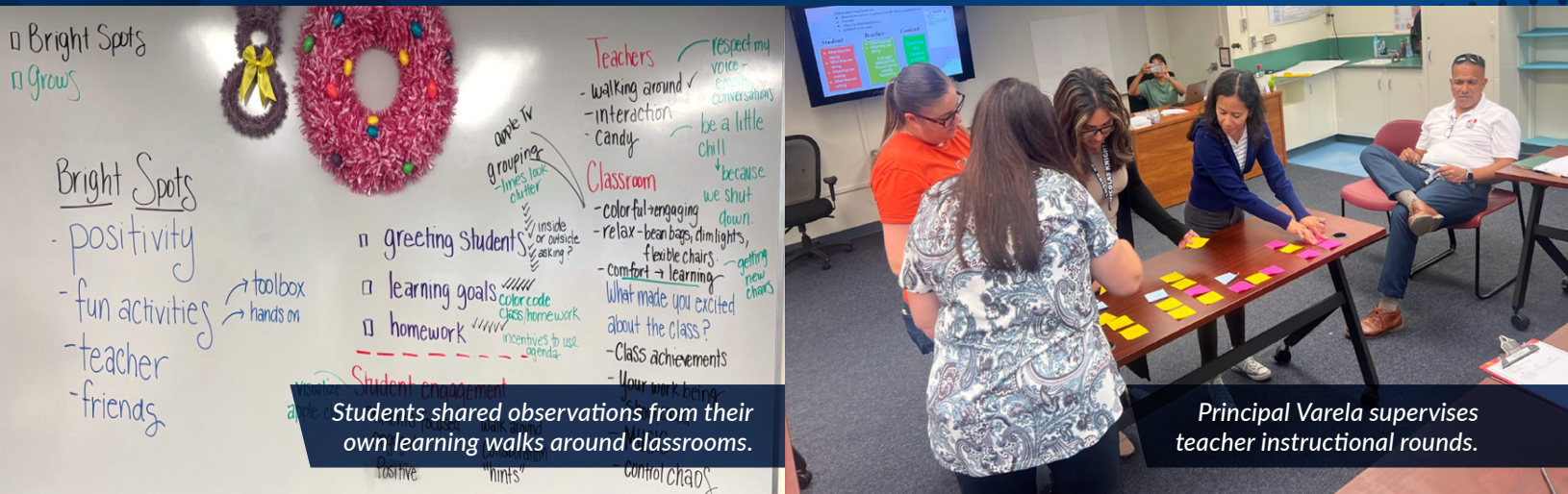


Evidence of Excellence



Nicolas Junior High School

FULLERTON, CALIFORNIA

Nicolas Junior High evolved from a struggling, overlooked school into a community of pride. Through High Reliability Schools strategies focusing on culture, instruction, and leadership, students improved in ELA and math, the percentage of English learners showing significant progress grew, absenteeism declined, and engagement increased.

Nicolas Junior High School

FULLERTON, CALIFORNIA



DEMOGRAPHICS

- › **615** students
- › **87.8%** free or reduced lunch
- › **21%** English learners

RACIAL/ETHNIC PERCENTAGES

- › **85.9%** Hispanic or Latino
- › **4.2%** White
- › **2.9%** Asian
- › **2.6%** Multiracial
- › **1.5%** Black
- › **1.5%** Filipino
- › **0.8%** American Indian or Alaska Native
- › **0.7%** Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander

Nicolas Junior High, located in Fullerton, California, serves 615 students in grades 7 and 8. The school's goal is to create a safe, supportive, and high-performing learning environment. It has achieved High Reliability Schools certification Levels 1 and 2 and is pursuing Level 3.

Nicolas.FullertonSD.org



Principal Varela leads a forum for NJH parents.

► CHALLENGE

Nicolas Junior High School set out to change its reputation—from a school once overlooked to one students are proud to attend. With a large proportion of economically disadvantaged students and significant staff turnover, Nicolas Junior High School struggled to achieve a stable learning environment. Students assigned to attend Nicolas routinely transferred to other area schools. Those attending the school exhibited behavior problems and inconsistent attendance. Nicolas previously pursued High Reliability Schools (HRS) certification, but with constant changes, including three principals in one calendar year, leaders were unable to establish sustainable systems. When current principal Jose Varela and assistant principal Dr. Maria E. Garcia came on board, they realized they had to “start from scratch.”

They recommitted the school to implementing the HRS framework, focusing not only on the content of each level, but on the overarching importance of continually collecting data and adjusting in response, distributing leadership and responsibility, and building enduring structures for success.

► IMPLEMENTATION

Nicolas staff began their renewed HRS journey with a commitment to building a safe and supportive environment. Varela and Dr. Garcia gathered data from staff and students to identify growth areas and clarify how initiatives, such as behavior supports, align with HRS goals.

At HRS Level 1, teachers implemented a ticket system and quarterly rewards to recognize positive behavior and effort, helping students feel respected and appreciated, which in turn made them more

All data and people mentioned in this story represent solely the time frame in which Marzano Resources worked with the school or district and the timeframe in which the school or district committed to implementing processes and practices set forth by Marzano Resources. Building and district leaders and staff featured in Evidence of Excellence stories may have changed.

“Student recognition is highly important, and it has paid off.”

—Maria E. Garcia / Assistant principal

► IMPLEMENTATION *(continued)*

engaged in the classroom. “Student recognition is highly important, and it has paid off,” Dr. Garcia said. The school also implemented forums for parent feedback and a student committee to provide input on schoolwide issues.

At HRS Level 2, leaders prioritized instructional improvement by first focusing on relationships and trust. Teachers set growth goals around creating welcoming classrooms, gradually moving toward instructional goals as confidence grew. Collaborative team time became more focused on instruction, and non-evaluative classroom visits encouraged collaboration and shared expertise.

Nicolas leaders set clear expectations for teachers, students, and administrators for each HRS indicator and tracked progress through surveys, focus groups, and observations. “We had a lot of great silos,” Dr. Garcia explained. “But

we wanted everyone to share these strategies.” Students also participated in learning walks. “Their feedback was beautiful,” Dr. Garcia said. Leadership was distributed across staff, empowering multiple leaders. “We all created this,” Dr. Garcia noted, “focusing on processes and systems to ensure improvements endure beyond any single administration.”

“By setting systems in place, we know we can continue to be successful,” Varela explained. “When a new principal comes in, they will have to adapt to the systems the school has in place rather than the school adapting to the principal.”

Nicolas achieved HRS certification at Levels 1 and 2 and is pursuing Level 3. This work continues to be guided by the school’s “CARE” values: Caring, Always Safe, Responsible and Respectful, and Empathetic.

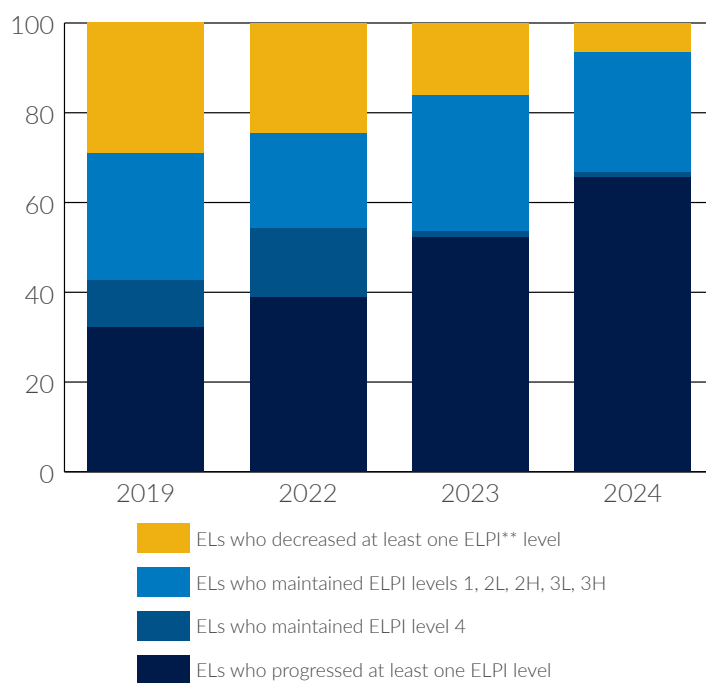
► RESULTS

Beyond improving staff and student engagement and perceptions of the school, Nicolas educators’ ongoing work on culture, instruction, and curriculum has also produced tangible positive results in terms of student outcomes. From 2023 to 2024, Nicolas students’ scores on the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) increased by an average of 15.9 points in English language arts and 9.7 points in math. The percentage of students who met or exceeded the grade level standard for ELA increased by 4.4%, while the percentage who met or exceeded the standard in math increased by 1%. Meanwhile, chronic absenteeism declined 5.1%, and the suspension rate declined 2%.

Nicolas also achieved dramatic improvements in English language acquisition for the large proportion of its students classified as English learners (EL). From 2019 to 2024, the percentage of English learners who progressed at least one English Learner Progress Indicator (ELPI) level more than doubled from 32.3% to 65.7%—a remarkable 33.4 point increase in language growth over five years on the English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC).

While acknowledging the progress the school has made, Principal Varela noted that their goal is to keep improving. “We’re proud of our accomplishments,” he said. “But we’re nowhere near done.”

Student Progress in English Language Acquisition*



*Data retrieved from <https://www.caschooldashboard.org/reports/30665066028104/2024/academic-performance#english-learner-progress>
**ELPI: English Learner Progress Indicator

Transform teaching with research-based practice

Marzano Resources is dedicated to helping K–12 educators advance student achievement. Built on Dr. Robert J. Marzano's 50 years of education research, Marzano Resources supports teachers and administrators through customizable on-site professional development, educator events, virtual coaching, books, videos, and online courses. Our associates and authors are thought leaders in the field of education and deliver research-based guidance for all major areas of schooling, including curriculum development, instruction, assessment, student engagement, and personalized competency-based education.

Here are just a few ways we can help you achieve your goals—whether you're teaching online or on site:

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Events

Explore our workshops and conferences to find your perfect fit. Our experts will help you maximize classroom engagement, assess student growth, foster a standards-based learning environment, and more.

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Be recognized as a High Reliability School. For schools and districts that have attained one or more levels of reliability, Marzano Resources offers formal certification to share with your community and stakeholders.

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Analysts at Marzano Resources have identified, as objectively as possible, a focused set of learning progressions for each K–5 grade level in the content areas of English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. Maximize your instruction with this invaluable resource.

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