



## High Schools That Work Profile

# SREB

## Louisiana High School Weathers the Storm to Become a Leader in Student Achievement and High Graduation Rates

*High Schools That Work (HSTW)* is very pleased to have been an external partner to help leaders and teachers at Warren Easton Charter High School implement the *HSTW* Goals and Key Practices and sustain a continuous improvement effort. School and teacher leaders at Warren Easton have changed the school environment from a culture of failure to a culture where failure is no longer an option. The school is organized by career focus, with teachers meeting weekly to plan quality experiences for students. Teachers provide an array of support for students while telling them, "You can do it, and we are going to help you graduate prepared for the future." School leaders and teachers have taken ownership of the belief that all students can learn at high levels and have created a school climate, engaging instruction and a support system that prove they are right. Warren Easton is proof that when adults at a school change their practices and beliefs, operate on the premise that students can learn at high levels, and connect learning to students' goals and interests, students will be motivated to succeed.

**Gene Bottoms**  
SREB Senior Vice President

### Introduction

**Warren Easton Charter High School**, a legendary high school in New Orleans, Louisiana, has weathered changes of many types, including Hurricane Katrina in 2005. As it implements the *HSTW* improvement model, Warren Easton is now receiving attention for the academic successes of its 100 percent minority student body.

"Know your students," advises Principal **Alexina Medley**, who leads a staff of administrators, teachers and specialists working together to prepare students academically, technically and socially for a future in further education and careers. "We believe every child can learn if given the push to succeed," Medley said.

Warren Easton's efforts have paid off in higher achievement scores, an attendance rate of more than 96 percent, a graduation rate of 98 percent and a dropout rate of less than 1 percent.<sup>1</sup> The school has enjoyed continuous improvement for the past three years. It received a baseline School Performance Score from the state of 76.6 percent in 2007-2008, climbing to 91 percent in 2008-2009 and improving to 92.6 percent in 2009-2010. The 2010 score incorporated 2010 test scores plus 2009 attendance and dropout figures.

<sup>1</sup> Districts that were heavily impacted by the hurricanes of 2005-2006, including Orleans Parish (in which Warren Easton High School is located), do not have graduation cohort results from 2005-2006 to 2008-2009. Graduation rates reported here reflect the percentage of enrolling seniors who earn a regular diploma at the end of the school year.

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## Rich in Tradition

Some background information on Warren Easton is appropriate in exploring what is happening at the school and how it is being accomplished. Established in 1845 as the first public high school for boys in Louisiana, Warren Easton is now a coed school enrolling about 850 students from throughout Orleans Parish Schools. The student population is more than 96 percent black, 3 percent Hispanic, and less than 1 percent Asian. Students come primarily from working-class families. The school was closed during the 2005-2006 school year after the costly and deadly Hurricane Katrina caused families to evacuate the city. It reopened for the 2006-2007 school year as a charter school with a board, operating through the Warren Easton Charter Foundation. “We have a board, but we also follow the guidelines of the state and the district,” Medley said.

In its new role as a charter school, Warren Easton has stepped up its efforts to raise student achievement. “We were already implementing some of the *High Schools That Work* Key Practices before the hurricane,” Medley said. The partnership began in 2004 when Warren Easton Senior High School was an Orleans Parish Select School focused on providing students with a college-preparatory education. *HSTW* contracted to work with the school to support its continuous school improvement efforts.

Medley was the district *HSTW* coordinator when the decision was made to adopt *HSTW*. “We looked at several models, but the *High Schools That Work* initiative was the best fit for Warren Easton,” Medley said. Previously an assistant principal at the school, Medley returned to Warren Easton as principal in 2006-2007.

## Faithful to the *HSTW* Design

When the school reopened after Katrina, it began a concerted effort to implement the *HSTW* design, embracing the Key Practices and receiving coaching from an *HSTW* school improvement consultant. The school received support in the form of a Site Development Workshop in August 2008 and a Technical Assistance Visit<sup>2</sup> in October 2008.

**A definite strength for the school was the fact that key school leaders, two administrators assistants and the *HSTW* school improvement coordinator — all dedicated to the *HSTW* Goals, Conditions and Key Practices — remained with the school after Hurricane Katrina.** District curriculum content specialists chart the school’s progress and provide assistance in carrying out the model.

Warren Easton has received professional development and school improvement coaching support from *HSTW* in the areas of high expectations, programs of study, challenging academic and career/technical (CT) studies, teachers working together, engaging instructional strategies, teachers as advisers, extra help and transitions, literacy development, and continuous improvement. The *HSTW* school improvement consultant has participated in classroom walkthrough events with instructional coaches for literacy, mathematics and career/technical education (CTE), followed by conferencing with the observed teachers and debriefing with the administrative team.

## What It Takes to Graduate

Every student expecting to receive a diploma from Warren Easton Charter High School must complete a challenging academic core of four English/language arts, four mathematics, four science and four social studies courses. “This is a Louisiana requirement now, but our school had the requirement long before the state,” Medley said. “We tell our students, ‘If you want to graduate from Warren Easton, this is what you will need to do.’ ”

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<sup>2</sup> The Technical Assistance Visit (TAV) is a three-day review of school and classroom practices, led by an SREB school improvement consultant and a team that includes members of the community and educators from other schools. The TAV team reviews school data, conducts interviews with multiple groups from the school community and observes classroom instruction using a protocol that has been refined through more than two decades of experience. At the end of the TAV, the team provides the school with a debriefing of its findings, which include promising practices taking place at the school, challenges remaining and recommendations for addressing challenges.

**Table 1:  
Students Completing the *HSTW*-Recommended Curriculum and Meeting the Readiness Goals:  
Warren Easton and Other All-Minority Schools in Louisiana**

	Warren Easton Charter High School	Eight All-Minority <i>HSTW</i> Schools in Louisiana
<b>Percentages of 12th-Graders Completing the <i>HSTW</i>-Recommended Curriculum</b>		
Four CP English Courses	96%	40%
Four CP Math Courses	89	66
Three Science Courses	100	67
<b>Percentages of 12th-Graders Meeting the <i>HSTW</i> College- and Career-Readiness Goals</b>		
Reading	91%	33%
Mathematics	65	32
Science	65	22

Source: 2010 *HSTW* Assessment

The 2010 *HSTW* Assessment showed that Warren Easton students reported completing the *HSTW*-recommended academic curriculum (at least four English/language arts courses, four math courses and three science courses) to a much higher degree than students from the eight other all-minority *HSTW* sites in Louisiana. Whereas 96 percent of Warren Easton students reported completing the English curriculum, 89 percent the math curriculum and 100 percent the science curriculum, the results at the other minority schools totaled 40 percent in English, 66 percent in math and 67 percent in science. **Warren Easton seniors participating in the 2010 *HSTW* Assessment also met the college- and career-readiness goals in reading, mathematics and science at a much higher rate than seniors from the eight other all-minority *HSTW* sites in the state.** (See table 1.)

High percentages of Warren Easton students see the importance of high school studies to their future aspirations. Every student participating in the 2010 *HSTW* Assessment said it is very important to graduate from high school, 94 percent said it is very important to attend all of their classes, and 93 percent said it is very important to continue their education beyond high school.

## A High-Priority Area for the School

One high-priority area for the school is the effort to prepare 30 to 40 percent of students to reach the Advanced level of performance on the state Graduation Exit Exam (GEE). The spring 2009 GEE showed small percentages of Warren Easton students scoring at the Advanced level of achievement in English/language arts, mathematics, science and social studies. The largest percentages of students were at the Basic level.

“We were on the way before the storm, but now we all want it,” Medley said of the effort to prepare more students at a higher level. “We can see it happening with the students and the teachers.”

Medley emphasizes the philosophy of higher standards for all students in interviews with prospective faculty members and in professional development and everyday interaction with the current staff. **“I ask them to look at lesson plans, and I give them time to do it,”** she said. “Teachers have opportunities to look at the core curriculum and to study data on individual students and groups of similar students. They have time to discuss students’ strengths and weaknesses.”

To help students meet high standards, Warren Easton has established an extra-help program that includes credit recovery, seat-time recovery, academic catch-up led by an assistant principal on Saturdays, and tutoring before and after school and on Saturdays. Two interventionists — one for math and science and the other for English/language arts and social studies — monitor students' progress in the program and help with remediation in the classroom. **“We say the extra-help programs are optional, but we don’t give students much choice,” Medley said. “We work with students and parents to ensure that students get the help they need.”**

Students are monitored for absences, tardies and disciplinary occurrences. “We believe a student should be out of school only if there is no other choice,” Medley said. “We want to help every student remain in school.”

## Teachers Meet Together

Teachers are organized into small learning communities for curriculum and instruction, classroom management and technology. Every teacher participates, and the groups meet every Tuesday.

The school is moving in the direction of peer observations of rigor and student engagement in the classroom. In January 2011, every teacher was assigned to observe another teacher on a certain day. In February, teachers chose who they wanted to observe. The observations will be followed by feedback and discussion.

Teachers are encouraged to blend academic and real-life content in their classes. The school reading coach supports teachers with strategies to improve reading and writing in the content areas and with ways to implement the school plan of literacy across the curriculum. The reading coach also assists struggling readers. The plan to boost students' reading and writing skills is basically the same as the state literacy plan. “All of our teachers work together to improve students' literacy skills,” Medley said. Reading and writing are incorporated into all subjects.

Teachers also are working to improve numeracy across the curriculum. “Math and science teachers are asked to support rigor and relevance by expecting students to use the content as if they were mathematicians or scientists in real life,” Medley said.

Students recognize the special efforts being made to emphasize numeracy across the curriculum. On the 2010 *HSTW* Assessment, 94 percent of Warren Easton seniors reported using math in classes other than mathematics at least monthly, 89 percent said they solved math problems with more than one possible answer at least monthly, and 91 percent said they solved math problems other than those found in the textbook at least monthly.

**Teachers assign complex, authentic problems that require students to draw upon several mathematics skills.** As a result, students develop their reasoning skills, their understanding of math concepts and their fluency in using proper math procedures.

## Transition Efforts Make a Difference

Medley pointed out two improvements that have made a difference for students at Warren Easton: strengthening the eighth- to ninth-grade transition and making the senior year count. By requiring students to take all four core academic courses in the 12th grade, the school is ensuring that students do not become distracted and lose their focus on the goal of graduating and succeeding in the next step.

A four-week summer program before the ninth grade is offered on a first-come, first-served basis, but school officials make an effort to include every student who needs the extra boost for success. The summer students take English/language arts, math and computer skills courses.

If students lack sufficient scores for high school courses, they take a double dose of English/language arts and math as ninth-graders. These double-dose courses are designed around instructional units in which teachers use a range of proven strategies to increase students' mastery of essential math concepts needed for success in high school and to advance students' ability to read and interpret printed materials and to express themselves orally and in writing.

The freshman academy at Warren Easton gives ninth-graders a successful beginning and a continuing focus on achievement for the remainder of high school. Housed separately on the third floor of the building, the academy brings ninth-graders and their teachers together in a nurturing setting. In addition to taking the core courses, students receive a year-long introduction to career fields and modern technology. They take field trips to colleges and universities as well as cultural and historic sites in the city. “Most inner-city students don’t know much about their own city,” Medley said. “We want students to see what is available and to discover what people are doing in professions that they might want to enter.”

**The intent of these efforts in the ninth-grade academy is to help ninth-graders discover their interests and aspirations and to begin to see how to connect a high school program of study to a career, postsecondary studies, or some form of advanced training.** Warren Easton has organized around students’ interests and has based its high school studies on a solid academic core with a series of career-oriented courses that interest students.

Freshmen students have a ninth-grade counselor who works with them in the academy. The counselor helps students prepare to choose a concentration for the remainder of high school. The counselor also keeps track of attendance and discipline matters to be able to secure intervention as needed.

“Ninth- and 10th-grade teachers have the same planning period, which makes it easier for them to discuss expectations for students for the coming year,” Medley said.

## Student Support and Close-Knit Mentoring Groups

Students stay with the same homeroom teachers in grades 10, 11 and 12 to form close-knit groups with mentoring in a supportive environment. Counselors meet individually with students, present information to all students in their homerooms and conduct grade-level meetings to provide guidance and advisement information to help students stay on course for graduation and beyond. They also conduct grade-level parent nights to provide information to parents on how students are progressing, what they are preparing to do in the future and what it will take for them to achieve their goals.

One hundred percent of Warren Easton seniors participating in the 2010 *HSTW* Assessment said a teacher or a counselor talked with them individually about plans for a career or further education after high school. All of these students also reported that someone from a college talked with them about going to college. Eighty-seven percent said they and/or their parents received information or assistance from someone at the school in selecting or applying to college.

**“We have increased our graduation rate by letting students know that they cannot drop out of school,” Medley said. “We support them with reading intervention and a technology center — and with everything a student needs to become successful.”**

## Real-Life Success Stories

Sometimes the support goes over and above what other schools might think necessary to save a student:

Principal Medley tells the story of a student who was cutting school and was suspected of setting fires in the restroom. She sent him to a fire prevention course and required him to teach other students about fire prevention. “This student had potential but was crying out for attention,” Medley said. Teachers began taking notice of the student and trying to help him. Finally, after a number of absences in senior year, the principal assigned him to color-code his record of absences, tardies and grades to illustrate how he had been performing. She also asked other students to phone or text him to make sure he arrived at school on time. “He comes to school on time now, and he even participates in the Saturday extra-help sessions,” Medley said. “He wants to graduate from Warren Easton.”

In another example, the principal persuaded three students who failed Senior English and therefore did not receive diplomas in 2010 to return to school in the fall. “I knew if we didn’t help them, they wouldn’t receive a diploma anywhere,” she said. These students attended school every day in full uniform. They took Senior English in the first block of the AB schedule and did volunteer work — such as helping the school nurse or doing office work — in the second block. All three were scheduled to receive their diplomas by the end of 2010.

## Modern Career/Technical Education

When Warren Easton reopened in 2005, it also unfurled a modern CTE department as opposed to vocational education courses of the past. Students have access to concentrations based on seven of the 16 clusters in the States' Career Clusters Initiative (SCCI): arts, business and business management, education and training, health science, hospitality and tourism, information technology, and marketing.

The school has received a grant to establish an after-school program that includes a STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) academy that will be available to students by the end of the 2010-2011 school year. It will incorporate engineering, robotics, biotechnology and other rigorous career areas for at-risk students as well as students with an aptitude for any of the areas.

**Eighty-four percent of Warren Easton students complete the four courses necessary for a CT concentration.** Since all students take two year-long required courses in the ninth grade — Education for Careers and Introduction to Business Computer Applications (IBCA) — students need only two more CT courses for a four-course concentration.

The Education for Careers course in the freshman academy covers a multitude of learning opportunities, from the Web-based Achieve3000 literacy program to career counseling, college and career information, field trips, guest speakers and life skills education. Achieve3000 is an individualized online program designed to accelerate reading comprehension, vocabulary, writing proficiency and performance on high-stakes tests. The program incorporates non-fiction articles from sources such as the Associated Press (AP) that are categorized by subject area such as math or science. An estimated 40 percent of Warren Easton ninth-graders use the program at home in addition to using it at school.

### *Equipping Students for Life*

**Emily McLendon**, technology coordinator and CTE department chair, spent 23 years as a technology/business teacher before heading the CTE effort at Warren Easton in 2006. "Career/technical education is for everyone," said McLendon, who is national board certified in CTE. "All students need to acquire skills that will equip them for life."

**Warren Easton students see the value of quality CT studies and report positive experiences.** On the 2010 *HSTW* Assessment, 88 percent of students said they completed a project that first required some research and a written plan before completing the task in a CT class at least once a semester. Seventy-six percent said they had challenging assignments in CT classes at least monthly.

The Warren Easton CTE department is in the process of connecting its program areas to industry-based certification so that students can qualify for credentials that will prove to employers that they are skilled in certain areas. The computer courses already result in various certifications and the hospitality and tourism program is part of the National Academy Foundation (NAF) leading to certification.

A total of 90 students in entrepreneurship, sports medicine and health science are earning college credit through a dual enrollment program with Delgado Community College in New Orleans. The next area for dual enrollment is expected to be hospitality and tourism.

Some 30 students participated in work-based learning programs in 2009-2010. They served as paid and non-paid interns at companies where they received experience with business and marketing careers that entail more than "flipping burgers." Through these off-campus experiences, McLendon said, "students are finding that they can move up the career ladder."

### *Learning Valuable Skills*

One thing McLendon emphasizes to students is that they can learn skills while in high school that will result in money in their pockets now as well as later. For example, she encourages computer students to design Web pages for people who are willing to pay for that service. "People who need a website don't care if you are still in school," she tells students. "They just want someone who can do the job."

The CTE department is a cohesive group of instructors who meet regularly to talk about sequencing, prerequisites, and what teachers and students are accomplishing in raising achievement. All CT teachers attend national conferences to keep abreast of trends and advances in the field.

In addition to active participation in the school's literacy initiative, CT teachers welcomed one of their colleagues from the English department who wanted to work together with them to improve the guidelines and the quality of lab reports and other written materials. As a result, students learned more about using the writing styles and formats of English classes to research and write reports on careers such as civil engineer or health scientist, including educational requirements, salary levels and job availability.

"We are addressing students' needs, and it is making teachers feel special to be able to do that," McLendon said.

## Small Changes for Success

Principal Medley suggests small changes that can make a big difference in whether a student succeeds or not. "When students come up with great ideas, help them put them into practice," she said. One group of students organized a chess club and wrote their own announcements seeking members. "They were building study skills and higher-order thinking skills at the same time," she said.

- Students often learn things in extracurricular activities that they can take back to the classroom or share with the community. Warren Easton students conduct coat drives for needy people and teach elementary school students how to plant gardens. They also read to pre-school students in the inner city.
- All field trip packets urge students to analyze what they have seen — not just what they did but what they thought about the experience.
- The school sponsors an academic pep rally at the end of the first semester. Students with high GPAs run out onto the floor like football players when their names are announced to the crowd.
- Students receive progress reports every two weeks; parents can access the reports online.

Although parental involvement varies from event to event during the year, the school has a parent liaison on staff and "bombards" parents with information concerning their children.

Asked how other schools might improve performance and keep more students in school until graduation, Medley said, "Find ways for teachers to work together in the best configuration for your school. That is paramount in getting them to work together." She believes teachers are more comfortable meeting and talking with their peers to develop and carry out plans for raising student achievement.

Warren Easton Charter High School is receiving well-deserved attention in the *HSTW* network and the nation for its efforts to prepare all students to achieve at a higher level. Actress Sandra Bullock has carried the banner for Warren Easton in the national media as a major contributor to the school's new medical and dental clinic located on campus.

**The school website contains this message from Principal Medley: "...the staff and I at Easton are committed to providing a stable environment in which you will flourish. While many things have changed within our city, Warren Easton's reputation of discipline, respect and success has not been one of them. Our goal is excellence, and our striving to reach this goal must be a cooperative effort."**

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