

Ira Harbison Elementary School, located just 12 miles from the U.S.-Mexico border in National City, California, is part of a close knit, diverse community that takes pride of ownership in their school. Many parents, grandparents, and staff members are actually former Ira Harbison students.

Each school day, after their parents drop them off, students in blue and white uniforms bustle with energy for the coming day as they line up outside the gates of this well-maintained school. The principal, Mrs. Beverly Hayes, greets parents and children by name. This personal attention gives students a sense of being supported and

Ira Harbison Elementary School	National City, CA
598 students K-6	
http://nsd.us/schools/iraharbison	
Hispanic	60%
Asian/ Pacific Islander/ Filipino	30%
White	5%
African American	4%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	1%
Students eligible for free/ reduced-price meals	100%
Students with Limited English Proficiency	45%
Average class size K-3	20.0
Average class size 4-6	30.22
Mobility rate for the 2005-2006 school year	17.31%

surrounded by people they know care. In response, Ira Harbison students are unfailingly polite; when a visitor came into the classroom and stood at the back of the room, it was only a matter of minutes before a boy rose and carried a chair to the visitor, asking “Would you like to sit down, Ma’am?”

Although the main building is more than half a century old, the campus remains well-landscaped and immaculate. As the school has grown, administrators have added a number of temporary classrooms, but surrounded them by flower beds, playgrounds, and open paved areas. Student work covers classroom walls and windows look out to the pleasant landscape. Many classroom doors stand open to the warm weather. A visitor feels welcome walking into any classroom on campus.



At the end of the school day, teachers walk their students out to the gate, meeting and greeting parents who are picking up their children. No child is released to an adult who is not recognized by the staff. Parents are very aware of this safety plan and expressed gratitude knowing that school personnel won't leave until all of the children are safely gone.

A “Focused Approach”

Although nearly half (45%) of Ira Harbison students are English language learners who speak Spanish or Tagalog as their first language, students routinely test above California state averages. A key element in the school's success appears to be its intensive English language instruction, which embeds English language development activities through the language arts (and increasingly, math) programs. At the beginning of each school year, English learners are given the California English Language Development Test (CELDT). Teachers use the data to devise a plan of action for appropriate ELD interventions.



Rather than offer a bilingual strand, Ira Harbison offers all students first through third grades three hours of literacy instruction and students in grades 4-6 at least two hours of literacy instruction—supplemented by additional, strategic



English Language Development (ELD) instruction for students who are learning English. Teachers take what Principal Beverly Hayes calls a “Focused Approach,” a strategy that the teachers receive training in during a staff development day. The regular classroom teachers deliver ELD instruction and a language arts specialist, resource specialist, and several impact teachers are also on hand to provide additional support and instruction. In addition to the district-adopted ELD textbooks, teachers use Specifically

Designed Academic Instruction in English (SDAIE) and Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) structured immersion methods.

All Ira Harbison teachers are certified in CLAD—Crosscultural, Language, and Academic Development—meaning they have all had specialized instruction in working with English language learners. Teachers “front-load” instruction for English language learners, leading small group discussions of new reading material or reviewing key vocabulary before a lesson. A “focus wall” in each classroom lists vocabulary and comprehension strategies for each story the class is studying, as well as the grade-level standards related to the story.



“Impact” teachers, working four hours a day, provide extra support to any student who has reading difficulties; the most strenuously struggling students get even more attention from the language arts and resource specialists. Every school in the district has a bilingual liaison who meets monthly with the district ELD coordinator.

Teachers use many strategies such as partner reading, scaffolding instruction, front-loading instruction, and bringing in real life examples to differentiate instruction. The language arts specialist explained that she finds herself “acting out the vocabulary, trying to connect it to their world in whatever way I can,” and described bringing in “realia” to expand students’ vocabularies, such as snow, so that the students who may not otherwise experience snow have a tactile experience to help them learn the vocabulary words.

High Teacher Expectations and Focus on Standards

All teachers align their instruction to the California Content Standards, but make their own schedules and have support to supplement curricula as they see fit. The principal also provides support for supplemental instructional materials to help teachers fill in gaps in the state content standards that aren’t addressed in the adopted textbooks. Each grade level uses a district-developed Pacing Guide for language arts and mathematics to prepare students for the district tests, administered at the end of each trimester, and the state STAR tests in May. Because these Pacing Guides are districtwide, students can more easily transfer from one school to another in the district without losing educational ground.



All grade levels have guided reading groups and small-group math instruction at students' skill levels. Teachers use software programs in math, language arts, and science to challenge students and provide instant feedback that helps the teacher tailor and focus instruction.

Asked what makes the curriculum so effective, teachers said, "The way we implement it. We make it exciting so it keeps their interest; we have flexibility in the system so if it's not appropriate to teach yet then we can wait." This

flexible approach works because teachers maintain high expectations and standards for both themselves and students and "don't make excuses for kids because of where they came from." Teachers work hard to figure out the best way to reach all students; in the words of the principal, "teachers aren't ever to the point where they are happy with everything; they are



always searching for a better way or more things they can do." One boy said about his teachers: "They make us work to our full potential and they don't stop trying until we do the best we can." As the school slogan states: the goal is "excellence for all!"

Ira Harbison Elementary has indeed earned recognition as an excellent school. In 2004, the school was cited as a California Distinguished School. It was a "Beating the Odds" school in 2003, a Title I Achieving School in 2002 and a



Title 1 Academic Achieving School in 2007. Student test results on the California Standards Test (CST) and California Achievement Test have consistently exceeded both state and district averages, and all subgroups have surpassed expectations for Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Ira Harbison's Academic Performance Index (API) score for 2006 was 785, up from 775 in 2005 (California's API scores range from 200 to 1,000, with a target score of 800 or higher. The state average for 2006 was 720.). This growth placed Ira Harbison in the top 10% of similar schools.

Professional Development and Teacher Collaboration

As a result of strong support at the district level, teachers at Ira Harbison are part of an active learning community. Every Thursday, classes are dismissed early districtwide to provide professional development opportunities for teachers. Five of these early-release days are for district-level professional development, six are for school-site professional development, 10 are teacher collaboration days, and 16 are teacher planning days. In addition to the

five district-level early release days, the district provides two days of professional development at the beginning of the school year that are usually devoted to new textbook adoption.

For the six site-level professional development days, the school may bring in a presenter on a topic of interest or collaborate with another school for training. Session topics are selected and correlated to identified student needs. Teachers remarked that they are given ample opportunity for professional development on topics of their own choosing, and some teachers participate in book study groups. The district also allows schools to use up to two teacher “buy back” days for professional development. These are optional weekend workshops which teachers are paid to attend.



On the 10 teacher collaboration days, teachers may collaborate horizontally (within grade level) or vertically (K-2, 3-4, 5-6) in planning sessions. Teachers use this time to review student work and assessment data and plan appropriate instruction to meet individual student needs. Occasionally the principal will hire substitutes so that teachers have more time to collaborate on special projects or attend training sessions.

Teachers at Ira Harbison described themselves as family, and said they enjoy working in an environment where the focus is on the student. They feel that they can call on each other whenever they have a problem. One teacher noted that “We build off each others’ strengths. If I need ideas for better teaching strategies, I have many excellent colleagues to turn to.”

School decision-making processes include teachers where possible. During their weekly Thursday afternoon sessions, teachers are consulted—and heard. As a teacher noted, “there are lots of holes in the language arts and



math books, so we need to supplement them with other materials in order to teach the state standards.” The principal, this teacher said, is willing to buy the supplemental materials teachers request. Teachers also participate in interviewing and hiring new teachers, another reason that they feel that the whole staff works so well together.

New teachers are assigned a Support Provider through the California Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment Program (BTSA). The support providers serve as mentors and provide daily encouragement and support. A relatively new teacher remarked that this process greatly reduced her frustration levels as she worked her way through her first year of teaching.

Teachers expressed confidence about the sustainability of their success even if the school changes principals. "The principal has developed such a strong organization that staff motivation would continue even if she left," observed one teacher, adding, "She has developed a network of trust both upwards and downwards. She allows us to run our classrooms the way we think is best as long as we produce good results."

Principal Leadership

Principal Hayes leads by example and treats staff as professionals. She helps maintain a culture in which "everyone here knows that we are here for kids" and will do what it takes to help students achieve. Teachers have the freedom to decide the best way to obtain professional development (i.e., bring someone in, attend workshops, purchase materials or collaborate), and the principal does her best to provide whatever additional support they need, such as materials or time. The principal attends the professional development that the teachers attend, is in the classrooms constantly providing support, and keeps teachers informed of professional development opportunities. She is also, she noted, in and out of classrooms "all the time and kids know that. Teachers know that."



Assessment

One parent, whose children had previously attended another school, remarked on the low stress level tests induce at Ira Harbison because the teachers instill confidence throughout the school year. Students don't fear test-taking.



In addition to the state assessment administered each spring to students in Grades 2–6, district assessments in language arts and mathematics are given three times a year to students in all grades, K–6. Seven to ten years ago, a project sponsored by the California Reading and Literature Project (CRLP), "Focusing on Results," began the district's research-based training, focused on literacy, individual

assessment of student progress, and data-driven decision-making. The majority of teachers at Ira Harbison participated in the CRLP "Results" training. The analysis of data to make instructional decisions has progressed and



been refined to include all curricular areas with a concentration on literacy and math. Teachers use student test results to determine instructional groupings and meet in grade-level groups to plan the most effective strategies for improving academic achievement. They have also received training in data management software which provides access to all state and district assessment results and allows teachers to organize student results in a number of useful ways.

English language learners take the California English Language Development Test (CELDT) and may also take the ADEPT (a test for English Proficiency developed by the Alisal Union School District) that can target which aspects of English learning an ELD student is struggling with.

Differentiated Instruction

In order to enable all students to meet state content standards, teachers use assessment data to set up flexible instructional groupings within the classroom. If a student is not making sufficient progress, he or she may be referred to special small-group instruction. Ira Harbison Elementary School offers a Special Day Class/Not Severely Handicapped (SDC/NSH) classroom for students with mild to moderate handicaps such as learning disabilities. This class includes fourth through sixth grade students.

Students learn the core curriculum program in this smaller class at a pace designed for each student. The Special Day Class/Severely Handicapped (SDC/SH) classroom includes students with moderate to severe handicaps and emphasizes functional skills. The SDC/SH classroom has 12 students; three paraprofessionals assist the classroom teacher, allowing time for individualized interactions.



Ira Harbison Elementary has a combined Grade 4/5 classroom and a combined Grade 5/6 classroom. Students in these classes were chosen to be as homogeneous in learning style and abilities as possible, since teachers split their time between two grade levels. In the 5/6 class, fifth grade students move to another classroom twice a day and are taught by the Impact teacher, allowing the regular teacher to concentrate on the sixth grade students. After several

weeks, the grade levels shift, sixth graders receive language arts instruction with the Impact teacher while the classroom teacher works with the fifth graders.

The Grade 4/5 combination class is a GATE classroom, as is one of the regular Grade 6 classrooms. This program is designed to provide a deeper learning experience to students who have demonstrated motivation, leadership characteristics, and academic achievement. One GATE student was quick to point out, "We're not smarter than everybody, we just like to learn more." They are offered advanced subject matter within the scope of the Pacing Guide lesson plan and opportunities to master higher skills in problem-solving, creative thinking, and logic.

Technology

Each classroom at Ira Harbison Elementary has at least five computers running educational software for reading, spelling, English language development, mathematics, and science. The software allows teachers to derive a number of reports showing areas of strength and weakness for each student and for the class as a whole. In addition, Ira Harbison has a 32-station computer lab which is used regularly by each classroom. The school has benefited from a recent technology grant that provided six selected teachers with new technology for their classrooms. Some of these teachers are using an interactive whiteboard, and others are using camcorders to integrate the performing arts into their curricula. For example, a third grade class used its camcorder to record student discussion of story elements.



Parent and Community Involvement

Teachers know parents by sight and have a good communication system for discussing students' needs. Parents are welcome and invited to visit classrooms any time, and they are specifically invited to such ceremonies as the monthly Citizenship Assemblies. Regularly scheduled evening programs—Back-to-School Night, Family Math Nights, Family Science Nights, Parent Institute, and Open House—keep parents informed and involved in their children's education. A very involved group of parents supports the school in many ways, serving on school site council, attending district advisory meetings, holding book fair fundraisers, and helping teachers with tasks such as copying and laminating. A bilingual Community Liaison oversees the parent center and coordinates parent volunteers.

Teachers make an effort to provide additional opportunities to students within the community. One teacher pointed out that, even though many of the students have lived in National City all of their lives, they have never visited such educational resources as the Birch Aquarium and the Chula Vista Conservation Center. Field trips are organized to

these and other local sites. Older students attend outdoor education programs at Camp Marston and Anza-Borrego Desert Environmental Camp. Through a partnership with the Navy, fifth graders attend a five-day science program named Starbase-Atlantis.

The National City Library funds a comprehensive after-school program that is free to all students. Offered from 2:45 to 6:00 p.m., the program includes such diverse activities as homework help, sports, spelling bees, and ballroom dancing. Parents are especially enthusiastic about these programs, which ensure their children are safe and actively involved in worthwhile activities during the prime after-school time.

Ira Harbison celebrates student accomplishment. Citizenship assemblies applaud student achievement and character building, and each month classrooms feature a different quality: December/January (short months) featured honesty; February concentrated on kindness; March, on cooperation. When a student is identified as practicing the targeted trait in the classroom, the teacher sends a note to his or her parent to sign and return. Returned notes are put in a box, and the top students in each class receive a certificate, a gift card, a pencil, and a flag. A parent expressed appreciation for these practices, saying, "I know my child is good, but it was really nice when the teacher sent home that note saying that she recognized that he had been particularly honest that day."

Parents are invited to attend the citizenship assemblies, and almost all do attend, taking photographs and occasionally presenting a bouquet of flowers or balloons to a deserving student. Not only do teachers want to be hired to work at Ira Harbison, but families outside the school area want their children to attend Ira Harbison for the opportunities it offers. One parent explained that "there are no 'bad' teachers—ones who you hope your children never get—at Ira Harbison."

Ira Harbison Elementary School State Criterion-Referenced Tests					
% proficient and above: 6th grade Reading					
	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
All	28	33	37	46	45
Low income	28	33	37	46	45
ESL	4	0	16	24	23
% proficient and above: 6th grade Math					
	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
All	40	36	39	53	49
Low income	40	36	39	53	49
ESL	16	4	16	27	38