

## A CASE STUDY WITH FREMONT HIGH SCHOOL

# Forging Equitable Grading Practices in Ninth Grade



### SCHOOL SNAPSHOT

## Fremont High School

DISTRICT: OAKLAND UNIFIED

Total number of students	1,146
Total number of ninth graders	339
Percent of English language learners	56%
Percent of students eligible for free or reduced lunch	95%

Leaders at Fremont High School firmly believe that a positive ninth grade experience is the foundation for a student's success in high school.

As a founding member of CORE Districts' [Breakthrough Success Community \(BTSC\)](#), Fremont first began to apply improvement science to their work in ninth grade in spring 2019. They've since adopted BTSC's full theory of improvement, which incorporates five elements critical to a successful ninth grade experience:

1. Adult teaming.
2. The eighth-to-ninth-grade transition.
3. Student-adult relationships.
4. Master scheduling.
5. Equitable grading practices.

While Fremont leaders and teachers have made strides in all five of BTSC's drivers for ninth grade success, they've generated particular momentum around grading practices. Leaders have previously identified that increasing equity in grading practices is a key need at the school, recognizing that grading should reflect students' knowledge and abilities and be motivational rather than punitive.

Given that teachers have significant autonomy over their grading practices, Principal Nidya Baez knew that any efforts to change mindsets and practices around grading would need to be supported and led by teachers. With this in mind, she created a teacher-run working group and a five-year vision for how the staff might collectively move toward mastery-based grading systems.



## Fremont's Approach to Grading Practices

Seeing an alignment between BTSC's approach and Fremont's emerging grading philosophy, Principal Baez strategically leveraged BTSC's on-track expertise and improvement science coaching support to evolve the school's ninth grade grading practices. BTSC's recommendations focused on establishing policies (including grading minimums and eliminating zeroes) and practices (such as make-up days and retakes) that accurately describe student proficiency and offer students multiple opportunities to demonstrate mastery. Taken together, these fundamental policies and practices change students' and teachers' relationships to grades and reduce the number of students who receive failing grades.

BTSC supported the continued development of equitable grading at Fremont by providing:

- Actionable and timely grade data reports.
- Frequent coaching for on-track team members.
- Detailed protocols for equitable grading policies and practices.

BTSC also helped enable Fremont leaders to assign and compensate ninth grade staff as BTSC "Driver Champions" who lead the improvement work in their assigned driver areas. These roles allow teachers to be at the center of improving ninth grade structures and routines. With this support from BTSC, Fremont leaders were able to reorganize their staff and schedules to better support their ninth grade efforts by:

### CREATING BUY-IN AND BUILDING TEACHER CAPACITY

Principal Baez and her team strategically appointed Mr. Sunny Chan—an experienced and influential algebra teacher—as grading champion. Initially skeptical about the new grading recommendations, Mr. Chan became a passionate advocate for equitable grading over the course of his participation in BTSC. Mr. Chan is also the gradebook platform administrator for the school, giving him natural opportunities to discuss grading approaches with colleagues and use the gradebook system as a mechanism for driving change.

### REPURPOSING BIWEEKLY GRADE-LEVEL LEARNING COMMUNITY TIME

Fremont leaders shifted community meeting time to include more collaboration relating to BTSC drivers, particularly grading. While Fremont's ninth grade team already had a strong professional learning community facilitated by teacher leaders, the distributed leadership among champions led to more staff requesting time on the agenda to share data, content resources, and ideas for change.

"[Principal Baez] has always been unwavering that investing in ninth graders is investing in all students and their success."

**Amanda Meyer, BTSC coach**

"The benefit of CORE is that they have been able to help us improve on the ninth grade work we are already doing to support our kids. ... With CORE, we have been able to build trust with our coach, build trust with the network, learn about new practices and tools, and see the benefit of working in collaboration with other schools across the network."

**Principal Nidya Baez**

Agendas led by Mr. Chan have included exploring anonymized teacher gradebooks to demonstrate how specific assignment types, naming conventions, weighting, and scores may or may not be clear, strategic, and equitable. With follow-up coaching from Mr. Chan, teachers are better equipped to identify and test changes to their gradebook settings and contents.



### TESTING NEW GRADING POLICIES

To promote buy-in, change teacher mindsets, and determine opportunities for teachers to refine assignment expectations, Fremont leaders tested out new grading policies. In fall 2023, after several years of experimenting with their grading practices, the entire algebra 1 team switched to a full standards-based mastery grading system and has seen a dramatic change in how they interact with students around assignments and tests.

### INTRODUCING STRUCTURES THAT ALLOW STUDENTS TO MAKE UP WORK

To give students more opportunities to succeed, Fremont leaders instituted options like “Power Hour,” which is hosted twice per grading period and allows students to make up work, retake tests, talk to their teachers about prioritizing assignments, and strengthen relationships with their teachers.

In the 2022-23 school year, leaders collaborated with the district’s central academic recovery team to repurpose weekly advisory periods to reteach key algebra standards to a select group of students with strong attendance but failing grades. This creative use of time during the school day led to 12 additional students leaving ninth grade caught up on algebra credits.

## Teacher and Student Impact

As a result of their work with BTSC, Fremont teachers feel a greater sense of ownership over their school’s ninth grade initiatives; collaborate more closely and vulnerably with one another; and are more disciplined in designing and studying changes to their practice. The school’s teams are systematizing routines like creating opportunities for students to make up work and creating consistency with structures such as common grading policies.

At the same time, students are displaying increased capacity in their abilities to discuss their learning goals and growth and to understand how to get the support they need. These new grading practices ultimately empower students to understand and improve their grades, while transforming how teachers and students interact around assignments and tests.

These successes, as well as other Fremont efforts across BTSC’s five drivers, have resulted in notable improvements in Fremont’s ninth grade off-track rate, which BTSC calculates on behalf of schools in its network using a combination of course grades, GPAs, total credits earned, and attendance rates. The school has also experienced a substantial increase in enrollment in recent years, going from being under-enrolled to having a lengthy waiting list. As a change-making school, Fremont is a place where students and families want to be.

#### Ninth Grade Off-Track Rate in 2017-18

60%

#### Ninth Grade Off-Track Rate in 2021-22

54%








# Appendix

## RESOURCE SHIFTS

To support their new grading efforts, Fremont leaders shifted how they organize staff, allocate resources, and use scheduled time.

RESOURCE SHIFT	DESCRIPTION
 Teacher assignment practices	Fremont leaders were intentional about assigning their BTSC grading “Driver Champion” and their “BTSC Team Leads”—all of whom are leaders in their school community and have more than 15 years of experience at the school. Leaders also built capacity for these teachers to lead by providing them with BTSC coaching support and learning sessions, which focus on sharing best practices and learnings with teams across the BTSC network.
 Strategic teacher schedules	Fremont leaders dedicate time before, during, and after school for ninth grade teacher collaboration and flexible student support structures like “Power Hour,” enabling them to maximize student and teacher participation without losing instructional or planning minutes during the school day.
 Data and systems	Leaders enhanced their use of data and systems and now consistently use student off-track data from BTSC and gradebook data to support their shared student collaboration efforts. This practice enables them to monitor student progress and assess the impact of their practices and strategies.