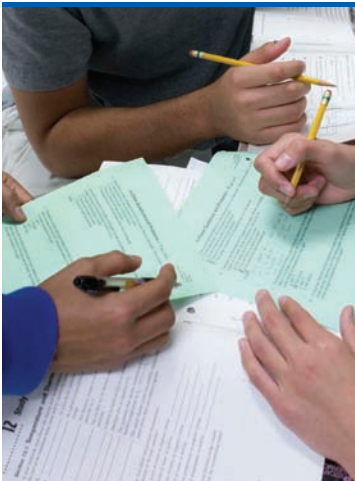


# 2011

## Texas High School Project Site Report: **W. Charles Akins High School** Austin ISD ■ Austin, Texas

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## AKINS HIGH SCHOOL

Between 2004 and 2009, the Texas High School Project (THSP) began an extensive, statewide effort to restructure and revitalize struggling schools through the administration of grants and the provision of expert assistance. Following the conclusion of the grant period, THSP identified four schools as having made meaningful gains in student performance on standardized tests. This report provides an in-depth review of the recent reform efforts made at one of those campuses - Akins High School in the Austin Independent School District (AISD) - and highlights how THSP funding may have contributed to this improvement.

THSP contracted with a research team at the Lyndon B. Johnson (LBJ) School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin to review Akins High School's leadership structure and practices, the effectiveness of its teachers, the learning systems that affect instruction and student performance, and the school's performance management systems that allow for data-driven decision-making. These four impact areas - education leadership, teacher effectiveness, learning systems, and performance management - serve as the framework for this report, as well as for THSP's reform efforts aimed at ensuring all students graduate from high school "college ready, career ready, life ready."<sup>1</sup>

### TEXAS HIGH SCHOOL PROJECT

*Created in 2003, the Texas High School Project is a public-private alliance that includes: the Texas Education Agency; Office of the Governor; Texas Legislature; Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board; Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation; Michael & Susan Dell Foundation; Communities Foundation of Texas; National Instruments; Greater Texas Foundation; and the Meadows Foundation. THSP strives to share and scale what is working in the areas of education leadership, teacher effectiveness, learning systems, and performance management. THSP's work promotes postsecondary access, success, and completion for all students - with a focus on those who are low-income and first-generation college applicants.*

## INTRODUCTION

W. Charles Akins High School opened as a new AISD campus in August of 2000. The school, originally designed to serve 2,300 students, quickly exceeded its capacity. The current student population at Akins is nearly 2,700, 71% of whom are Latino, and 63% are eligible for free or reduced lunch.<sup>2</sup>

As a new campus serving a population with traditionally low levels of family engagement, Akins faced a number of hurdles its first year in operation. In 2002-2003, fewer than 30% of students passed the math and science Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) tests, fewer than 50% passed in English and language arts, and approximately 60% passed in social studies.<sup>3</sup>

During this time, Akins also experienced turnover amongst its administrators. When Mary Alice Deike was hired as head principal at Akins in August 2003, she was the third principal in three years. Deike, who was previously the principal of the high school in nearby Fredericksburg, Texas for eight years, was characterized by interviewees as a visionary leader who developed ideas that were the catalyst for reform at Akins. Though the school's attendance, graduation, and dropout rates were comparable to district averages at the time, the differences between minority and white students enrolled in advanced placement classes and the gap on standardized test scores were troubling to the new principal. Akins also had an issue with gang activity, which created serious discipline issues. Following an analysis of the problems facing Akins, Principal Deike began seeking grant opportunities to help improve the school.

## PARTNERSHIP WITH TEXAS HIGH SCHOOL PROJECT

Principal Deike and several teachers interested in improving student performance at Akins met throughout the 2004-2005 school year to discuss a new school structure and apply for a grant from the Texas High School Project (THSP) to help facilitate this transition. The grant would provide funding for developing and implementing a reform policy built around the concept of small learning communities (SLCs). The goal of the redesign would be to promote a more student-centered school environment that would allow opportunities for more personalized instruction and interventions.

The THSP grant proposal was submitted the following school year and, in June 2005, Akins was awarded a four-year grant for high school redesign. The focus of the first grant year, seen as a planning year at Akins, was on structure: assigning teams, deciding the physical layout of academies in the school building, developing staff assignments, and soliciting buy-in from staff.

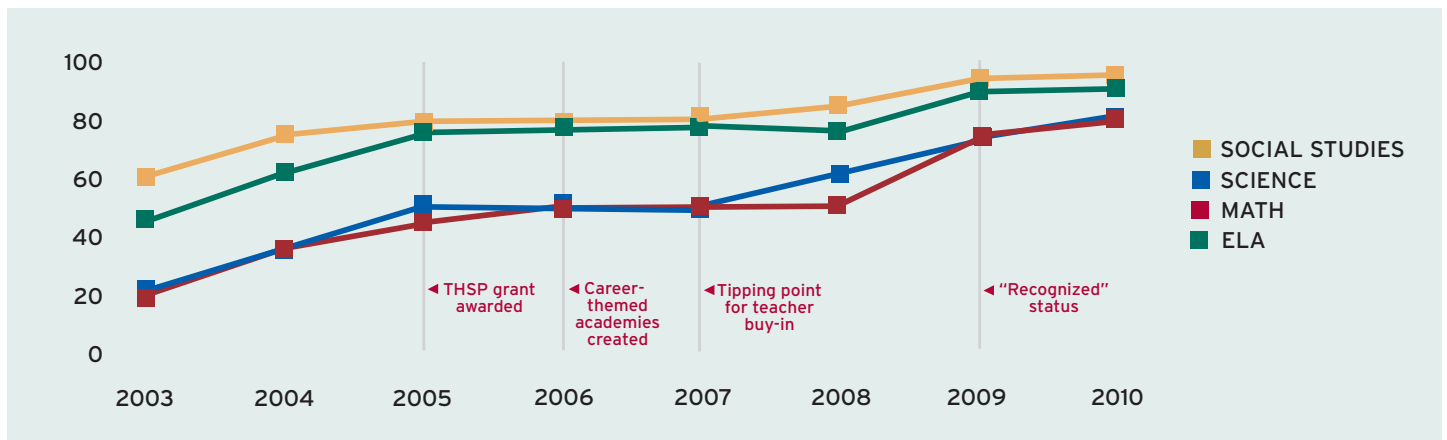
In the second year of the THSP grant, 2006-2007, Akins fully implemented six career-themed academies, including the New Tech High program, funded separately by the Texas Education Agency (TEA). Even with the school organized differently, a number of issues persisted, including power struggles between the new academy administrators and the traditional content area leaders, as well as curriculum alignment across academies.

Principal Deike left Akins at the end of the 2006-2007 school year and was followed by Daniel Girard, who is the current Akins principal. Principal Girard had to contend with leading a nascent redesign movement and deal with a number of procedural kinks. He also entered an environment resistant to accepting a new principal, as Principal Deike's staff had held her in high regard. Further, Principal Girard had a reputation for setting unfairly high expectations of his teachers, as reported by the *Austin Chronicle* when he accepted the position.<sup>4</sup> Finally, although Principal Deike had garnered a good deal of support for school reform, there were still a number of teachers resistant to changing the status quo. It was not until two years into the THSP grant that the composition of staff at Akins reached the "tipping point," where enough teachers resistant to new ideas had left or changed their minds and forward progress could be made more easily.

Principal Girard settled into his leadership role by operationalizing ideas pioneered by Principal Deike and her cohort of teachers. He worked to build school policy based on pragmatism, all the while empowering teachers to lead. New school policies were implemented systematically - starting with discipline and moving toward improving achievement indicators in one targeted subject area at a time. Policies that were proven to be ineffective were halted and those that were successful were encouraged and replicated in other departments.

As indicated in Figure 1, by the end of the grant cycle in June 2009, Akins had seen marked improvements: TAKS scores in math and science had increased to nearly 80% of students passing, 94% passing English and language arts, and 97% passing social studies.<sup>5</sup> These improvements have not gone unnoticed. In 2009, the school achieved "Recognized" status from the Texas State Accountability Rating System, and the following year Newsweek magazine ranked Akins within the top 6% of all high schools in the U.S.<sup>6</sup>

FIGURE 1. TEST SCORE TRENDS AT AKINS HIGH SCHOOL FROM 2003-2010



Source: Texas Education Agency's Academic Excellence Indicator System database  
 Note: Appendix 1 provides a comprehensive timeline covering the full reform effort.

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## METHODOLOGY

The Texas High School Project (THSP) administered grants to a number of high schools in Texas interested in creating small learning communities on their campuses. Following a review of the progress made at all schools receiving grants, THSP identified Akins and three other campuses as successful reform efforts because of meaningful increases in standardized test scores over the grant period. Graduate students, under the direction of Professor Cynthia Osborne from the LBJ School of Public Affairs at The University of Texas at Austin, were then tasked with investigating the specific changes that led to improvements at Akins High School.

After reviewing internal THSP documents, LBJ School researchers interviewed the current principal, associate principal, all six assistant principals, department chairs, as well as several teachers at Akins. This report identifies the policy changes at Akins that led to its transition to a “Recognized” ranked school that is striving for “Exemplary” status.

The findings are presented through a framework adopted by THSP, which includes four impact areas related to school performance: education leadership, teacher effectiveness, learning systems, and performance management. Beginning with a brief discussion of each impact area, this report describes specific reform measures that teachers and administrators at Akins High School claim led to improvements in their school.

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## EDUCATION LEADERSHIP

The Texas High School Project (THSP) describes education leadership as “campus leaders who are focused on effective instruction and efficient operations.”<sup>7</sup> Education leadership is embodied not only in principals and superintendents, but in teachers as well.<sup>8</sup> Whereas teacher effectiveness and curriculum have traditionally been the focus of improving student performance, today a growing body of literature focuses on the role that leaders play in helping students excel. Recent studies indicate that school leadership can have a positive and significant effect on student learning – through direct means, such as influencing campus culture, and indirect means, such as improving the quality of teachers on the campus.<sup>9</sup>

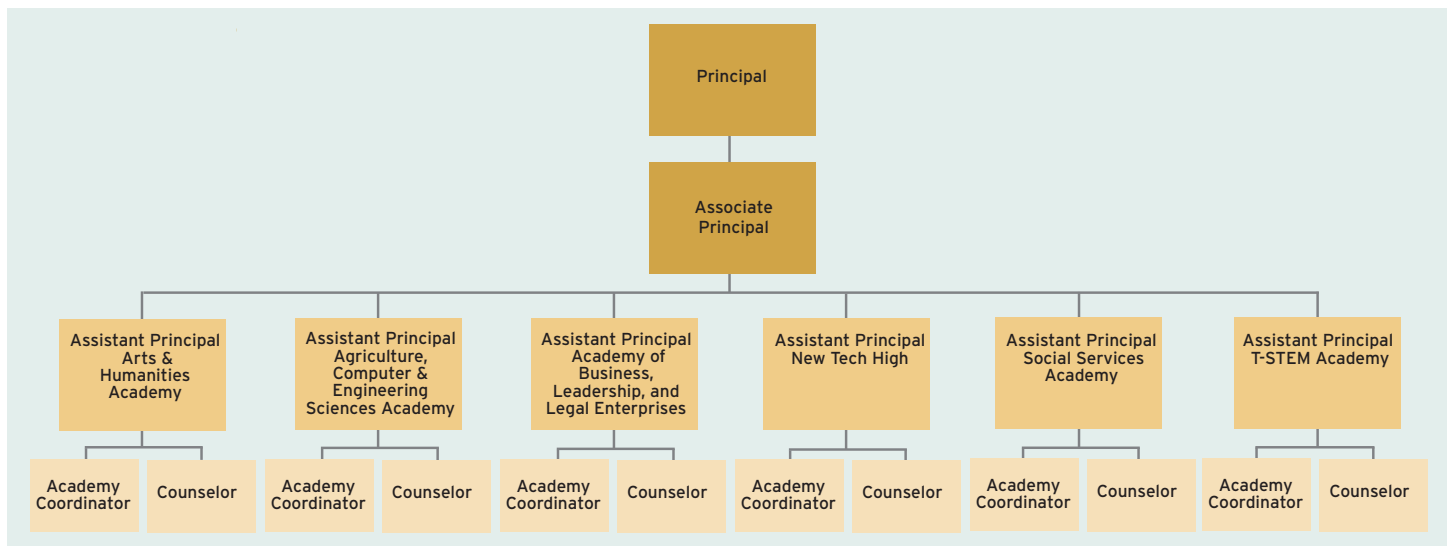
An extensive review of education leadership at Akins High School shows that the implementation of strategic leadership structures contributed to improved student performance by setting high expectations for staff and students, establishing a distributive leadership model, creating an environment of collaboration among teachers, and ensuring that teachers have adequate support to be successful. Both Principal Deike and Principal Girard played an important role at Akins in allocating THSP funds to sustain reforms beyond the life of the grant.

### IMPLEMENTING STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP STRUCTURES

Creating clear roles and responsibilities for all staff has been essential to reform at Akins. Principal Girard leads the school and is supported by an associate principal that manages all of the academy assistant principals. There are currently six academies at Akins, and each has its own assistant principal, academy coordinator, and counselor; these three administrators are referred to as a triad. THSP prescribed the triad relationship, which allows assistant principals to more easily respond to discipline issues because academy coordinators share needs from the classroom, freeing teachers from this responsibility. Counselors focus on providing services to students that help them to be “college ready.”

Subject areas are led by a department chair and are also supported by instructional lead teachers (ILTs) who are experts in content areas. For example, the math department chair is supported by an ILT in algebra. Department chairs and ILTs work across all academies. Figure 2 illustrates Akins High School’s leadership structure.

FIGURE 2. LEADERSHIP  
STRUCTURE AT  
AKINS HIGH SCHOOL



## SETTING HIGH EXPECTATIONS

The most recent principals at Akins each took a different path to institutionalizing high school reform. Akins staff described Mary Alice Deike as a visionary leader; she encouraged feedback from all levels of staff to implement reforms. Daniel Girard transitioned from Principal Deike’s big-picture leadership to a more pragmatic approach. He is described by Akins High School academy coordinators as a principal who works in a “world of facts.”

First on Principal Girard’s list of expectations as the new principal was for Akins staff to read the High Schools That Work (HSTW) materials.<sup>10</sup> He noted that there was a lack of investment from some teachers simply because they did not understand why they had moved toward the academy structure. Staff we interviewed feel that Principal Girard’s opinion and motivation is clear. Other administrators describe him as a methodical leader who is not at Akins “just to improve his resume, but to increase student achievement.” Principal Girard also organized task forces to “bring about consistent school-wide change.” His efforts to improve communication between administrators and teachers have made an impact in the classroom. Teachers we interviewed said they expect to have regular visits from Principal Girard and for him to question students about their learning.

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Following the “tipping point” of the 2007-2008 school year, in which teachers not invested in the reform effort left the campus, Principal Girard stated that he has retained most of the Akins teachers. He believes that the staff now share his high level of expectations for the school. During interviews, we heard that teachers are dedicated to the academy environment and are supportive of continued changes that advance student achievement. According to one assistant principal, “This is no longer reform. It’s standard operating procedure.”

### ESTABLISHING A DISTRIBUTIVE LEADERSHIP MODEL

Administrators at Akins feel that their comprehensive leadership structure has been a catalyst to shared leadership. There are a number of opportunities for Akins staff to emerge as leaders. Teachers can gain a more formalized leadership role by participating in the Campus Leadership Team (CLT).

*“The current leadership is with the teachers. They own it and they will maintain it....Nobody could come in and unravel what is here.”*  
- Principal Girard

The CLT consists of a variety of staff from different academies and departments and is responsible for implementing new initiatives at Akins. The principal determines appointments to the CLT. The CLT allows teachers to lead without being on the administrative team because they are responsible for making decisions that impact the whole school. An example of a decision made by the CLT was the creation of academy specific t-shirts, which helped students to develop pride in their academy. Unless they are a member of the CLT, most teachers we interviewed felt it was easier to make small changes within their department, rather than impact the entire campus.

Fostering distributive leadership is both the product of teacher initiative and a principal willing to distribute power downward and nurture teachers' agency. Akins High School's culture of mutual trust was built carefully and intentionally during Principal Deike and Principal Girard's tenures and is reinforced daily throughout the administration. Teachers stated that Principal Girard is not concerned with “how” they complete a project, only the “what.” They are given autonomy in determining the process; Principal Girard said, “The current leadership is with the teachers. They own it and they will maintain it. It’s not about me or Principal Deike anymore. Nobody could come in and unravel what is here. The teachers own it now.”

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## CREATING A COLLABORATIVE ENVIRONMENT

Staff indicated that administrators at Akins have worked hard to encourage collaboration. Teachers said that the leadership team is able to encourage open channels of communication because they model “a spirit of collaboration.” Staff we interviewed felt that principals Deike and Girard hired employees who wanted to contribute to a collaborative work environment. By recruiting “team players,” Akins has embedded collaboration in its culture.

Collaboration is encouraged both within and outside of the academies through regular department and academy meetings. Departments meet on a weekly basis to discuss curricular strategies to improve student achievement. Academies meet 11 times per year during “Late Starts,” a district-wide time in which students start later in the school day, allowing for morning professional development opportunities. These meetings allow staff at Akins to be “proactive, not reactionary” in their practices and promote the team structure.

## ENSURING ADEQUATE SUPPORT

Support is key to success in each Akins academy. The teachers we spoke with stated that leadership at Akins is empathetic to the needs of the staff - “they can put themselves in other’s shoes.” Academy coordinators play an important role in creating a culture in which teachers help each other to improve instruction. Coordinators act as liaisons between teachers and assistant principals and are a voice for all teachers. They also help to increase teacher’s comfort level with frequent evaluations and feedback because they work to ensure the information is presented in a positive manner. The triad structure, and in particular the academy coordinators, are critical to sustaining reform. In interviews with each academy coordinator, a passion for providing a quality education to every student emerged.

All administrators are responsible for providing reflections on how teachers can continually improve their instruction. One element of this process is the “walk-through,” for which assistant principals serve as the evaluator. Akins felt that it was the administrator’s responsibility to ensure that walk-throughs are an effective learning experience. The teachers we spoke with were reflective about their teaching and they expected that administrators should be as well.

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In interviews, we learned of inconsistency in the support systems by academy. Although most of the feedback was positive, some teachers felt their academy leaders did not give them the tools they needed to be successful. Austin Independent School District (AISD) administers a survey annually to solicit information about Akins administrators. However, staff were unclear about how this survey was used to make changes. Although the evaluation system for teachers has been institutionalized, there is not currently a system in place for administrators.

#### USE OF THSP FUNDING

Both Principal Deike and Principal Girard were responsible for distributing the THSP grant funds to improve the campus. Principal Girard stated that this funding “changed the way we do business.” Money was invested in professional development for teachers and Principal Girard felt this could change behaviors in the classroom. Akins focused on high level implementation of the redesign rubric provided through the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), THSP’s technical provider, and in their campus improvement plan.<sup>11</sup>

Principal Deike initiated the reform at Akins, but funding allowed the school to improve logistics and transition from theory to application. Examples of logistical change included grouping academies together and developing a master schedule with time built in for teacher meetings. THSP also gave Akins the seed money to develop the academy coordinator position. Paramount to Akins High School’s successful redesign was their focus on sustainability from the beginning of the grant. Now that THSP funding has discontinued, administrators and staff stated that the major change they see is a lack of professional development opportunities outside of the school. Teachers must now rely primarily on the Late Starts for professional development, which is generally done in-house. The structures put in place through THSP funding remain because of lasting teacher investment in reform.

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## TEACHER EFFECTIVENESS

Research shows that high quality, effective teachers can have a positive and significant impact on student achievement.<sup>12</sup> As such, the Texas High School Project (THSP) is dedicated to the impact area of teacher effectiveness, which focuses on the ability to “hire and develop teachers who help students perform better.”<sup>13</sup> During the course of our investigation, we used the extant body of research on teacher effectiveness as a guiding framework for analysis. This section describes the findings from Akins High School based on themes which are critical to investments in teacher effectiveness; these include recruitment and retention, teacher evaluation, professional development, and collaboration.<sup>14</sup> We also discuss how teacher buy-in and involvement was instrumental in the school's reform process.

### DEFINING TEACHER EFFECTIVENESS AT AKINS HIGH SCHOOL

There was a general consensus among administrators and other staff about what they expected from teachers at Akins and what they defined as effective teaching. Those interviewed said that having a passion for teaching kids was the most important characteristic of effective teachers, and expertise of content knowledge was next in significance. Interviewees also mentioned that to be more effective, teachers should be well-organized motivators, facilitators, and listeners so that they can help students be successful.

In our interviews with teachers, they emphasized that effective teachers are those who are able to motivate and bring students up to a different level of achievement - from the basics to mastery of a subject. Moreover, teaching effectively means not only teaching content knowledge, but also teaching students how to think and how to learn, so that they can make real life connections. One teacher said that an effective teacher “act as a cheerleader” for students to make them work harder. In our findings regarding both administrative and teacher definitions of effectiveness, common themes of increasing academic rigor and creating relationships with students to improve their outcomes emerged.

### HIRING AND RETAINING EFFECTIVE TEACHERS

During site visits, administrators also talked about effective teachers in terms of being good employees. They emphasized the importance of professionalism, including being open to feedback and constructive criticism. Additionally, potential hires must be willing to work in the academy structure. Supporting the academy proved to be the key in recruitment and retention of teachers at Akins.

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According to one assistant principal, at the beginning of the reform period, teachers resisted change and this served as the biggest obstacle to employing the small learning communities. Over the course of three years, teachers who did not buy-in to the academy structure left. This allowed the administrators to put into place new teachers who were invested in the academies. Now, small learning communities have become part of the culture and have helped develop clear teacher roles and responsibilities; teachers view them positively and work within the structure to foster student success. Indeed, interviewees said that some teachers applied to Akins because of the academy structure. Most teachers and staff we interviewed said that they want to stay at Akins because they enjoy working within Akins High School's academy structure and because the school offers a positive working culture of collaboration.

### PROVIDING EVALUATION AND FEEDBACK

The teacher evaluation process at Akins was designed to motivate teachers to “work smarter” for student progress, rather than to judge their performance. Teachers are officially evaluated through the statewide evaluation system, Professional Development and Appraisal System (PDAS). Teachers we interviewed said that PDAS was a “one-time evaluation” and not sufficient for evaluating teachers' performance or for providing specific feedback about instruction. Because of this, Principal Girard uses additional informal evaluation protocols to look for signs of excellence; these include examples of student work using common assessments, direct observation, student feedback, and other state and local test scores. These assessments are added to the state's PDAS evaluation. Specifically, evaluations by administrators and peer teachers have become an important addition to the PDAS evaluation and help give teachers timely feedback on their pedagogy.

Observations play a large role in evaluation at Akins. Teachers are frequently evaluated throughout the semester by their academy administrators via “walk-throughs,” which are small in-class evaluations. Assistant principals visit classrooms to observe teachers on a variety of teaching goals and gauge the level of student learning. Each academy uses walk-throughs frequently, but the process for walk-throughs varies across academies because administrators use different methods or protocols. For instance, one assistant principal said that he visits core teachers at least once per week, which is above the standard procedure. He uses a half-page open-ended question protocol to observe instructional methods. Another assistant principal said that she uses a five-page walk-through form. Teachers we interviewed said that although they felt the walk-through structure was valuable, it would be even more successful if there was a uniform structure used across academies.

*“Late Starts are the place where we discuss what works, what doesn’t, what we need, and new ideas.”*  
- teacher commenting on professional development opportunities at Akins High School.

Peer supervision is another valuable tool to foster teacher effectiveness and create a culture of collaboration at Akins. “Learning walks” were designed for teachers to help each other improve instruction through peer feedback. This open-door program consists of a pre-conference, observation, and a post-conference to ask peers for feedback from the visit. Each teacher gets “walked on” at least once per semester. Teachers we interviewed said that peer supervision and feedback was extremely valuable to improving their instruction.

Overall, the Akins evaluation process, including both administrative and peer feedback, works as a support system to inform teachers about how to improve instruction - a goal for every teacher regardless of experience or skill. In an interview, one teacher said, “We like having evaluations because it’s good for the kids.”

#### EXPANDING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The biggest professional development opportunity at Akins High School is the “Late Starts” program in which students come into class later in the day to allow teachers time for professional development. Late Starts occur 11 times per year and offer teacher training for a variety of teacher needs. These days are an opportunity to highlight sound teaching strategies that teachers are implementing in the classroom. Speakers are invited to address critical issues for each academy during Late Starts. For example, at a recent meeting, English Language Learner (ELL) teachers spoke about strategies for improving ELL achievement because this is their most prominent, current goal. A teacher explained, “Late Starts are the place where we discuss what works, what doesn’t, what we need, and new ideas.”

In addition to Late Starts, other professional development opportunities have had an impact on the reform process. THSP funding has helped to improve teacher quality at Akins because it was invested directly into teacher learning. One example of this investment is training provided to teachers on project-based learning. In interviews, teachers also said that they had good opportunities to see other schools’ learning systems and to meet instructional experts at conferences through trips funded by THSP. The ideas brought back from these trips were passed down to faculty through Late Starts and helped to make both structural and cultural changes to the school. The THSP funding expiration limited the opportunities for teachers to travel for professional development purposes. In interviews, teachers said that they would like to have the opportunity again to travel for professional development because they felt the ability to travel and confer with other educational experts helped Akins as a whole.

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## SUPPORTING COLLEGIALLY AND COLLABORATION

Teacher collaboration is another key to Akins High School's success. The academy structure promotes teacher collaboration because it creates connections and builds relationships among teachers as well as students. The physical proximity of the clustered academy classrooms allows groups of teachers to develop relationships. Thus, they are more comfortable sharing their experiences, information about individual students, and teaching strategies.

In interviews, teachers indicated that the academies create the feeling of a smaller community within a larger school. As a result, interviewees agreed that teacher collaboration leads to a number of positive results. These include better communication than before the redesign at Akins; teachers set a common goal and standards through consistent dialogue; teachers know more about their students, and are thus able to serve them better; and the level of respect among faculty has increased, because everyone is encouraged to share best practices and work toward a common purpose. Staff agreed that the positive culture of collaboration among teachers greatly influenced students' progress at Akins.

Other than the academy structure, a few teachers identified the district-wide performance-based pay program, REACH, as something that encouraged teachers to share ideas and work with struggling teachers so that team-wide goals could be met.<sup>15</sup> The REACH program, as designed, rewards gains in student achievement at the campus and team levels, as well as the individual teacher level. At Akins the team level includes the academy teachers as a group. One teacher said, "If you know a fellow teacher is having trouble with the common goal and your pay is tied to it, you are more likely to talk to them about what you're doing and offer suggestions for improving their results." Though the REACH program was not the focus of the study, a few teachers commented on the pay structure in connection with collaborative efforts. These teachers suggested that although the individual goal and payment configuration had little influence on their working habits, the inclusion of departmental goals in the performance pay structure did foster more collaboration among those groups of teachers.

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### CREATING TEACHER BUY-IN FOR REFORM

Lastly, teachers' commitment to student learning and reform played a vital role in ensuring student success at Akins. Initially, some teachers resisted the small learning communities, but after reaching a consensus for the reform, a successful implementation of the academy structure became possible. Akins administrators ensured that teachers bought in to the changes on the campus by giving them ownership - through opportunities for leadership and on-campus professional development opportunities. In all, teacher effectiveness was strengthened and supported through concentrated efforts of evaluation, feedback, and support. THSP helped to foster this with its professional development opportunities and funding.

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## LEARNING SYSTEMS

The Texas High School Project (THSP) defines learning systems as structures put in place to “support administrative and learning environments that encourage rigorous and personalized learning.”<sup>16</sup> Changes made to the learning systems at Akins High School proved to be crucial to increased student performance and overall success. Investments in learning systems have been most central to sustaining success at Akins after the redesign process was complete. Systems that encourage rigorous and personalized learning for students at Akins include altering school structures, aligning curriculum and standardizing assessments, and implementing strategic interventions.

### ALTERING SCHOOL STRUCTURES

#### *Small Learning Communities*

Small learning communities (SLCs) provide a smaller setting than other comprehensive high schools and allow students to link their learning to college and career aspirations. SLCs have been found to be especially useful for students traditionally considered at-risk of leaving school or dropping out.<sup>17</sup> In 2006, Akins High School fully implemented six small learning communities based on Career Advancement Technology Education (CATE) courses.<sup>18</sup> Funding from THSP played a critical role in facilitating the transition, which started with alterations to the operating structure and then to instruction. Changes to the operating structure included revising team assignments, modifying classroom locations, hiring new personnel, and establishing trust within newly created teams.

Today, teachers and classrooms are grouped by academy versus department. The proximity to other academy teachers encourages collaboration and makes it easier for teachers to visit and share information regarding individual students. In addition, the new master schedule has incorporated time during the workday for teachers to meet by academy and by department to have crucial conversations about curriculum and student achievement. Not only do small learning communities make it more manageable for teachers to work together in groups, but teachers we spoke with said that students do not feel like just another face in the crowd. One student said, “We have passionate teachers and our students get along great because we have similar interests within the academies. Plus, the small learning community makes it easy to get to know everybody.”

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The academy structure at Akins helps students connect with other students who have similar interests. In addition, students have the opportunity to build relationships with teachers, which proves to be beneficial throughout their high school career. Akins students are closely connected to their academies and they show a great deal of pride in them, which is evidenced by the projects on display in each academy hallway. The academies have played a large role in building community and establishing traditions in this new school.

Modifying instruction was part of the second phase in the move to small learning communities at Akins. Small learning communities do not drive what is being taught in the classroom. Instead, they create opportunities for teachers to be creative with how instruction happens. As a result, small learning communities are a recruiting tool to attract innovative teachers to Akins, and the increased relevance keeps studying all subjects meaningful for a diverse student body with a wide range of interests.

#### *Changes to Discipline Policy*

Principal Girard inherited a school that he described as “busy.” There was gang activity and a general feeling that a small number of disruptive students were commandeering teacher energy in the classroom and influencing students outside the classroom. One of the first measures administrators took to limit this influence was to strategically place adults in every place students gathered, notably in the halls between classes and around the lunch tables in the cafeteria. The goal was to solve discipline issues in a positive way - to give power back to the “good kids” so that learning could occur, rather than to punish students who were acting out in the absence of watchful adults. The results were immediate - discipline issues at Akins today are minimal and generally concern what Principal Girard drolly referred to as “9th grade girl stuff.”

*“Everything we do must support the students.”*  
- Principal Girard

*“We have to teach better and teaching better begins with a good common assessment. In addition, we have to engage the students and inspire them to work at learning the concepts.”*  
- a member of the 2005 Akins THSP proposal team

## ALIGNING CURRICULUM AND STANDARDIZING ASSESSMENTS

### *Real World Applications*

At Akins, the push for increased rigor and more content-based instruction began with the implementation of an aggressive Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) plan. Principal Girard is clear in his philosophy, “Everything we do must support the students.” Teachers are expected to make the most of all instruction time and teach “bell to bell.” Since the redesign, staff members believe that there is more thoughtful instruction occurring in the classroom. For example, we observed an Arts and Humanities Academy history class learning about rationing during World War II. To engage these students, who were primarily interested in art, the teacher explained the concept through student interpretation of the meaning behind posters from the war advertising the merits of rationing. The intent was to help students understand the mentality of the country at the time.

### *Common Assessments and Alignment*

One academy coordinator stated, “Great teaching comes from the heart, but structure has enabled us to build capacity.” At Akins, common assessments serve as a checks-and-balance to ensure rigor. These assessments encourage the department leadership team (assistant principal, department chair, and instructional lead teacher) to work together and talk about expectations and areas for improvement in learning. Common assessments keep teachers on the same page and using similar language. Finally, common assessments help with horizontal curriculum alignment across classes that are teaching the same content.

When Akins submitted their application for the THSP grant, staff recognized the need for common assessments. One member of the proposal team stated: “We have to teach better, and teaching better begins with a good common assessment that is based on the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS). In addition, we have to engage the students and inspire them to work at learning the concepts.”

Common planning time allows teachers to share, combine, and enhance ideas as a team. Vertical alignment is the planning for curriculum across grade levels so that fewer lessons have to be re-taught. The Akins staff we spoke with believe that vertical alignment of curriculum is self-fulfilling if teachers consistently ensure that lessons cover the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS). An added bonus to the small learning communities at Akins regarding vertical alignment is that teachers know what is being taught at all grade levels in their academy - and therefore in the school. Currently, Project-Based Learning (PBL) instructors recognize there is still opportunity to better align PBLs with common assessments.

## IMPLEMENTING STRATEGIC INTERVENTIONS

A department chair stated that Akins High School was “founded on the idea that each student is important. It doesn’t matter where you came from. We’re here for you.” With that in mind, the architects of the redesign knew they wanted to build a strong advisory model into the new operating structure to help struggling students succeed. There is campus-wide support for teacher-student advocacy at Akins, which is now carried out in two forms: Advisory and the Afterschool Program for Exploration (APEX).

*Akins High School was “founded on the idea that each student is important. It doesn’t matter where you came from. We’re here for you.” - a department chair*

Advisory is part of the weekly class schedule for all students at Akins. Advisory is designed so that a small number of students (generally 15) work with the same teacher for 25 minutes every Tuesday and Wednesday. Advisory is dedicated to career-based training, discussions, grade checks, attendance, reviewing tutor logs, and monitoring “bubble students” - the students who are at the cusp of performing at the next highest level.

Advisory allows teachers and students to establish trust and build relationships over a four-year period because efforts are made to keep groups together throughout the students’ time at Akins. As a result, fewer students “slip through the cracks” because they feel that they have at least one teacher who knows them well; advisors also get to know a small number of students. Within Advisory, teachers are expected to know who is in need of intervention in order to stay on track toward academic success and to motivate students to work and enjoy school.

Funding from THSP made it possible for Akins to initiate an after-school program to provide individual tutoring for students. Since then, APEX has expanded to include credit recovery and more than 20 extracurricular programs. Initially, students at Akins were not participating in APEX. Akins recognized that they needed to keep additional buses at the campus so that more could attend. Today, there is a high level of participation - particularly in extracurricular activities.

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## PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

Effective decision-making depends on the availability, timeliness, and quality of data, both quantitative and qualitative. The Texas High School Project (THSP) aims to help schools “create the infrastructure and processes to identify, track, and analyze data critical to key decision-making.”<sup>19</sup> Critical data range from standardized tests and classroom assessment scores to attendance and discipline records. Although educational data move constantly between classrooms, campuses, districts, and the state, this report focuses on the data being analyzed and the decisions being made within Akins High School at the classroom and campus levels.

One administrator described Akins as “a data-inundated environment.” Akins, like all Texas high schools, has to manage its fair share of data: TAKS scores, benchmarks, student grades, attendance, and more. Akins staff we interviewed believe that intensive focus on understanding and using data to impact student learning, from prescriptions for individual students to creating policies that affect the entire school, set it apart from other high schools.

The school culture at Akins, according to teachers and administrators, is highly data-driven. One teacher described Principal Girard as someone who “led [staff] by the nose to the data.” According to interviewees, increases in student achievement due to performance management include purposeful analysis of data, prioritizing and creating time for analysis, and designing interventions for students.

### ANALYZING DATA PURPOSEFULLY

Data systems are an important part of the deluge of data entering and exiting the school. Akins uses *Advance and Information Management System (AIMS)*, which is a district database, to track individual students. AIMS can be useful; however, the academy structure makes it difficult to take full advantage of it because students cannot be sorted by academy. *My Reporting* is another district-wide database, which contains longitudinal data. Counselors use *Naviance*, a system designed to track students’ progress toward college. Individual teachers have created databases in classrooms based on need or absence of a formalized system. Students and parents can access current grades at home online – and can even receive text messages warning if scores are dropping – through *Grade Speed*, which teachers update as students complete work.

*“[Data analysis] is good, because it helps you restructure your lessons into helping the students that are weaker - it helps you identify them.”*

- English teacher

“Performance management” implies more than simply collecting and reporting data through these systems, however. In an effective performance management system, data are collected, analyzed to identify strengths and weaknesses, and responded to - for example, by creating intervention plans for students or changing school policy in a way that will augment a campus-wide weakness. An English teacher commented, “[Data analysis] is good, because it helps you restructure your lessons into helping the students that are weaker - it helps you identify them.”

Last year at Akins, data analysis led staff to introduce a goal of increasing English language learner (ELL) performance, a subgroup of students discovered to be achieving at lower levels on TAKS than other groups at Akins. Formal and informal systems were created to address this goal, including ELL support staff conducting trainings with teachers and the active sharing of best practices for teaching ELL students amongst colleagues.

### **BUILDING DATA REVIEW INTO TEACHER SCHEDULES**

Providing teachers with the necessary time to collect and analyze data as well as make appropriate adjustments is important in creating a data-driven culture; appropriate time makes data analysis a priority.<sup>20</sup> THSP, through its funding and technical assistance, provided additional time for Akins teachers to meet and understand student data and their impact on students.

Classroom-level data are used to measure student progress throughout the year. Both academies and departments keep and analyze this information. Academy data (individual student records) are circulated among teachers during district Late Starts. These data are used to identify at-risk students and students who are on the cusp of achieving at the next highest level, and to discuss possible interventions and strategies for helping these students improve their performance.

Departments meet weekly during common planning periods to do similar work: identifying students in need of extra help, looking for trends in class retention, or finding persistent weaknesses in certain skills that need to be addressed across academies. THSP funding allowed Akins to reorganize teacher schedules to include common planning periods. Planning time has improved teachers’ ability to communicate and understand individual student and department-level data.

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According to teachers, data have become more important each year following the redesign and continuing into the present. As the academies moved from the implementation phase to “standard operating procedure,” and Principal Girard sought to guarantee that students did not fail unnoticed, the school’s focus on data analysis has grown. As a result, the time teachers have to review data is crucial to the success of its performance management systems.

Through the many avenues of data collection, the Akins team is able to monitor and track student progress, both in the short-term and as they advance in school. Data collection also helps to identify students in need of extra help and prescribe remedies for problems. Teachers we talked with expressed the desire to use one comprehensive data system, because the data they need are often located in multiple places and can be hard to track down. According to teachers interviewed, not all staff members have access to each data system and are sometimes reliant on administrators to give them relevant student data. These access issues can interfere with the timeliness of data provision and analysis.

### DESIGNING DATA-BASED STRATEGIC INTERVENTIONS

Research shows that using data purposefully to identify strengths and weaknesses among students and within the school, and responding to findings through interventions or new school policies, is critical to meaningful improvement.<sup>21</sup> As such, assessments and interventions are a key part of managing student performance at Akins. Students take multiple benchmark tests prior to the TAKS so that teachers better understand the areas in which each student needs to improve. If students do not perform at the expected level on the benchmarks, they are required to attend the Afterschool Program for Exploration (APEX) tutoring sessions to master the skills they are missing.

Performance management is leading to many other interventions. For example, the science department pioneered a policy for ensuring students knew state standards for the TAKS test by creating an 80-question common assessment, with two questions per standard. If a student is unable to answer both questions related to the standard correctly, he or she must attend a tutoring session that specifically covers that skill. Students must continue to attend tutoring until they have mastered the standard. Thanks to this diagnostic, science teachers can be confident that their students are learning the same material and are prepared for standardized tests because the curriculum has been horizontally aligned across academies.

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Interviewees agreed that good data management practices have helped streamline the process to promote student achievement at the highest possible level. The administration gives data analysis meaning by formalizing best practices and encouraging teachers to track student progress. Analyzing data has become a school-wide effort to go beyond understanding to operationalizing interventions in response to the messages in the data. Although data collection can turn students into numbers, the staff believe the opposite is true at Akins. When the purpose of analyzing data is to know each student better and provide individualized help, data are no longer about cold, hard facts, and are instead an important tool in the mission to constantly improve achievement for every student.

### MOVING FORWARD

Teachers say there is not enough time in the day to review all of the data they are expected to look at and that Late Starts are not frequent enough. Despite time limitations and the demands of a difficult job, teachers and administrators at Akins nevertheless expect to see continuous progress in student performance at all levels. One goal for the future is to improve advanced placement test enrollment and scores, now that “Recognized” state accountability rating has been achieved.

The Akins performance management policy for ensuring a minimum level of student learning through mastery of TAKS material is now being employed to push all students to greater heights. For example, class retention data showed that many students were dropping advanced placement English III a few weeks into their junior year. Now teachers in the English department are looking for ways to better prepare students in sophomore English for advanced placement classes the following year, instituting steps toward completing highly rigorous work as freshmen and sophomores so they are better prepared for the pace of classes their junior year.

The focus thus far has been on improvement in math and science, the two weakest areas of the TAKS tests for Akins students, and is slowly expanding to the other departments. Teachers in other departments say they are seeing the gains in student achievement brought about by good data management in math and science and are seeking to implement similar systems in their own departments. The Akins administrators and teachers we interviewed are steadfast in the belief that student achievement in all subjects will continue to improve as they refine and further develop performance management practices, allowing staff to influence student achievement with even greater precision. Because Akins staff members are listening and responding to the messages in the data, as Principal Girard put it, “More students are learning more,” which is Akins High School’s true goal, beyond becoming an “Exemplary” school.

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## CONCLUSION

The Texas High School Project provided an opportunity for Akins High School to improve student learning through funds for restructuring teacher and student schedules, training staff, and creating a more student- and learning-centered school. The policies and reforms implemented were analyzed through the four impact areas of education leadership, teacher effectiveness, learning systems, and performance management. To understand the impact of the reforms, it is necessary to look at the four impact areas as parts of a larger whole. No single reform measure could have changed school performance alone. Therefore, in seeking to replicate this success at another campus, it is important to develop policies that will affect student learning through all four areas and build a strong school community from every angle.

Each new policy or idea implemented at Akins can be seen as targeting a specific problem. The following are illustrations of the impact areas at work: having more teachers present in hallways fixed a large part of the discipline problem; formalizing a means to see where individual students needed science tutoring has greatly increased science TAKS passage rates; and walk-throughs have given administrators and teachers the forum they needed to discuss strengths and weaknesses in the classroom. Though each of these changes was necessary to bring about improvement, a large part of what changed at Akins was staff attitude toward reform. Our research shows that policies are not the most important part of reform; they are an important element, but smart, dedicated people who are empowered to share ideas, try new things, and focus on student learning are the catalyst for long-term change.

## APPENDIX 1: AKINS HIGH SCHOOL REFORM TIMELINE

SCHOOL YEAR	ACCOUNTABILITY RATING	THSP FUNDING AND EVENTS	OTHER IMPORTANT EVENTS
2000-2001	No Rating		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>School opens</li> </ul>
2001-2002	Acceptable		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mrs. Deike hired as Principal</li> </ul>
2002-2003	No Rating		
2003-2004	Acceptable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Request for proposals sent out by THSP</li> </ul>	
2004-2005	Acceptable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>THSP grant application completed by Principal Deike</li> <li>THSP grant awarded: \$1,625,000 total over 4 years</li> </ul>	
2005-2006	Acceptable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>THSP grant year 1: \$520,000</li> <li>HSTW technical assistance begins on campus</li> <li>THSP funds invested in professional development for teachers</li> <li>THSP funds used to purchase laptops and carts known as "Computers on Wheels"</li> <li>Academy coordinator position developed and filled</li> <li>Plans made for small learning communities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Texas Education Agency funds New Tech High Academy with \$200,000</li> <li>"Learning Walks" professional development program begins on campus</li> <li>After School Program for Exploration (APEX) starts on campus</li> </ul>
2006-2007	Acceptable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>THSP grant year 2: \$276,250</li> <li>6 small learning communities implemented with a academy Themes: 1) 9th Grade, 2) Arts and Humanities, 3) Agriculture, Computer, and Engineering Sciences, 4) Business, Leadership, and Legal Enterprises, 5) New Tech High, and 6) Social Services</li> </ul>	
2007-2008	Acceptable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>THSP grant year 3: \$276,250</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mr. Girard hired as principal</li> <li>Assistant Principals describe this academic year as the "Tipping Point" for getting teacher buy-in and accepting change</li> </ul>
2008-2009	Acceptable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>THSP grant year 4: \$552,500</li> </ul>	
2009-2010	Recognized		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>REACH district performance pay program starts on campus</li> <li>9th Grade academy ends and Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) Academy begins</li> </ul>

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