



Press Release

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Nov. 9, 2015

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Whittier High Wins Prestigious Golden Bell Award

State Recognizes School's Academic Mentor Program

WHITTIER, CA – It was five years ago that Whittier High School implemented its Academic Mentor Program – a strategic intervention tool that provides in-class academic support to at-risk students with the help, guidance and mentorship of peers. Since its inception, the program's success rates have been significant, showcased by vastly improving student test scores and rising GPAs.

The innovative program has caught the eyes of state education leaders from the California School Boards Association (CSBA), which is honoring Whittier High School with a Golden Bell Award, a recognition earned by California school districts with outstanding educational programs and practices that promote excellence and increase student achievement.

"Whittier High School is extraordinarily proud of the Academic Mentor program," Principal Lori Eshilian said. "This program epitomizes our Cardinals with C.L.A.S.S. core values – students demonstrating Citizenship, Leadership, Achievement, Self-Respect and Service to others."

Whittier High – a two-time Golden Bell Award-winning school – will receive the award at a recognition ceremony on Dec. 5 at CSBA's Education Conference in San Diego.

"This prestigious award validates the dedication our teachers, staff and student leaders who ensure that this program achieves its ultimate goal of providing support and intervention to help all of our students succeed," Eshilian said.

The Academic Mentor program grew out of the school's Senator/Link Crew program, which draws on help from student leaders and upperclassmen to build school spirit, promote engagement, help freshmen adjust to high school and provide emotional and personal support.

Although the Academic Mentor initiative has many of the same goals, the dual-intervention program – inspired by Rio Hondo College's Gateway Tutoring Program – also supports both mentors and mentees, providing freshmen who are at risk of not graduating with academic support while giving mentors the opportunity to receive training and learn instructional techniques that boost their own academic abilities.

"There is a preponderance of evidence that demonstrates how difficult it is for students to graduate high school if they got off track during their freshman year," said Assistant Principal of Curriculum Tim Liggett. "We have focused a significant amount of time to being proactive and preventative."

The Academic Mentor Program includes juniors and seniors who serve in 79 classes on campus, including guided studies and math, tutor English language learners and support sophomores in science.

“An Academic Mentor in a classroom is nothing like the traditional high school teacher’s aide. They are not there to simply circulate around the room during independent work to answer questions,” said Martha Arrona, Intervention Coordinator and the Academic Mentor Program Lead. “Instead, they are fully integrated into the teacher’s lesson so that they have identified responsibilities while working with specific students and collaborative learning groups.”

By providing struggling students an additional layer of support that is timely and individualized, Whittier High has seen a rise in student achievement.

For example, the percentage of all ninth-grade students who end their freshman year on-track to graduate has increased from 85.5 percent in 2011 to 89.2 percent in 2015. For 10th-grade students, on-track percentages have grown from 84.6 percent in 2011 and 88.4 percent in 2015.

The program also continues to grow among student mentors: in 2013, there were 140 students who were a part of the program; this year, there are 250.

“Through the Academic Mentor Program, each student grows socially and academically, learns to be self-motivated and develops in a collaborative environment that prepares them for life beyond high school,” Whittier Union High School District Superintendent Sandra Thorstenson said. “This level of achievement is a remarkable example of the foresight, innovation and leadership each of our schools foster every day.”

PHOTO CAPTION:

GOLDENBELL: An Academic Mentor at Whittier High School assists a student with in-class tutoring. The program is a strategic intervention tool that provides in-class academic support to at-risk students with the help, guidance and mentorship of peers. The program is being recognized with a 2015 Golden Bell Award.

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The Whittier Union High School District provides all students with an engaging, quality standards-based instructional program delivered by a well-trained staff resulting in improved student achievement.

Whittier Union High School District works to achieve and maintain excellence in providing a comprehensive education for all students.

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