

Texas District-Wide Initiatives

A Summary of:

“Equity-Driven Achievement-Focused School Districts: A Report on Systemic School Success in Four Texas School Districts Serving Diverse Student Populations” (September 2000) University of Texas at Austin. By Linda Skrla, James Scheurich and Joseph Johnson, Jr.

Focus

- Early Childhood
- ✓ Primary School
- ✓ Middle School
- ✓ Secondary School
- Postsecondary
- Extended Learning

Overview

In 1999, four Texas school districts — Aldine, Brazosport, San Benito and Wichita Falls — were selected for study by the evaluators because they had brought about widespread academic success for children from low income homes and children of color. Researchers found five common themes among the districts. First, Texas developed a State Context of Accountability for achievement and equity, making a change from input-driven accountability to results-driven accountability. The change required schools to get a specific percentage of students to pass a state assessment of reading, writing and mathematics skills in order to maintain state accreditation. Second, Local Equity Catalysts pressured the district into improving. These catalysts included revitalized federal desegregation orders, monitors assigned to the districts by the state due to dysfunctional district governance and local activists or community groups concerned about accountability data evidence of inequitable student achievement. Third, the Ethical Response of District Leadership involved district leaders deciding to develop a district in which all student groups achieve at high levels. Fourth, District Transformation involved changing teaching and learning practices in the classroom. Finally, an

POPULATION

Aldine: Of 49,453 students in 56 schools in 1999, 36% were African American, 47% were Latino, and 14% were white. Seventy-one percent were low-income.

Brazosport: Of 13,247 students in 19 schools, 9% were African American, 33% were Latino, and 56% were white. Thirty-nine percent were low-income.

San Benito: Of 8,697 students in 17 schools, 0% were African American, 97% were Latino and 3% were white. Eighty-seven percent were low-income.

Wichita Falls: Of 15,293 students in 31 schools, 16% were African American, 18% were Latino, and 63% were white. Forty-six percent were low-income.

attitude of “Everyday Equity” was adopted and profoundly changed many educators’ outlooks. As a result of developing reform along these five common themes, all four districts demonstrated what evaluators called “impressive gains” in passing rates for all student groups on all TAAS tests over six years.

Key Findings

Aldine: Between 1994-99, the percentage of African American students passing all TAAS tests increased, on average, 35.6% (from 36.9% to 72.5%). The percentage of Latino students passing the tests increased 31% (from 48.9% to 79.5%). For whites, the increase was 19% (from 67.7% to 87.4%).

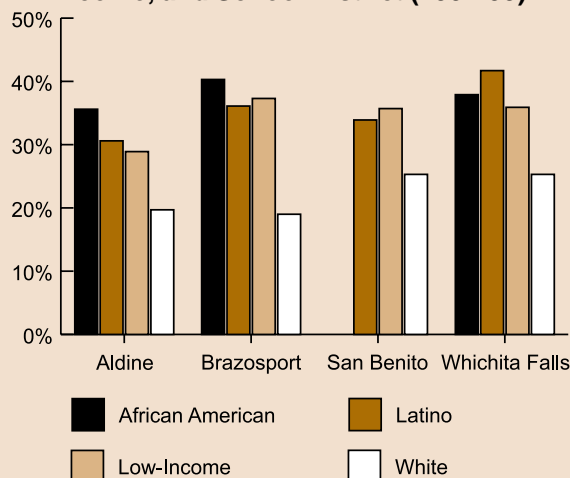
Brazosport: In the same time period, the increase in percentage of African American students passing the TAAS tests was 40.3% (from 42.9% to 83.2%), and 31% for Latinos (52% to 88.1%). The increase for white students was 19% (from 76.8% to 95.8%).

San Benito: The percentage of Latinos passing the tests was 33.9% (from 45% to 89.6%), while for whites the increase was 25.3% (from 64.3% to 89.6%). (In 1999, the district had no African American students).

Wichita Falls: Increases in the TAAS were 37.9% for African American students (from 29% to 66.9%), 41.7% for Latinos (from 35.9% to 77.6%) and 25.3% for whites (from 64.5 to 87.8%).

Increases in attendance rates from 1994 to 1999 were 0.8% for Aldine (95.1% in 1999), 1.2% for

TAAS Score Increases by Race, Ethnicity, Income, and School District (1994-99)



Brazosport (96.2%), 1.2% for San Benito (95.3%) and 1.1% for Wichita (95.9%).

For the State of Texas, average increases in passing rates for all TAAS tests from 1994 to 1999 were: 30.7% for African Americans, 29% for Latinos and 18.5% for white students. Attendance rates increased 0.4% in this period.

Program Components

Program components in each district were related to the five themes described in the Overview above.

- ◆ First, the *Context of Accountability* required schools to get the same percentage of students from each racial and income group to pass the assessment, in order to maintain state accreditation.
- ◆ Second, *Local Equity Catalysts* had a better range of data available to them than ever before. For the four districts, examples of local catalysts were the general public, newspapers, parents, federal judges, community activists, job seekers, local business people and competing schools/districts. Districts were required to report achievement data to Local Equity Catalysts.
- ◆ Third, the *Ethical Response of District Leadership* involved district leaders not just crunching numbers, but adopting a moral philosophy and a goal of making all students and teachers believe they could succeed.
- ◆ Fourth, *District Transformation* involved the strategy of proactive redundancy, or developing multiple ways to reach the same learning goal. For example, if a district wanted to ensure that teachers were being successful with the children in their classes, it might have required principals to visit classes weekly to examine teaching. In addition, a district might have implemented targeted, monthly testing of some sort to check whether children were learning. This provided two focused processes to ensure that the specific goal – teachers' success with students – was met.

- ◆ Finally, the districts reached an attitude of *Everyday Equity* when their high expectations snowballed. For example, as TAAS scores rose, districts reported that more students began taking advanced placement courses.

Contributing Factors

Onsite Technical Assistance

The districts provided peer review teams who gave support and onsite technical assistance to low-performing schools. Schools that needed help monitoring or assessing data also received technical assistance.

Common Sense of Mission

Evaluators reported that teachers, principals and support personnel in all four districts shared a common sense of mission, and that mission statements were backed by a true sense of commitment. Within each district, evaluators found, what they called, “a remarkable consistency” in messages about academic achievement goals transmitted to educators, parents, students and community members.

Information Sharing

“In Wichita Falls, a website available to all staff was created for each specific aspect of the state tests, and this was integrated with potential test questions and exemplary ways to teach the specific skill,” noted the evaluators. In all four districts, staff development was based largely around information sharing — whether online, person-to-person or documented in published resources — about instructional practices.

Standards-Based Curriculum

Instructional practices were revised based on specific learning goals in core subjects for each grade.

Evaluation

Reform leaders carefully studied data and other measurable outcomes to determine how well school-wide changes were working.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

TAAS data is taken from the state database. To understand the changes that have occurred in the districts, a team of six researchers made two, three-day visits to the Aldine, San Benito and Wichita Falls districts. A single, three-day visit was made to Brazosport since this district had been part of an earlier pilot study. While in the districts, researchers interviewed board members, superintendents, central office staff, principals, teachers, parents, community members and business leaders.

EVALUATION & PROGRAM FUNDING

The evaluation was funded by the Sid W. Richardson Foundation. The school districts funded the reform efforts, with low-achieving schools receiving extra funds or special technical assistance on an as-needed basis to implement reform.

GEOGRAPHIC AREAS

The school districts were located in Texas. Aldine is in the northwest Houston metropolitan area, Brazosport is located on the Texas Gulf Coast, San Benito is in the Rio Grande Valley area and Wichita Falls is in northwest Texas.

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