

By EVE HIGHTOWER  
[ehightower@modbee.com](mailto:ehightower@modbee.com)

*Last Updated: April 5, 2007, 09:48:56 AM PDT*

WATERFORD — Waterford High School's motto is "worst to first," and that's just what students have done since the campus opened six years ago.

"Waterford High School was at the bottom of the barrel," The Bee reported in 2003 after the state released its Academic Performance Index rankings.

Waterford received a pair of "1" rankings on a scale of 1 to 10: well below average in test scores, and well below average compared with schools whose students had similar social and economic backgrounds.

"It was all over the front page, and we probably deserved it," said Will Frey, who has taught science at Waterford since the school opened in 2001. "We decided not to make excuses and figure out what we can do."

The low scores inspired the faculty to look inward rather than point to the sundry reasons why students might not do as well as those from more affluent areas with two-parent families.

"When you start making excuses, you just sound lame," Principal Don Davis said.

Ultimately, Waterford's pair of 1s propelled the school forward. Last week, the school won a state Title I Academic Achievement Award. And school officials expect to take home a California Distinguished School award this month.

Both awards take into account that the school rose to a 10 and an 8 in this year's API scores from the state Department of Education.

"It's very rare for a school to move up in ranks that much," said Pat McCabe, director of the Policy and Evaluation Division for the California Department of Education. "What's unique about that is, in order to move, you not only have to leap over everyone ahead of you, but do it at a greater rate than the rest of the state."

### **Teachers aren't complacent**

The nerve it took teachers to accept the blame for low scores still is evident as they experiment with teaching aids and philosophies rather than settle into the perception they have achieved enough.

This year, an English teacher has divided classes by gender, to see if students perform differently without the anxiety and distraction the opposite sex might bring to the classroom. So far, boys and girls are scoring about equally on tests, and the classes separated by gender are outperforming mixed classes, Davis said.

Some experiments have been implemented schoolwide. Students use hand-held whiteboards to provide direct feedback to teachers in the classroom. The teacher asks a question and students write the answer on the boards.

Whiteboards help teachers spot those lagging behind without embarrassing them by drilling them during class. If at least 80 percent of the class gives the correct answer, the teacher moves on. Teachers identify those students who don't understand and can work with them separately. And students who have trouble with a subject can take an elective class that helps them keep up.

If less than 80 percent of the class understands a lesson, the instructor teaches it again. The technique has helped students such as senior Krista Montgomery, 18, who wrestled with algebra.

"I knew I was struggling, but I'm not the type to go up and ask for help," she said. "This way, teachers know if I'm struggling."

To keep students alert, teachers also randomly call on students by pulling names written on Popsicle sticks.

"It keeps us more awake in class knowing we'd have to answer questions," said senior Leti Dominguez, 17.

### **Middle schools prepare students well**

Principal Davis also attributes success to getting students from good middle schools such as Hickman, which is a Distinguished School and just earned two 10s in state rankings for the second year in a row. Hickman has adopted many of Waterford High's instruction techniques, said Vicki Porter, the charter school's vice principal.

"Kids who don't know (answers) try to be invisible, but you cannot be invisible here," Porter said.

When Leti started attending Waterford four years ago, she said, she doubted the school would be noticed for anything but poor performance.

"I knew it wasn't going to be the best, but it was a quick turn," she said. "I'm excited to see how much we've grown since then, and know I was part of it."

**To comment, click on the link with this story at <http://www.modbee.com/>. Bee staff writer Eve Hightower can be reached at 578-2382 or [ehightower@modbee.com](mailto:ehightower@modbee.com).**