They work with their departments and administrators to ensure that collaboration and rigor are a focus.

### Increased Rigor

One of the first things I did at my former school was eliminate basic and general level classes, and it was one of the first things that I did at Park View. I believe that telling a student that he or she is performing at a basic or general level does not convey high expectations. Students can achieve at high levels if they are scheduled and instructed in an engaging and rigorous way. Although it was not the most popular change I made, it was the right thing to do for the students. But it cannot be

*The expectations are high and clear for both students and teachers. Results are not relegated to the annual report card.*

done without staff development for teachers.

Sustained staff development has been a hallmark of our journey. We have explored and used a variety of methodologies, sources, and resources. I believe that our students have an increased willingness to try new and more-difficult course work because they know they will be supported. We have seen an increase in students going on to postsecondary schools and in the scholarship money they are applying for and receiving.

One of our proudest accomplishments is our equity facilitation team. We began with staff development in basic equity training and how to create culturally responsive classrooms and came to understand and internalize the importance of setting high expectations and nurturing positive relationships with students. We have focused on understanding where our students are coming from and how this impacts school performance and our relationships with them, as well as the importance of sharing some of ourselves with our students to form stronger and more personal relationships. Finally, we are now working with student equity leaders who are sharing themselves with us and creating stronger ties to our school community.

Parent involvement remains a challenge

in our school. As in many high schools, we have a small core of parents who are very involved, but they are not representative of our student population. Approximately 25% of our students are English language learners, but a much greater number of parents do not speak English. We have tried a variety of things to encourage involvement, such as our guidance director teaching Parents as Educational Partners classes for our non-English-speaking parents and publishing all of our communication in both English and Spanish. We want parents to fully participate in the high school experience, so we provide interpreters in many languages for parent conferences and special programs. This year, our PTSA has added a Hispanic parent liaison.

All of these things have been done to improve student achievement. I do not believe that one person can change a school, but I do think that modeling expectations and what you value, establishing and maintaining a sound instructional vision, and focusing on building and nurturing the right climate gives each of us the opportunity to grow and improve. I have seen growth in our students, the teachers, and the school. I have also seen growth in myself. We are ready to continue on our journey. **PL**



## Team-Taught Biology Using

### Universal Design for Learning

*By Crystal Wolfgang, Science Department chair, and Carolina Wells, Learning Resource Department chair*

After learning about Universal Design for Learning (UDL) through a professional development opportunity, we joined a pilot program to use UDL in team-taught biology classes. The goal was to make the curriculum more accessible to students with different learning needs. Our class included students with autism; English language learners; general education students with attendance problems; and students who had learning disabilities in reading, writing, and math. During summer 2008, we worked on a basic curriculum for the course, and in the fall, we incorporated UDL in our biology class as a pilot program.

Through the use of the Dana portable word processors, our students with autism were able to begin working without any prompts. As we increased the use of technology along with cooperative work, students with autism became more comfortable asking questions and collaborating with peers to use critical-thinking skills.

Students used computer-based technology to learn vocabulary. Strategies included such tools as active vote tools for multiple-choice games and interactive whiteboards. As the students learned the vocabulary, visual slides were also used to reinforce content learning.

Labs were designed to include active movement, and the kinesthetic centers appealed to all the students. The use of iPods, Web quests, and small group collaboration gave each student the opportunity to have a voice in the outcome of each unit. Guest speakers demonstrated how lab work can be used in every day work: police officers spoke to and interacted with the students to help them discover how DNA can be used to solve crimes.

Success, however, went far beyond new instructional techniques and academic gains. As we assessed our progress, we were most impressed with the personal triumphs we saw in our students—such as the boy with autism who learned to eat lunch and hold a conversation with a group of “popular” kids and the young girl who struggled to uphold her probation but was allowed to lead her group and empower herself.

Our culminating project for the year included a trip to the National Zoo. While at the zoo, students used video cameras to film the animals in their habitats. The students edited their footage using Windows Movie Maker and Photo Story 3 and put together a video that addressed all of the strands required in the Biology Standards of Learning.

By using UDL for the past year, we have come to realize that by thinking differently about how we teach, we put success within reach for all of our students. We believe that by working together as a team, we have made a difference in our students’ lives, and through their growing confidence and pride in their work, they have made a difference in ours.

- High expectations
- Student and staff member common department planning
- Schoolwide instructional goals
- Connections between curricular and cocurricular programs
- Commitment to college access for all
- AVID and freshman transition program
- Equity facilitation team
- Equal access to upper level honors and AP courses
- Inclusion

