

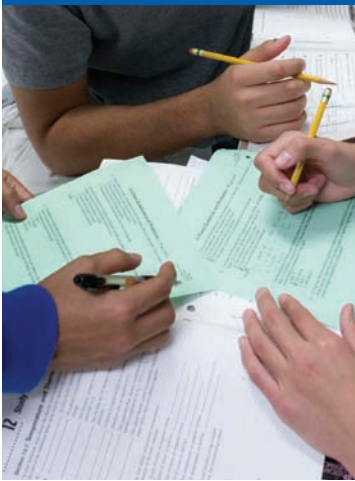
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Texas High School Project Site Report: **Dunbar High School**

Fort Worth ISD ■ Fort Worth, Texas

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DUNBAR 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 - Dunbar High School in the Fort Worth Independent School District (FWISD) - 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 Dunbar 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."¹

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

Dunbar High School is located in the “Stop Six” neighborhood of Fort Worth, Texas - a reference to its location along an inter-urban bus line stop. Dunbar has long been associated with the historic African American settlement and urban poverty found in the neighborhood. Much like the neighborhood, however, the high school is changing. The school graduated its last all-African American class in 1983 and has since steadily increased in ethnic diversity such that today the school’s population is 87% African American and 9.5% Latino. Dunbar serves approximately 900 students, 60% of whom are economically disadvantaged.²

Leading to its involvement with THSP, Dunbar faced several issues including failing test scores, a campus-wide discipline problem, and a high rate of staff attrition. Conditions at Dunbar were compounded as the school had failed to reach “Acceptable” status under both state and federal accountability rating systems for several years in a row, leading to sanctions for poor performance and the threat of school closure.

Combined with its accountability issues, Dunbar was also embroiled in a local lawsuit contending that the school was not equitably serving its students. The lawsuit argued that the school’s magnet program received more experienced teachers and more funding than the regular academic programs. The scrutiny over failing achievement scores and an unhappy community created a sense of crisis in the school; this pushed FWISD to take a renewed interest in the campus and focus its efforts on improvement.

In an attempt to institute broad reforms at the campus, FWISD worked with school administrators to put into place a number of grant programs and support structures to aid the struggling school. District-level administrators provided the impetus for applying to THSP for support because they felt it would be a good fit with the campus-wide reforms that needed to occur. The interest taken by the district, and the number of grants and new programs infused into the school, provided a spark for change that would help to redesign and refocus Dunbar toward academic success.

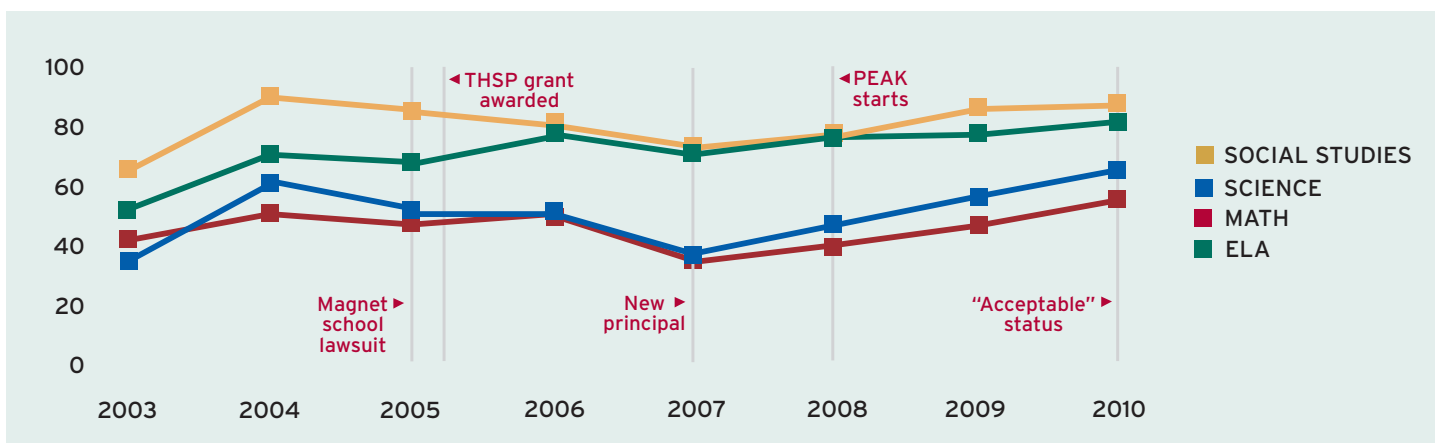
PARTNERSHIP WITH TEXAS HIGH SCHOOL PROJECT

The Texas High School Project started working with Dunbar High School in the 2005-2006 school year to help restructure the school. The grant provided \$669,000 in funds over four years and worked in tandem with a number of other programs, most notably the district's performance pay initiative, Public Educators Accelerating Kids (PEAK), to provide support and foster change in the school's culture and practices.

In addition, a new principal from California, Doug Williams, was hired in 2007 to help realize the reform efforts at the school. He envisioned a school dedicated to learning and worked diligently to create an environment ready and willing for change. His leadership served as a catalyst for action, allowing the efforts of THSP and other district grants to begin to be fully realized.

As shown in Figure 1, though there is some drop off in the immediate years after Dunbar received the THSP grant, starting in 2007-2008, the school began to see positive improvement in student test scores.³ Interviews with faculty and staff made clear that the funds and technical assistance provided by THSP significantly aided in this improvement at Dunbar. Most notably, the THSP grant provided support to create small learning communities and opportunities for common planning among teachers. The grant also financed additional administrative assistance for the teamed 9th and 10th grades.

FIGURE 1. TEST SCORE TRENDS
AT DUNBAR 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.

“The school is now a place where you can walk into the classroom and hear learning going on.”

- Dunbar teacher

Working directly to impact student success, THSP funds were used to host a variety of tutoring programs, including Saturday workshops and after-school extended-learning experiences. Perhaps most helpful, THSP funds allowed the school to attend a number of professional development opportunities that directly led to structural changes at the school, including block scheduling, teacher development opportunities, and gender-separated classes. Finally, the technical assistance personnel from THSP and the High Schools That Work (HSTW) program worked directly with Dunbar staff, often conducting targeted professional development and follow-up classroom support.

In addition to focusing on raising academic achievement at the school, Dunbar also defined success in terms of two other goals: building relationships with students and creating a positive environment for learning, and building bridges to the community so that the school serves as a focal point for achievement and success. Principal Williams described this second goal as the school becoming the “light on the hill” for the community.

School officials, teachers, and community members significantly influenced the school’s environment and transformed the school’s accountability record with the help of THSP and other valuable resources. These efforts have culminated in a cultural shift at the school that can be seen today. Discipline issues and dropout rates have declined while attendance and achievement scores have increased. Recently, Dunbar reached “Acceptable” status under the Texas Accountability Rating System for the 2009-2010 school year, marking a new era of student achievement and success. By helping Dunbar organize the school day around student success, THSP encouraged the campus to address its barriers to education.

Today, guided by the leadership of Principal Williams, the Dunbar campus is dedicated to a learning environment centered on excellence where educators and students are focused on academic achievement. According to one Dunbar teacher, the school is now a place where “you can walk into the classroom and hear learning going on.”

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 Dunbar 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 Dunbar High School.

After reviewing internal THSP documents, LBJ School researchers interviewed the current principal, three administrators, one counselor, two administrative support staffers, and 24 teachers at Dunbar. In all, 31 Dunbar staff and faculty members were interviewed, some on multiple occasions. In addition, LBJ researchers observed a variety of classrooms and were even able to attend a parent meeting. Using information gleaned from document analysis and site visits, this report identifies the policy changes at Dunbar High School that led to its transition to an “Acceptable” ranked school that continues to improve each year.⁴

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, we describe specific reform measures that teachers and administrators at Dunbar claim led to improvements in their school.

EDUCATION LEADERSHIP

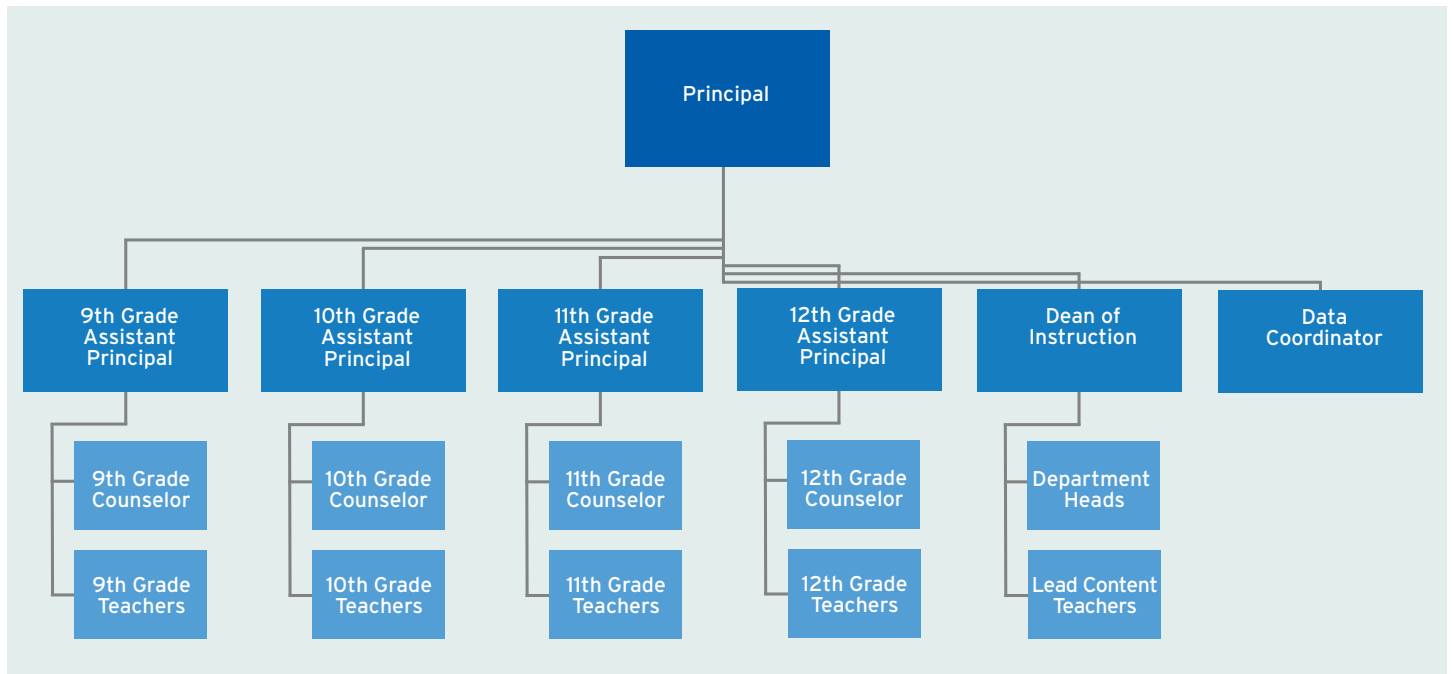
The Texas High School Project (THSP) describes education leadership as “campus leaders who are focused on effective instruction and efficient operations.”⁵ Education leadership is embodied not only in principals and superintendents, but in teachers as well.⁶ Whereas teacher effectiveness and curriculum 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.⁷

An extensive review of education leadership at Dunbar 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, and creating an environment of collaboration among teachers. Principal Doug Williams used THSP funding to accomplish a number of these objectives.

IMPLEMENTING STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP STRUCTURES

The formal leadership structure of Dunbar High School is led by Principal Doug Williams, who joined the school in July of 2007. There are four assistant principals; each is assigned permanently to an entering freshman class and follows that class for four years. Each administrator is paired with one counselor. There is also a dean of instruction and a data coordinator. In addition, there are department heads and lead content teachers (LCTs) for each subject area. Figure 2 illustrates the leadership structure at Dunbar.

FIGURE 2. LEADERSHIP STRUCTURE AT DUNBAR HIGH SCHOOL



“If we are going to expect things from kids, we are going to expect it from the staff. If we are going to demand 100% from the kids, we are going to expect that you give 100% to the kids.”
- Principal Williams

SETTING HIGH EXPECTATIONS

When asked about the expectations of his staff, Principal Williams answered, “If we are going to expect things from kids, we are going to expect it from the staff. If we are going to demand 100% from the kids, we are going to expect that you give 100% to the kids.” In conversations with teachers, it is apparent that Principal Williams and the rest of the formal leadership team at the school have communicated these expectations clearly, and teachers work hard to meet them on a regular basis. When asked about Williams’ transition to leadership at the campus, a 9th grade teacher stated, “He came with a new idea and that idea was: we are going to change the culture of Dunbar High School.”

According to one staff member, Williams keeps the perspective of teachers in mind; this allows him to be very clear and understanding in his expectations of teachers. In fact, for his first three years at Dunbar, Principal Williams taught a math class in addition to fulfilling all of his principal duties. In interviews with teachers and administrators at Dunbar High School, this aspect of Principal Williams’ leadership was mentioned repeatedly. Williams’ background in teaching and dedication to the profession have earned him respect from staff and have been vital to raising both student and staff expectations at Dunbar.

Principal Williams’ commitment to high-quality teaching is also apparent in the expectations for professional development. Teachers are encouraged to attend off-site professional development when possible. The expectation, however, is not only that the training be relevant, but that the teacher agrees to reteach the material to fellow colleagues at Dunbar. Williams called this a “homegrown” approach to professional development - one that encourages teachers to take responsibility for adding to the collective skillset of the school.

ESTABLISHING A DISTRIBUTIVE LEADERSHIP MODEL


Principal Williams worked hard to include a large number of teachers into the decision-making process at Dunbar. This approach meant expanding the number of teachers within the leadership structure and making sure every teacher had a voice in school-wide decisions. One of the first stories shared about Principal Doug Williams' leadership style involved the school's adoption of block scheduling. Principal Williams wanted to institute block scheduling immediately upon his arrival at Dunbar. After an informal survey, it was clear that the teachers and other administrators were not in favor of this change. Principal Williams let the idea rest, focusing on other key areas. He proposed block scheduling the following year and again chose not to insist on this change, as many staff members were still skeptical of the initiative.

Each year following Williams' initial proposal, other administrators and teachers were exposed to the concept of block scheduling at the *Model Schools Conference*, a professional development opportunity financed by THSP funds.⁸ By Williams' third year at Dunbar, the idea of block scheduling had gained many supporters, including an assistant principal and teacher leaders. It was at this point that Williams felt comfortable implementing block scheduling because it was a change the whole school community wanted. This example of shared decision-making illustrates Williams' commitment to shared leadership and responsibility among the administration and faculty of Dunbar High School.

CREATING A COLLABORATIVE ENVIRONMENT

Upon his arrival at Dunbar, Principal Williams knew he needed to establish a group of people who shared his vision for the school; he felt this would help to create an environment of collegiality and sharing. His first opportunity to do this came through the application process of the Public Educators Accelerating Kids (PEAK) initiative, a district-level performance pay program which allowed for additional hiring opportunities. Williams sought teachers with leadership qualities and a desire to make Dunbar an excellent school - those who were invested in a shared sense of purpose and who would work collaboratively to increase student achievement. A science teacher stated, "To be a successful teacher at Dunbar, it is necessary to have leadership qualities." The new teachers, combined with those who committed to staying at the campus, worked together to identify and solve problems.

"To be a successful teacher at Dunbar, it is necessary to have leadership qualities."
- science teacher



Principal Williams believed sharing a vision was critical. When asked about the process of creating a shared vision, he described enlisting the support of “first-tier” administrators as the initial messengers. This included assistant principals, counselors, and other members of the administration. These leaders communicated the vision and fostered a sense of shared purpose while interacting with “second-tier” leaders, which included LCTs, department heads, and other teacher leaders. When Williams began seeing his vision consistently used by the “second-tier” of leadership, he felt he had successfully created a distributed leadership structure dedicated to collaboration.

To foster a shared sense of purpose among all staff, Principal Williams sends out an email to the entire staff every Sunday night highlighting the successes, challenges, and upcoming events at Dunbar. Teachers referred to this email positively and believe it helps everyone stay connected and encourages continued collaboration.

One last example of the school’s growing collaborative environment has been the use of “learning walks,” a short and informal evaluation strategy. The process of observing other teachers is a two-way learning experience. First, the teacher being observed is responsible for teaching and sharing his/her expertise with the observers. Second, the observers are responsible for identifying the strengths and weaknesses of their colleagues and following up with feedback and support.

Teachers initially reported being uncomfortable with the level of feedback offered in learning walks because it felt intrusive. Due to a high level of support from administrators, teachers gradually adopted the collaborative attitude needed for this reflective process of evaluation and improvement as an effective tool in increasing student achievement at Dunbar. This revised process of evaluation has helped to craft all teachers at Dunbar into teacher leaders who are responsible for collaborating and sharing new ideas for everyone’s betterment.

TEACHER EFFECTIVENESS

Research shows that high quality, effective teachers can have a positive and significant impact on student achievement.⁹ 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.”¹⁰ 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 Dunbar High School based on themes which are critical to investments in teacher effectiveness; these include recruitment and retention, teacher evaluation, professional development, and collaboration.¹¹ We also discuss how teacher buy-in and involvement was instrumental in the school’s reform process.

DEFINING TEACHER EFFECTIVENESS AT DUNBAR HIGH SCHOOL

“The teachers now actually know the students, care about the students, and take time to know what students are going through.”


- Dunbar teacher

Often teacher effectiveness is described by practitioners in terms of taking curriculum and turning it into knowledge, with knowledge measured by gains in student achievement. This notion of teacher effectiveness was found on the Dunbar campus, but the school also included an important addendum to the definition. To Dunbar, an effective teacher is one who can transform content into learning through an expertise in pedagogical structures, as well as through meaningful relationships with students. Indeed, the relational aspect of an effective teacher was quite often the first response when asked, “What makes an effective teacher?” As such, building relationships in tandem with building pedagogical content was a key aspect of the change that occurred at Dunbar. One teacher described this by saying, “The teachers now actually know the students, care about the students, and take time to know what students are going through.”

Dunbar changed the ways teachers interact with students, as well as how teachers interact with the curriculum, to address the challenge of teacher effectiveness. Fostering effective teaching meant “making everyone accountable for learning,” as one teacher noted, and included supporting teachers as they changed their beliefs and practices inside and out of the classroom.

HIRING AND RETAINING EFFECTIVE TEACHERS

At the inception of the THSP grant process, it was clear that Dunbar suffered from teacher attrition, which exhausted the school’s organizational and human resources. Historically, the campus experienced large teacher turnover (more than 60% in some years), which was exacerbated by the frustrations of a dwindling magnet program. The school was in need of a new management plan to recruit and retain teachers who were both qualified in their con-



tent and onboard with the school's vision for change. A district program, the Public Educators Accelerating Kids, or PEAK initiative, began during the tenure of the THSP grant phase to help meet the school's demand for a high quality and sustainable staff on the campus.

The PEAK program, funded by performance pay grants from the state of Texas, combined a host of support structures to help attract and retain teachers, including: 1) a reapplication phase for job placements, 2) additional support from the district to fill positions, 3) professional development opportunities for new and existing staff, and 4) performance pay incentives linked to individual teachers and groups of teachers.¹²

As noted in Appendix 1, the program began at the end of the 2007-2008 school year. First, the administrative staff reapplied and were all granted their positions, including Principal Williams. Next, teachers were given the opportunity to either be placed on a district transfer list or reapply for their positions. Teachers who wanted to stay had to agree to a three-year tenure at the campus. Two-thirds of the campus successfully reapplied and were granted back their positions. Then, the district gave a huge amount of support to the school, both through providing additional teacher positions and also by allowing the campus first choice of all campuses, to select the remaining third of teachers needed to fully staff the campus. The alignment of district resources with school reform allowed for staffing the campus with a number of qualified applicants that perhaps might not have been interested in the campus without the district intervention.

Because of PEAK's intensive hiring process, Principal Williams implemented a rigorous interview structure to help guide personnel decisions. Portions of the interview procedure included teaching an impromptu class and allowing students to gauge whether an applicant would be a good fit. Prospective teachers were given a minimal amount of planning time and then expected to teach a small segment of material to a class similar to the one they were being considered for. After their lesson, the principal asked students their thoughts and took their feedback into consideration when hiring. Principal Williams concluded that since the implementation of student feedback, he has felt that they have been "right on" about all but one prospective hire.

It is unclear whether PEAK's rehire program has helped to significantly diminish retention issues at the campus over time, but it did allow Principal Williams to staff his school with teachers invested in the vision of high expectations. Principal Williams described the PEAK changeover as one that allowed him to keep the one-third of the staff already dedicated to his vision, hire another third to fill the positions of those who wanted to move on, and convince the remaining third to get onboard with the new changes.¹³ Principal Williams noted how important it was to get a "critical mass" of teachers involved and committed to the reform process.

PROVIDING EVALUATION AND FEEDBACK

After recruiting a staff that was ready to make the changes needed, the school implemented a variety of structures to support teachers and help them grow professionally. Part of this plan included a ramped-up evaluation system that provided consistent feedback and allowed teachers to become self-reflective with their pedagogy. The evaluation structure focused on formative assessments and linked evaluation with learning experiences both inside and outside of the classroom. As such, it provided a feedback loop of expectations, observations, and feedback. One teacher commented on the strength of this approach, noting that the administration was “very specific in what they were looking for in the classroom; they tell you what they want to see.”

This evaluation system, aided in part by additional administrative funds from THSP, allowed administrators to walk the halls and be in classrooms more often than they had been able to before. Previously, administrators were only in teachers’ classrooms approximately three times per year. Now, evaluations are a weekly event in which administrators enter a class, take notes, and then meet with staff to focus on specific learning goals. These evaluations are also loaded into a data system to chart progress and teacher learning goals.

You now see “teachers who are self-reflective and willing to get better for their students.”
- lead content teacher

This upgraded evaluation model, often called “walk-throughs,” has allowed teachers to become more in tune with their students’ needs because they are given concrete examples of their teaching and what expectations are and are not being met. It also allows for more administrative visibility in all parts of the school, which helps keep discipline and other hallway issues in check. In all, the administrative evaluation and feedback system allows for candid conversations between teachers and administrators about what teaching and learning mean, and what they look like in the classroom. A lead content teacher shared this positive feedback about the changes in evaluations at the school - you now see “teachers who are self-reflective and willing to get better for their students.”

In addition to administrative evaluation, the campus also moved to a system that allows for peer evaluation by lead content teachers (LCTs). These teachers were promoted within their departments to focus on specific strategies and develop individual learning plans with teachers. LCTs work with their teachers and provide content- and pedagogical-based evaluations that focus on the teacher’s individual needs.

The LCT evaluations also led to either formal mentoring structures or informal mentoring based on specific needs. This extended evaluation system allows for teachers to learn from one another and to find peers who can help them with specific content or classroom problems. The feedback given during LCT evaluations also provides the basis for both personal and school-wide professional development opportunities.

EXPANDING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Teacher development occurred at many different levels at Dunbar, including informal one-on-one mentoring based on administrative and LCT evaluations, small group discussions during grade-level or departmental planning times, and whole group seminar opportunities. In addition, a large part of the professional development opportunities included allowing teachers to visit other campuses and then bring back ideas to the group.

THSP funds were used to host a variety of these professional development opportunities in which teachers were able to identify professional needs and then find conferences or sister schools to visit. Examples of these include several trips to the *Model Schools Conference* as well as site visits to schools in Georgia, Florida, Colorado, California, and multiple visits to other schools in Texas. Ideas or lessons learned from these visits and conferences were either turned into new school structures or were fed back to the larger teacher population through departmental meetings and clustered professional development.

An example of how site visits translated into sharing at the school level is the “learning walks,” a program brought back from the *Model Schools Conference* and started in the 2008-2009 school year. In a learning walk, a group of teachers briefly visits a number of classrooms with a specific question or focus area in mind, for example classroom management or student engagement. After viewing several teachers, the group talks about what they saw and team members reflect on how they can improve their own pedagogy.

These learning walks often fostered discussion across campuses because teachers were able to visit other schools to view successful techniques or programs. Many teachers found the multiple forms of peer feedback and support to be especially helpful, and one teacher insisted that the program helped “make everyone accountable for learning.” The learning walks also sparked conversations that would be turned into school-wide professional development opportunities.

Often, THSP played an important role in providing whole group professional development. For example, THSP provided key professional development opportunities in tandem with the start of the PEAK initiative. The THSP technical assistance consultant was on hand during a getaway Summer Planning Academy (SPA) in which the new staff were introduced to each other and taken through goal setting exercises. He also returned during the fall to host another full campus professional development seminar to follow up on the goals and strategies created during the getaway weekend. These whole group opportunities, such as the SPA weekends or the whole group THSP-led seminars, continued concurrent to the other small group and individual professional development plans, which were geared toward individual teachers’ needs.

“Collegiality and cooperation among teachers has grown immensely.”
- 10th grade teacher

SUPPORTING COLLEGIALITY AND COLLABORATION

The attention paid to teachers through thoughtful hiring and professional development culminated in a shift of culture at the campus. Perhaps the best example of the change in culture was the oft-expressed notion of the reflective and collaborative teacher. It was common in interviews to hear personnel give examples of how they think differently or have changed practices in the past few years. One teacher noted, “It’s not odd to see me in somebody else’s class learning from their lesson.” Many observed that this change was a new phenomenon, and it strengthened the faculty as a whole, creating a culture of cooperation and collegiality among staff. A 10th grade teacher said, “Collegiality and cooperation among teachers has grown immensely.”

Collaboration was the key to this cultural change and was expressed in almost all interviews with teachers and administrators. The faculty at Dunbar felt that the changes made at the school allowed them to work with each other to solve problems and grow professionally. Sometimes this meant having a mentor to develop and follow through with a pedagogical problem, but in other instances it meant having a fellow teacher to turn to when times were difficult. One teacher described this notion by saying, “It helps to have a faculty you can have fellowship with.”

Following THSP involvement, the staff more readily believe that all students can succeed and expect students to work toward that success. This belief was expressed repeatedly; one teacher commented, “We are more like a family now...the teachers with each other and the teachers with the kids.” Through collaborative efforts, the current staff culture creates a sense of urgency on the campus and helps to focus both teachers and students on academic results.

CREATING TEACHER BUY-IN FOR REFORM

In all, Dunbar was able to create a comprehensive strategy to get the most out of its teachers by providing a multitude of structures committed to excellent teaching. These included hiring and retention practices, ongoing and meaningful feedback through multiple evaluators, and a wide breadth of professional development opportunities. The sum of these structures helped foster a new culture at Dunbar that is focused on high expectations for both teaching and learning.

These changes were shaped and implemented with the help of the teaching staff at the campus. Without their buy-in and readiness for change, the leadership at the school and the newly placed structures would have faced insurmountable challenges to implementation. Teachers played an important role as both the cheerleaders for reform and the individual units of change. The Dunbar staff worked hard to reflect on their own practices and develop as more effective teachers through intensive collaboration with their peers and students. They were very proud of their “homegrown” efforts in both professional development and implementation, which they felt contributed to the positive changes seen in Dunbar High School’s campus.

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.”¹⁴ Changes made to the learning systems at Dunbar High School proved to be crucial to increased student performance and overall success. Investments in learning systems have been central to sustaining success at Dunbar after the redesign process was complete. Systems that encourage rigorous and personalized learning for students at Dunbar include altering school structures, aligning curriculum and standardizing assessments, and implementing strategic interventions.

ALTERING SCHOOL STRUCTURES

Small Learning Communities

The transition from middle school to high school is difficult for many students; due to this challenge, Dunbar worked with THSP to create a small learning community for students making this transition. THSP provided funds for an additional administrative position and a technician dedicated to offering guidance and training throughout the process. THSP helped create a separate “school within a school” for freshmen. The 9th grade academy is located in its own section of the building with all core courses and administrative offices separated from the rest of the school. This isolation has helped students in their first year to focus on their studies and better transition to the high school setting. As a result, the number of 9th graders who fail and have to repeat the grade has decreased, which directly impacts the four-year graduation rate at the school.

Building Relationships through Teaming

To reduce the number of students “slipping through the cracks,” 9th and 10th grade students have common core teachers, allowing for more collaboration and communication regarding student progress. This practice of teaming encourages teachers to discuss how best to reach students and share what works in their classrooms. A 10th grade teacher we interviewed said, “Teaming gives more insight on students and allows [teachers] to assess learning more often.” This fits with the extant literature on the subject of teaming, which suggests that the practice recognizes the complexity of the teaching process and addresses the interdependence of teachers when trying to achieve broader goals.¹⁵

When facing discipline issues, it is not uncommon for Dunbar teachers to work together to find ways to keep students in the classroom. Many teachers reported a campus-wide

“Teaming gives more insight on students and allows [teachers] to assess learning more often.”

- 10th grade teacher

emphasis on building relationships and finding new ways to reach students. This focus on student relationships is also seen at the administrative level; once past 9th grade, students are linked with an assistant principal and counselor who follow them through to their senior year. Because of this, students are able to build three-year relationships with their administrators, who in turn are able to push them toward academic success.

Block Scheduling

Dunbar currently uses a 5x5 block schedule; this consists of five 70-minute class periods on the first day and another set of five classes the second day for a total of ten class periods each academic year. The school implemented this particular model in 2010-2011 after learning about it at a THSP-funded trip to the *Model Schools Conference*. Before instituting this schedule, Dunbar followed a single-day, seven-class period schedule. The newer schedule offers three more credits per year – a concept that allows students who begin to fall behind as 9th graders an opportunity to regain credits and stay on course to graduate with their peers.

The five periods versus seven periods also cuts down on time lost passing between classes and offers more time for instruction. Both teachers and students supported the move to block scheduling and it has proved beneficial to creating and sustaining academic relationships. These findings are consistent with the research on block scheduling; teachers often report an increase in variety of instruction, more student-centered instruction, and improved student-teacher relationships when operating under a block schedule.¹⁶

In 2009-2010, Dunbar began offering double-blocking for math and science classes. This schedule allowed students to have longer periods of math or science each day, giving teachers more time to communicate concepts and possibly reteach any previously covered material. With Dunbar High School's new block schedule, students enrolled in double-blocking have math or science instruction every day instead of every other day.

Creating a Safe Learning Environment

Both teachers and administrators reported that prior to the THSP grant, Dunbar struggled with discipline, keeping students in the classroom, and keeping nonstudents out of the school. To address these issues, Dunbar placed an emphasis on monitoring the hallways. Along with special staff dedicated to hall monitoring, teachers are encouraged to stand outside of their classrooms during passing periods. This change promoted three desired outcomes: 1) more students were in class on time, which allows for less disruption and more learning, 2) teachers had more opportunities to interact with students outside of the classroom, which leads to stronger relationships, and 3) discipline issues declined.

"We are collaborating together, sitting down with other teachers and asking, 'what did you teach, how did your kids get this?'...that's a huge cultural shift."

- lead content teacher

In addition to monitoring passing periods, halls are observed during class time. Students authorized to be outside of the classroom are granted a bright orange vest, similar to those used on a construction site. This simple mechanism provides Dunbar staff with the ability to easily identify which students should and should not be in the hallways.

Another idea drawn from THSP-funded trainings was gender-separated classes. The 9th grade and 10th grade began this initiative in the fall of 2010 after learning of successful programs at similar high schools. As of March 2011, administrators reported positive results including a noticeable decrease in discipline issues and a more orderly classroom environment. In one class, the research team witnessed a 10th grade all-male math class loudly chant a statement of self-belief led by one 10th grade boy yelling, "I believe," followed by the rest of the class finishing each statement with positive sentiments about their futures. Plans to expand this initiative into the other grade levels are in the works for the next school year.

Flexible Lunch Periods

In addition to collaborating with other teachers, the new schedule offers teachers extra time to be with students outside of designated class periods. The state minimum for student lunch periods is 30 minutes; Dunbar offers students 55 minutes, treating the additional 25 minutes as a privilege. Teachers have the flexibility to use this time to address discipline issues or academic concerns without cutting into valuable class time. This is one of the new changes made to create a stronger sense of order at Dunbar.

ALIGNING CURRICULUM AND STANDARDIZING ASSESSMENTS

By providing time during the school day for teachers to collaborate, Dunbar was able to pursue common assessments and align the curriculum both horizontally and vertically. Teachers no longer work in silos, teaching the curriculum with no feedback or peer guidance. A lead content teacher stated, "We are collaborating together, sitting down with other teachers and asking, 'what did you teach, how did your kids get this?' that's a huge cultural shift." Through the use of weekly "Bell Ringers," which are common assessment tests given to all students studying the same subject, teachers have access to timely information about the curriculum they teach and can easily monitor the progress of their students. More importantly, teachers are able to go back and reteach any concepts not mastered by their students. Through common planning periods, teachers are also able to ensure that the curriculum or subjects, such as math and science, are aligned vertically and are taught in a strategic, sequential order.

IMPLEMENTING STRATEGIC INTERVENTIONS

Tutoring

Dunbar offers multiple tutoring options: hired tutors pull students out of class during designated class periods; teachers and tutors provide extra help before and after school; and teachers and hired tutors offer Saturday sessions. Buses are available for the students participating in after-school and Saturday programs to ensure fair access to these opportunities. In preparation for Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) testing, many core subject teachers offer special TAKS camps and even compete to find unique ways to entice students to attend; for example, in 2009, teachers at Dunbar launched a “Takin’ It to the Streets” campaign and went door to door recruiting students for the TAKS camps. Funds from THSP were vital because they helped cover the costs of tutors, buses, and camp materials.

Mentoring

The mentoring program, started in 2009-2010, built an additional layer of accountability for student success. All Dunbar teachers volunteer to mentor up to 10 students; these students are chosen based on past performance and existing relationships. Mentors keep a close eye on the overall progress of their mentees, and if a student is struggling, another teacher is able to find the student’s mentor and discuss new strategies. This extra measure provides accountability for student achievement and promotes a stronger relationship between teachers and students.

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.”¹⁷ 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 Dunbar High School at the classroom and campus levels.

Further, data collection and management are just a small piece of effective performance management. 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 are critical to meaningful improvement.¹⁸ Thus, this section explores the ways Dunbar has focused its performance management around informed decisions from a variety of its collected data.

Over the five-year grant period, Dunbar used the resources provided by THSP and High Schools That Work (HSTW)¹⁹ to implement three key changes in the area of performance and data management. The school has committed to purposeful data use, provided time and opportunities for staff to collaboratively analyze data and plan accordingly, and tracked student performance to develop specific learning and intervention plans based on data.

ANALYZING DATA PURPOSEFULLY

As part of Fort Worth Independent School District (FWISD), Dunbar has used a variety of district-based technology and data systems over the years. Data warehouses and software have come from a variety of places including the district and the local Texas Education Service Center (ESC), known more locally as *Region XI*. As technology has grown more sophisticated, some of these systems have been replaced, but others have lingered on because there is no one system that does everything the school needs and/or wants.

For example, the *Data Smart* software, rolled out in 2007-2008 as part of a larger curriculum changeover, expanded school capabilities to provide many more data points, including weekly assessments broken down by each objective. In addition, a new data warehouse system, *Connects*, was also implemented during the grant timeframe. These two data interfaces, though powerful, do not allow for the inclusion of locally created assessments. Thus the school uses a variety of other programs, such as *Eduphoria*, to accomplish the data demands of their staff. Whether using the latest data software or the old software still in use, the staff and faculty at Dunbar strive to incorporate timely data into their decisions with students and with each other.

“We are looking at the data more. We are being proactive and not just rolling the dice when it comes to making important decisions.”
- data coordinator

Both the data coordinator and principal at Dunbar made it clear from the beginning of their respective tenures that data would be used to inform decision-making. The data coordinator stated, “We are looking at the data more. We are being proactive and not just rolling the dice when it comes to making important decisions.” The principal requires that teachers use data collected from common assessments to inform classroom instruction if student scores are not satisfactory. The data coordinator facilitates the collection of data, as well as the exchange of data between teachers and administrators. The coordinator also provides support in the form of training, analysis, and developing structures conducive to effective data use. The data coordinator leads trainings throughout the school year in campus-wide or team meetings, as well as for individual teachers on an “as-needed” basis. This position represents a school-wide commitment to data analysis.

In addition to data use at the administrative level, teachers often scrutinize any available student assessments. These include state and district assessments, as well as locally developed formative assessments for classes and common assessments across departments and teams.

BUILDING DATA REVIEW INTO TEACHER SCHEDULES

Providing teachers with the time necessary to collect and analyze data is important in creating a data-driven culture.²⁰ THSP, through its funding and technical assistance, provided additional time for Dunbar teachers to meet and understand student data and the data's impact on students. Teachers credit the time embedded in the school day as a key reason they are able to effectively analyze and use data.

Over the years of the THSP grant, summer collaborative meetings were held for teachers and counselors to analyze individual student performance and demographic data. These meetings provided teachers with an early view of their students so that they could use the summer to plan accordingly. In addition, THSP funds were used for three-day faculty retreats known as Summer Planning Academies (SPAs). During SPA weekends, teachers were able to group with their departments and grade-level teams to discuss data and make strategic plans for the year. In addition, SPAs were used to introduce teachers to new software capabilities and to expand the technical knowledge of the staff so that they could better collect, analyze, and disseminate data for future discussions.

Teaming in the 9th and 10th grades helped provide extra time to focus on data because teams use their common planning period to work collaboratively. In addition to grade-level teams, subject area teams meet on a monthly basis to review and interpret data. Specifically, the time given to teachers during the school day to work together has been extremely beneficial because it means that data analysis is always on the agenda and rarely gets pushed back because of other workday pursuits.

DESIGNING DATA-BASED STRATEGIC INTERVENTIONS

Developing data-based strategic interventions to improve the performance of both teachers and students is a priority at Dunbar. One example of the ways in which data have led to strategic interventions with teachers has been through the use of “learning walks,” a short and informal evaluation strategy taken from a THSP-funded conference. The data coordinator examines information from student assessments regularly to determine the needs of teachers on an individual basis, as well as at the school-wide level. This analysis is then turned into teacher development opportunities where teachers can learn from each other by visiting classrooms to see exemplars of a particular unit or learning strategy. After the walks are complete, a debriefing follows that is then used to ensure that further professional development is targeted and effective. Learning walks have contributed to a more open and collaborative environment, as well as the school’s data-driven culture.

Dunbar has also developed a more data-driven culture over the last few years through common assessments in content areas known as “Bell Ringers.” These are short, weekly quizzes that are given by every teacher and analyzed at monthly data team meetings. All teachers are then required to adjust instruction if students’ mastery does not meet a certain level. One math teacher said, “You might be teaching it, but was the student receiving it and learning it?” These quizzes, and their subsequent analysis, have created a focused, collaborative approach for evaluating and improving instruction.

Finally, Dunbar has reorganized tutoring to make it a more targeted means of addressing student needs. Previously, tutoring was done in an ad hoc manner. Currently, students are assessed and targeted based on their mastery of different learning objectives across a variety of subjects. Teachers repeatedly pointed to tutoring as one of the important ways Dunbar has improved student understanding, which led to increased test scores.

MOVING FORWARD

In all, data use has been an effective tool in identifying issues and increasing student achievement at Dunbar High School. In the future, Dunbar is looking for ways to increase the efficacy of locally developed data in order to connect them to other district and state measures for more complete alignment. In so doing, Dunbar hopes to structure data analysis in such a way that administrators, teachers, and students are all active data users.

CONCLUSION

The Texas High School Project (THSP) provided an opportunity for Dunbar 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.

Reform at Dunbar was spearheaded by the district, which took specific interest in the school and was led by the vision and efforts of Principal Doug Williams. As growth in student performance started to occur, the effort was embraced by all staff and became embedded in the school culture. This first occurred with an overhaul of the faculty through the Public Educators Accelerating Kids (PEAK) program, but has been maintained through various tiers of leaders and support from the campus.

By distributing leadership opportunities throughout the campus, Dunbar empowered mentors, lead content teachers, department heads, and even those who attended professional development trainings to share new ideas with others. Our findings have shown that although the various policies and structures implemented at the campus have resulted in positive change, it has been the support of the people involved during the implementation process that has made all the difference. In moving forward it is important to note that with all reform efforts, smart, dedicated people who are empowered to share ideas, try new things, and focus on student learning are the catalyst for long-term change.

An emphasis on excellence at Dunbar has become more than a mantra. It is an expectation - one that is realized daily. Although the campus still struggles to maintain and improve its academic scores, it has shown immense improvement across all subject areas. Further, one can go into the school and see that there is structure, organization, and learning occurring that reflect strong relationships between students and faculty. A cultural shift has allowed the school to build a community of learners centered on achievement and success. This success is prominently displayed in Dunbar's main foyer where, pasted to the administration office's glass walls, are many senior class photos attached to college acceptance letters. From the moment students walk through the doors, they see that the bar is set...and it is set high.

APPENDIX 1: DUNBAR HIGH SCHOOL REFORM TIMELINE

SCHOOL YEAR	ACCOUNTABILITY RATING	THSP FUNDING AND EVENTS	OTHER IMPORTANT EVENTS
2004-2005	Acceptable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • THSP grant application completed by Principal Ingrid Williams • THSP grant awarded: \$669,000 total over 4 years 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community lawsuit filed over Magnet program and equal access • District intervention and special attention
2005-2006	Acceptable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • THSP grant year 1: \$208,800 • HSTW technical assistance begins on campus • 9th grade reorganized into small learning communities with common planning time for teachers • Addition of an administrative position for 9th grade • Extra duties/pay for counseling at 9th grade • Saturday tutoring funded by THSP starts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Magnet program reorganized as student interest program • Increase in Advanced Placement and Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) course offerings
2006-2007	Unacceptable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • THSP grant year 2: \$115,050 • 10th grade reorganized into small learning communities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boys and Girls Club starts College Readiness and Counseling Program on campus
2007-2008	Unacceptable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grant year 3: \$115,050 • <i>Model Schools Conference</i> attended • Summer Planning Academy (SPA) getaway retreat 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New principal, Doug Williams, hired • New FWISD curriculum rolled out • New FWISD curriculum-based assessments (CBAs) rolled out • New Data Smart data warehouse rolled out • "Pastors on Campus" mentoring program starts • Public Educators Accelerating Kids (PEAK) performance pay program starts - teachers reapplying for positions (replaced 1/3 of teachers)
2008-2009	Unacceptable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • THSP grant year 4: \$230,100 • Model Schools Conference attended • SPA faculty retreat 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Learning Walks" professional development program begins on campus
2009-2010	Acceptable		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Double-blocking science and math begins • SPA faculty retreat
2010-2011	Unavailable		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5x5 block scheduling starts on campus • Gender-based classes start

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- ⁴ Ibid.
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- ¹² Fort Worth Independent School District. (2011). PEAK - Public Educators Accelerating Kids. Fort Worth, TX. Retrieved from: <http://www.fwisd.org/peak/Pages/default.aspx>.
- ¹³ While the PEAK program was not specifically studied during site visits, a number of teachers and administrators expressed their feelings about the program. In all, they felt the restructuring, combined with getting first choice of applicants, helped to shape the faculty and bring them together under Principal Williams' new vision. They also appreciated the extra professional development at the beginning of the process. When asked about the monetary rewards, however, almost all interviewed said they were confused by the reward system and believed it did not provide an incentive for them to work harder. They felt they already engaged in the behaviors emphasized by the reward system. However, most stated it would be a nice surprise if and when they received bonuses.
- ¹⁴ Texas High School Project. (2011). *About THSP: Overview*. Retrieved from <http://www.thsp.org/about-thsp/overview/>.
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