PROBATIONARY VISIT
VISITING COMMITTEE REPORT

ACCREDITING COMMISSION FOR SCHOOLS
WESTERN ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES

FOR

SAN MARIN HIGH SCHOOL

15 San Marin Drive
Novato, CA 94945

Novato Unified School District

March 7-8, 2016

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I. Introduction

San Marin High School is one of two comprehensive high schools in Novato, serving the northern half of the city. A population growth in the area has added over one hundred new students, over ten percent, to the school since the last WASC visit in March, 2014. The increased population reflects the general community, as the Latino and white populations both saw increased numbers. Latinos now make up about 26% of the school’s population. The school’s total population now is 1076 students, including 238 who qualify for free and reduced lunch services, and 65 who were designated as English Language Learners at the time of CBEDS. To meet the needs of the new growth, the equivalent of four full-time teachers have been added to the staff in the English, History, Film and Video, and Science departments.

To meet the needs of the increased ELL students, the school has added four more sections of ELD classes, to now include six sections. Most ELL students are now enrolled in a grammar and conversational class simultaneously. There are plans to add a reading comprehension class in the future.

The STEM program continues to attract many students in the district to a hands-on, project-based curriculum, preparing students for a career in science, tech, engineering, and math fields. Since our last visit, two more academies have been added under this umbrella. The AVID program continues to include one class per grade level. The SmARTt program continues, offering students classes in the visual, performing, and written arts. The school also offers a robust Advanced Placement program, with 14 sections offered across the disciplines.

A change this year to the bell schedule includes a Modified Block schedule (Tuesdays and Wednesdays with extra time in the classroom), and the addition of eight minimum days, where students are released early to allow for staff collaboration, professional development, and planning time. The staff voted last school year to end its advisory period.

The school has emphasized common assessments across the curriculum, incorporating EADMS ( Educator’s Assessment Data Management System) as the new student data management/assessment system. Many departments are aligning the curriculum with Common Core or NGSS standards, and project-based learning assessments are key within the STEM programs. English and Social Science teachers have adopted a common rubric for all writing assessments. As scores have been lower for Latino students, these departments are coming up with strategies to address their needs. Math and Science teachers likewise are beginning new strategies to meet the needs of second language learners. Using the ASCEND to support students in Math Fundamentals, which can translate the problems into different languages, the Math department saw an increase in English Learners’ scores from 53% earning a C- or higher, to 61%. Science teachers are in the process of creating common assessments, and developing Project-based assignments, as used extensively in the STEM program.
The school has seen an increase in success among the subgroups that previously had been lower performing. These include EL learners and Latino students, who saw a marked improvement in grades over the past two years. The school attributes this success in part to a change in school culture, and the addition of four new EL classes, as well as tutoring interventions, and the school’s awareness of the needs of this population. The students now feel more personally invested in the program, and have a voice they feel is being heard.

A few groups took responsibility for reviewing student achievement and monitoring the school’s action plan from the previous WASC report. The School Site Council, department heads, and staff review the progress of the Action Plan regularly. An assistant principal continued in his role as Study Coordinator with the writing assistance of the English Department head, getting information from the whole staff in writing their report.

II. Progress on Critical Areas for Follow-up/Schoolwide Action Plan

San Marin’s Action Plan was updated to include each of the critical areas of concern the visiting team suggested in our last visit. Noticeable progress was made in each of these areas, as evidenced by our observations, interviews with staff, students, parents, and administration, and documentation provided by the school.

Schoolwide critical areas for follow-up from the previous visit:

1. Collaboration in designing, assessing, and reflection of standards based student learning among staff members occurs only intermittently. Professionals collaborating with each other on a regular basis, to reflect on best practices, share lessons, and develop common assessments will make for a stronger, more cohesive faculty, improve education techniques, and provide a better learning environment for all students.

A new schedule this year includes multiple opportunities for teachers to collaborate after school, after students are released early. They also have time twice a month on Wednesday mornings with their new modified block schedule for collaboration and staff development. The English department began a system of instructional rounds, to offer the chance to share best practices across departments. The Equity group, made up of about 15 teachers, meets 15 times a year to talk about issues of equity, and focuses on classroom practices and effectiveness. Hyperlinked interactive curriculum maps are being used by the English department to make it easier for new teachers to know what other teachers are doing at any given time. The Biotechnology and Global Academy teachers were awarded grants to pay for teachers to have paid planning time to develop their specific projects and discuss student progress. Many departments are working together to develop common assessments, lessons, and strategies in like courses.
2. There is a lack of technology—including hardware/software, management, instructional use, infrastructure, etc. More equipment, and a more reliable server will improve the school’s goal towards increasing teacher and student use of technology.

There have been many changes since the last visit concerning the purchase of new technology available to students. Eight document cameras, two iPad carts, 40 new desktop computers in the library, STEM laptops, eight chromebook carts, and projectors in nearly every room have been acquired over the past five years. More funds have been identified to continue the purchase of new equipment. The use of technology has been regularly observed in the classrooms, aided by the more consistent internet server over the campus. Use of student-owned equipment is allowed at times by some teachers, when appropriate.

3. There is a need to further develop the school’s vision, particularly with new programs being proposed. It appears there used to be a vision before, but it has been supplanted by the mission statement for the STEM program.

The school was in the process of rewriting their vision statement before our last visit, and completed it last school year. There was input from the various stakeholder groups.

4. Time to plan, implement, and evaluate new and existing programs needs to be built in to the schedule, and existing time needs to be better utilized.

The STEM program teachers have used release time effectively to plan and develop curriculum for new courses and projects. Minimum days throughout the year have offered teachers a chance to transition to the modified block schedule, making for a smoother transition in the 2014-15 school year. A staff writing calibration involved all teachers in grading student writing. Teachers spent the afternoon grading and sharing their interpretations of the common rubric that they had developed. Activities like these can be a powerful use of this time that is already built in.

5. There is a large gap between achievement among College Prep, EL Learners and Advanced Placement students. The third group, AP students, has greater access to electives. It appears there are a large number of College Prep and EL Learners on the D/F list while there is no standard, school wide identifiable means of determining what a D/F represents.

Mixed level classrooms in the English department have been the focus, as the school shifted from Honors English in the 9th and 10th grades to Pre-AP. Positive results from this move include fewer Ds and Fs, less poor behavior from students, and more engagement in the classroom. All 9th graders are now taking Biology, instead of offering Earth Science classes. The Community Liaison, a bi-lingual staff member, has assisted in communicating with EL parents, encouraging them to be more involved in the school. Three of the academies have heavily recruited from the EL classes, making this choice a
better possibility for more students. Tutoring sessions at lunch instead of after school have seen an increase in the numbers of students who can participate, and CSF students serve as tutors. Matters of equity are discussed by the staff, led by a teacher on special assignment, and offering a voice on campus to student groups who have felt marginalized on campus. A partnership with the College of Marin now offers first generation college bound students a chance for concurrent enrollment at both San Marin and the college, smoothing the transition between the schools. A redesigned ELD program has opened opportunities for English Language Learners, offering consistency in their two English classes per day, and includes a vocabulary wall in each EL classroom. This reinforces the learning for each student. An 8th grade Shadow Day in November allowed prospective students to see what the high school experience would be. The Math department has spent the past two years with the Math coach to support teacher strategies and interventions for student improvement.

6. There is a lack of evidence the course content is standards based or learned by students. A transparent model of instruction, so that students understand what they are expected to know and be able to do at the end of the day, the unit, and the term will lessen their confusion.

Most teachers have been trained in basic level SIOP, focusing on language and content standards, writing objectives that are displayed to the students, and developed with a focus on bell to bell teaching, engagement, and varied instructional strategies. The Science department has started the transition to NGSS, and project based learning is taking place across the school. Classroom visits have shown content and language objectives for the day prominently displayed, and in some cases, teachers have verbally read them aloud. Students then are able to know what is to be taught on a daily basis.

7. There is a lack of a variety of instructional and assessment strategies employed by teachers. Student engagement will improve once better and varied instruction takes place.

Teachers have been involved in a great many trainings in recent years to expand their strategies, including SIOP training and Project based learning strategies through The Buck Institute. They have incorporated these strategies into their goals, and share out their results in department and staff meetings. Non-traditional assessments are used in the Math department, and Game Based Learning is used in both the English and Math departments, to further engage students. Classroom observations and student interviews have shown a growth in teaching strategies that are now used in most classrooms. Student engagement is up from our last visit, largely because of the emphasis on solid teaching and learning.
8. There remains the need of a comprehensive assessment system in place, including district and department-wide common assessments.

The district has begun using an on-line testing platform (EADMS) to replace the older Data Director system. Using EADMS, teachers can push the grades out to Aeries and assess students on standards mastery. Students districtwide are taking three Literacy benchmarks per year. Post grading discussions allow teachers to discuss strategies to support students to meet their goals. Every teacher was required to create and implement a formative assessment on EADMS, sharing out best practices to inspire their own teaching practices. Discussions surrounding common grading scales have happened in the four major departments (math, science, English, and social science).

III. Commendations and Recommendations

San Marin High School has undergone some strong changes in the direction we were encouraging two years ago. Student engagement is noticeable in the classrooms at a higher level than before, teachers are more attentive to struggling students and English Language Learners, and the school has less of a “two-tiered” feeling about it (one school for AP students, and another for all the rest.) While there is a long way to go before they are satisfied with their test results, and grades for all students, we are pleased with the progress they have made, and their serious work in addressing our areas of concern from two years ago.

The visiting committee would like to commend the school for the following:

1. There is a noticeable move to teaching the common core/NGSS standards in the classrooms, with objectives written and sometimes verbally communicated to the students.

2. English Language Learners are now given more attention on campus. The community liaison has helped to bridge the communication gap between the school and Spanish speaking students and parents.

3. The school culture has changed for the better, with more students feeling they have moved from a two-tiered type of school, to one where everyone feels part of the campus as a whole. Groups of students who appear to come from different cultures are seen intermingling. By enrolling all 9th grade students in Pre-AP English courses, students have expressed the quality of the course has increased because of the increased diversity of the classes, citing engaging conversations and diversity of thought.

4. The new technology on campus helps in delivering daily lessons, and use of assessment data, though early in its adoption, will continue to drive the learning.

5. The equity team, composed of fifteen teachers, who study and implement strategies designed to lessen the achievement gap, and provide opportunities for all students to succeed in courses that may previously have been closed to them.
The visiting committee recommends the following areas as follow up items:

1. Continue to work with communication strategies in spreading news to parents and students. Proactively reaching out to parents will develop a strong community relationship.
2. Continue working with staff members concerning implementation of common core/NGSS in the classroom.
3. Continue departmental work in building common assessments and content strategies, and using collected data to refine the curriculum.
4. Continue implementation of SIOP strategies in content specific courses. Continue to develop a rigorous ELD program that addresses the Common Core ELA standards and scaffolds for ELD 1, ELD II, ELD III.