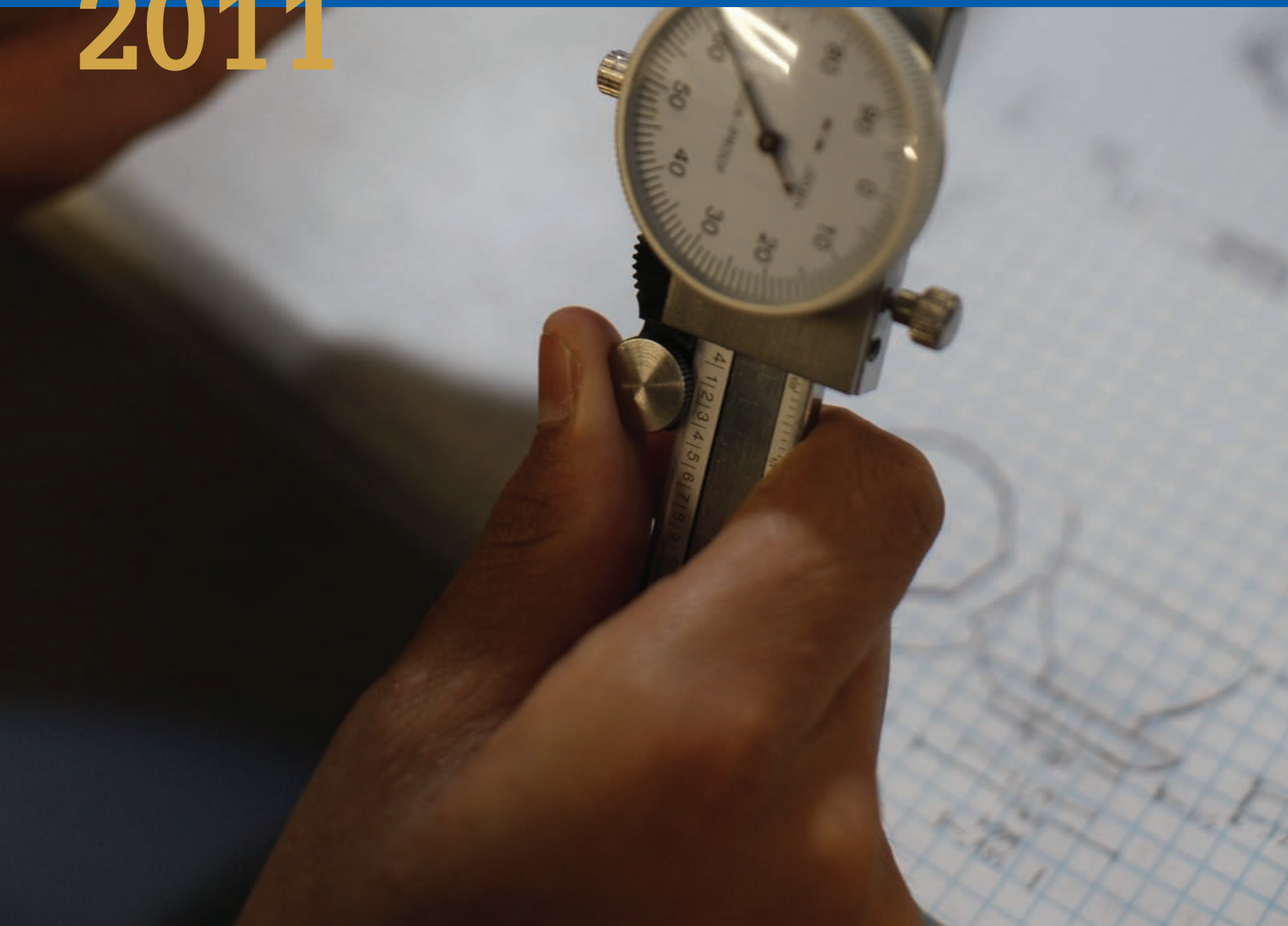


Texas High School Project Site Report: **High School Reforms that Work**

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HIGH SCHOOL REFORMS THAT WORKED

Between 2004 and 2009, the Texas High School Project (THSP) began an extensive, state-wide effort to restructure and revitalize struggling schools through the administration of grants and the provision of expert assistance. The primary focus of THSP's reform efforts was the creation of small learning communities within large, comprehensive high schools. This initiative was aligned with a nationwide "small schools" movement led by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation that sought to reduce the dropout rate and raise student achievement scores by personalizing the learning environment.

After the conclusion of the grant period, THSP identified four schools in Texas, Akins High School, Austin High School, Dunbar High School, and North Side High School, as having made meaningful gains in student performance scores on standardized tests. This report explores the recent reform efforts made at these four campuses, identifying specific changes funded by THSP grants at each campus that led to increases in student achievement.

THSP contracted with a research team at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas to review the schools' leadership structures and practices, the effectiveness of their teachers, the learning systems that affect instruction and student performance, and the schools' 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 The research team reviewed internal school and THSP documents, and also visited each school twice during the fall of 2010 and spring of 2011. The research team interviewed the principals, other administrators, and teachers at each campus to learn first-hand what changes led to their success.

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.

AKINS HIGH SCHOOL

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

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, less than 50% passed in English and language arts, and approximately 60% passed in social studies.³

During this time, Akins also experienced turnover among 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 for eight years, was characterized by interviewees as a visionary leader who developed ideas that were the catalyst for reform at Akins.

Although the school's attendance, graduation, and dropout rates were comparable to district averages at the time, the differences in the number of minority versus white students enrolled in advanced placement classes and the gap in standardized test scores between these groups were troubling to the new principal. Akins also experienced high levels of gang activity, which created serious discipline issues.

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 to apply for a THSP grant to help facilitate this transition.

In June 2005, Akins was awarded a four-year High School Redesign (HSRD) grant totaling almost \$1.63 million from the Texas High School Project (THSP). The grant provided funding for developing and implementing a redesign plan built around the concept of small learning communities. The goal of the redesign was to promote a more student-centered school environment that would allow for personalized instruction and interventions. In addition, professional development was provided in part by High Schools That Work (HSTW), a collaborative reform organization led by the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB).

In 2005, planning for reorganization began. The focus of the first grant year was on structure: assigning teams, deciding the physical layout of academies in the school building, developing staff assignments, and soliciting buy-in from staff.

By 2006-2007, the second year of the THSP grant, Akins had fully implemented six career-themed academies, one of which was exclusively for 9th graders. When students transitioned to the 10th grade, they enrolled in one of five academies: Academy of Business and Legal Enterprise; Agriculture, Computers, and Engineering Sciences; Arts and Humanities; Social Services; and New Tech High. This last academy was added through a separate grant from 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 problems with curriculum alignment across academies. Adding to the school's leadership issues, Principal Deike left Akins at the end of the 2006-2007 school year. She was replaced by current Akins principal, Daniel Girard, who previously led another THSP-associated school in El Paso. Although he was supportive of the reform's goals, Principal Girard 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 for his teachers, as reported by the *Austin Chronicle* when he accepted the position.⁴

Although Principal Deike initially garnered a good deal of support for school reform, there were still a number of teachers resistant to change. It was not until two years into the THSP grant that the composition of staff at Akins reached what was referred to as the "tipping point" - where enough teachers resistant to new ideas had left or changed their minds, and new policies could be implemented 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 proved to be ineffective were halted and those that were successful were encouraged and replicated in other departments.

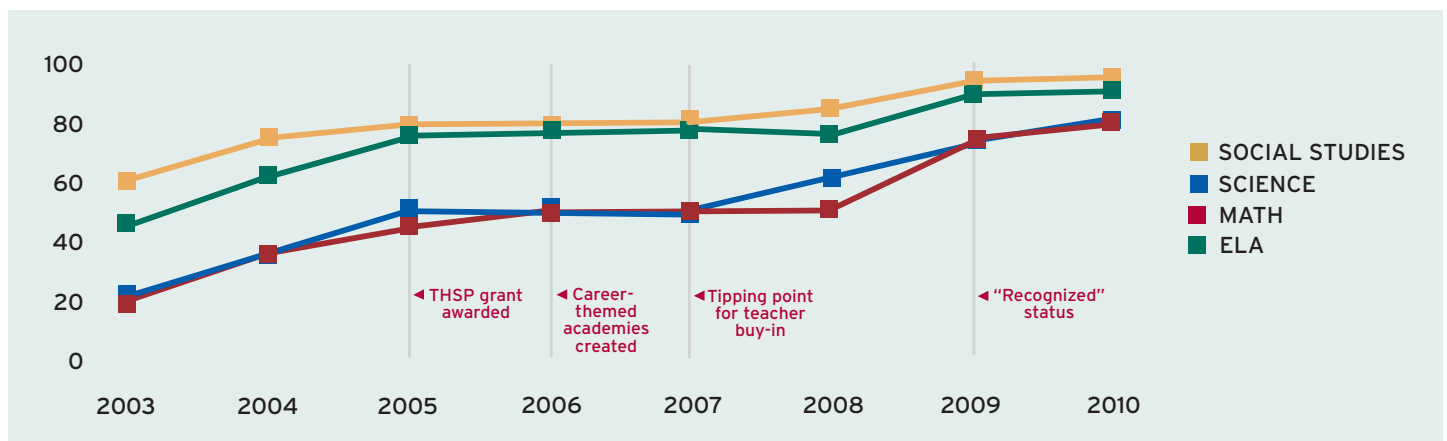
Akins has emerged from the grant process as an improved school. As indicated in Figure 1, by the end of the grant cycle in June 2009, Akins saw marked improvements: nearly 80% of students had passing TAKS scores in math and science, 94% were passing English and language arts, and 97% were passing social studies.⁵ 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.⁶

Although Akins defines a large part of its success by its students' TAKS scores, the implementation of career-themed academies also improved the school. Through the creation of these academies, Akins was able to foster a strong sense of community within each academy and throughout the campus. Today, teachers and classrooms are grouped by academy rather than department. The grouping of academy teachers facilitates collaboration and ensures that teachers are able to share information about their students.

The academies have played a large role in building community and establishing traditions in this new school. 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 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 that can benefit them throughout their high school career.

In addition, according to Principal Girard, the THSP grant allowed Akins to institutionalize a culture that is conducive to reform and new ideas. With the support from THSP, administrators were able to "change the hearts and minds" of Akins staff and make them feel comfortable taking risks and proposing their own suggestions for reform. By creating an environment that encourages innovation, Akins' faculty and staff have laid a strong foundation for a campus that will continue to reevaluate and improve upon its practices for the benefit of its students.

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.


AUSTIN HIGH SCHOOL

Stephen F. Austin High School, one of the few anchors of the Eastwood neighborhood in inner-city Houston, has faced many challenges since it opened in 1935. This historic campus now serves a student population of nearly 2,000 that is 96% Latino and 95% economically disadvantaged.⁷ The density of the neighborhood is almost twice that of the Houston area as a whole, and close to 60% of the adult residents have not graduated from high school.⁸

Although the school steadily improved during the course of the 1990s, Austin HS still faced many problems. Teachers were isolated from each other and did not consistently prioritize forming relationships with their students. It was far too easy for students to “fall through the cracks” at Austin HS, and the dropout rate hovered at around 12%. Also, there was little sense of community or school pride. For example, the band had no uniforms to march in and played worn, second-hand instruments.

In 2001, Linda Llorente, who was known as a tough, organized leader, was hired from a nearby middle school to help continue the progress Austin HS had begun. Through her innovative brand of distributive leadership, Principal Llorente created a system that encouraged the entire school community to come together and resolve solutions for themselves. She also fostered investment from the surrounding community, which brought about positive changes for Austin HS students. This community buy-in included partnering with local organizations and businesses to provide job training and additional academic opportunities for students.

Principal Llorente also pursued grant opportunities that aligned with her faculty and staff's vision for the school. In 2004, Austin HS successfully applied for a grant with the Texas High School Project (THSP) that promised to help the campus transition into smaller, more personalized learning communities. However, during this time Houston ISD experienced considerable change in its leadership, and THSP administrators ultimately decided to delay distribution of the grant.



In May 2006, THSP reevaluated the situation at Austin HS and awarded the school, along with three other high schools in HISD, a District Engagement grant. Austin High's portion of the grant was \$200,000. The district then appointed a lead principal from another Houston ISD high school receiving the District Engagement grant to oversee the restructuring and reform efforts. Professional development was provided in part by High Schools That Work (HSTW), a collaborative reform organization led by the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB).

A central focus of the THSP grant was the creation of small learning communities through the development of career-themed academies. Administrators introduced career-themed academies in the 2006-2007 school year. During the grant period, Austin HS also implemented an organizational structure for curriculum called Same Objective, Same Assessment (SOSA) groups. These weekly meetings allowed small groups of teachers belonging to common content areas to share lesson plans and review data. The grant also provided for professional development and other expenditures, including college preparation programs, replacement technology and supplies for computer labs, and stipends for teacher tutorial sessions. In addition, THSP funding allowed Austin HS to redirect preexisting funds to meet other needs within the school.

Although school administrators liked the concept of small, career-themed academies, the new structure was not a good fit for Austin HS. In 2007-2008, Austin HS switched to grade-level academies with the introduction of its 9th grade academy. Over the next three years, the academy structure grew to include all four grades. The grade-level structure included grade-level student uniforms, which helped faculty and staff identify and keep track of their students on the campus.

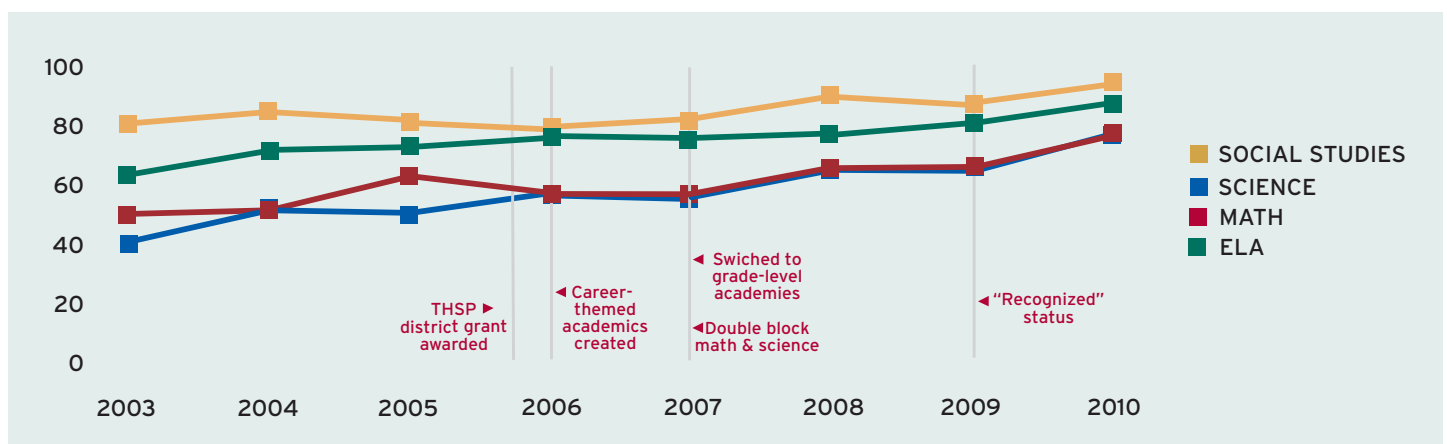
Before the THSP grant, Austin HS used a block scheduling model with four 90-minute classes taught each day - alternating between "A" and "B" days. In the 2008-2009 school year, the school adopted a double-block schedule for algebra, geometry, and biology; subjects with historically low TAKS passing rates at Austin HS. On "A" days in these classes, students learn new material and on "B" days students review older material. Double-block scheduling allows students to have more concentrated time with one teacher.

As depicted in Figure 2, the reforms initiated through THSP funding proved to have a notable impact on the school's accountability rating. Austin HS was labeled a "Recognized" school by the Texas State Accountability Rating System for the first time following the 2008-2009 school year and has remained so ever since. In 2010, and for the first time in a decade, more than 75% of students passed the math Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) exam.⁹

The administration at Austin HS was quick to acknowledge that standardized tests should not be the sole measure of a school's success. Over the past few years, Austin HS has become a model school in other important ways. Students and teachers now interact in a more personalized and effective manner through small learning communities. Teachers are not isolated within their classroom; rather, they regularly share and learn from each other. As for the band, they recently returned from a trip to Los Angeles where they participated in an invitation-only competition. The local community is now proud of the campus and, according to one administrator at Austin HS, during halftime at the weekly football games no one leaves their seats.

Austin HS has emerged as a school that makes no excuses for poor performance. Though Principal Llorente's leadership was a clear catalyst, Austin High School's partnership with THSP allowed it the opportunity to honestly assess its weaknesses and craft solutions that addressed its needs. It is this culture of success - facilitated by the recent reform process - that will continue to drive improvements at the school and in the lives of the students it serves.

FIGURE 2. TEST SCORE TRENDS AT AUSTIN 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.


DUNBAR HIGH SCHOOL

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. Today, the school's population is 87% African American and 9.5% Latino. Dunbar serves approximately 900 students, 60% of whom are economically disadvantaged.¹⁰

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 by the school's inability 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 funding than the regular academic programs. The scrutiny over failing achievement scores and an unhappy community created a sense of crisis in the school and pushed Fort Worth ISD to take a renewed interest in the campus and focus its efforts on improvement.

In an attempt to institute broad reforms at the campus, Fort Worth ISD worked with school administrators to establish 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 redesign and refocus Dunbar toward academic success.




In 2005, the Texas High School Project (THSP) awarded Dunbar a four-year High School Redesign (HSRD) grant totaling \$669,000. The grant provided funding for developing and implementing a redesign plan built around the concept of small learning communities. The goal of the redesign was to promote a more student-centered school environment that would allow opportunities for personalized instruction and interventions. The grant 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. Also, professional development was provided in part by High Schools That Work (HSTW), a collaborative reform organization led by the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB).

The main focus during the first year of the grant was on improving the school's 9th grade academy. Groups of teachers were given a planning period, which allowed them to pool their resources and knowledge in order to better meet the instructional, social, and emotional needs of their students.

Halfway through the grant process, however, Dunbar experienced significant personnel changes. Then-Principal Ingrid Williams was reassigned to another high school in the district at the end of the 2006-2007 school year. As a result of the uncertainty created by the principal's departure, many teachers also pursued other opportunities. By July - with most schools having completed the bulk of their hiring for the following year - Dunbar still had more than 20 positions open. As a result, the school was not able to attract many experienced teachers. The teachers that were hired that summer did not stay at the school long. Two were asked to resign within the first month of school, and two more left before Spring Break.

Fortunately, Principal Doug Williams, who formerly held teaching and administrative positions in the innovative San Diego Unified School District, proved to be an effective leader who supported many of the THSP-related reforms. To meet Dunbar's challenges, Principal Doug Williams focused on restoring order to the campus. He envisioned a school dedicated to learning and worked diligently to create an environment ready and willing for change.



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 school staff 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. At faculty meetings, a portion of time was set aside for staff development related to discipline and classroom management, often led by HSTW consultants. 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 can serve 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.

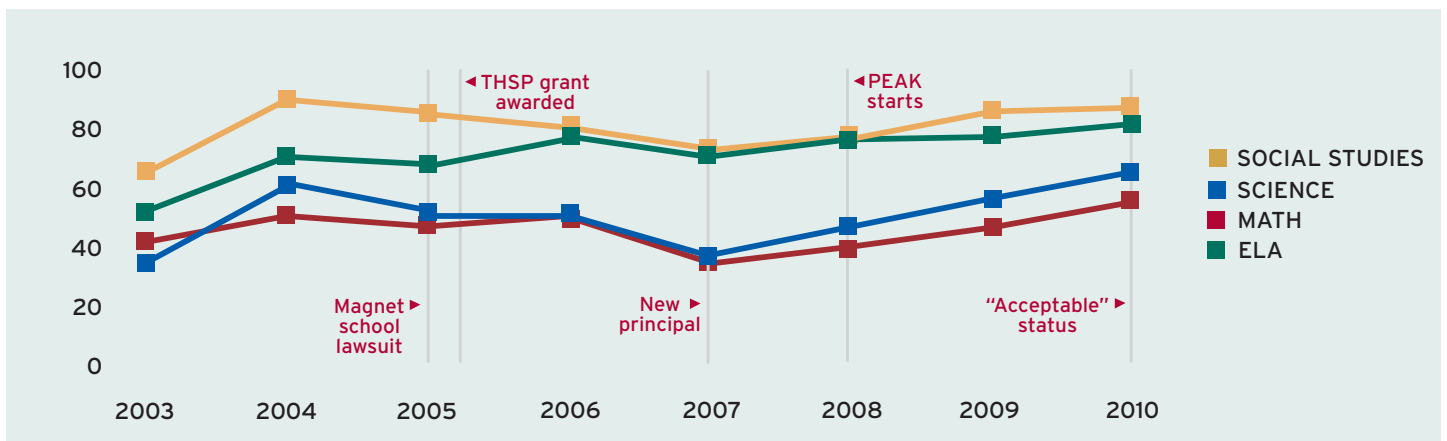
During this time, a considerable number of teachers were resistant to the new changes. As a result, Principal Williams enrolled Dunbar in a new district-level performance pay program called Public Educators Accelerating Kids (PEAK), which required existing staff to recommit, interview, and be rehired in order to continue at Dunbar. Though enrollment in PEAK resulted in lower teacher retention rates than normal, it created a much more cohesive environment for teachers, students, and parents.

As shown in Figure 3, there was some academic drop off in the immediate years after Dunbar received the THSP grant. Starting in 2007-2008, however, the school began to see continued improvement in student test scores. In 2010, scores in English, science, and math all were higher than they had been since the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) was first introduced. Interviews with faculty and staff made clear that the funds and technical assistance provided by THSP significantly contributed to this improvement at Dunbar.

Although Dunbar prides itself on its recent test score improvements, another accomplishment made through the reform effort is the school’s new culture. Previously, Dunbar was often derided as a high school known only for being a basketball powerhouse, but the school’s culture is beginning to change.

FIGURE 3. TEST SCORE TRENDS AT DUNBAR HIGH SCHOOL FROM 2003-2010

Dunbar is becoming more effective at sending students to college not only for basketball, but also for academics. From 2005 to 2009, Dunbar nearly doubled the percentage of its students completing rigorous work in advanced courses to nearly 30% - well above state and district averages.¹¹ In 2009 - the most recent year of data currently available - for the first time in a decade average ACT scores at Dunbar exceeded district averages. The school's main entrance is lined with pictures of students posing with acceptance letters and scholarship offers.



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

Dunbar is no longer a campus where some students are predicted to perform highly and others are not. Now, all students are expected to engage in the lessons and master the material. This commitment to high expectations will continue to drive the reform process at Dunbar and improve the lives of its students.

NORTH SIDE HIGH SCHOOL

Since it began serving Fort Worth's historic North Side neighborhood in 1937, North Side High School has traditionally served a high-needs population. Today, the campus is comprised of 1,400 students, 95% of whom are Latino and 82% are economically disadvantaged.¹² In the surrounding neighborhood, 70% of adults have less than a high school education.¹³

The effects of these challenges became particularly clear beginning in 2000. From 2000-2005, an average of only 73% of incoming freshman students graduated within four years and 15% dropped out at some point. The remaining students completed with a G.E.D. or took longer than four years to graduate.¹⁴

At the time, North Side faced a serious challenge regarding attendance and graduation rates. With a growing gang problem plaguing the campus, students were feeling increasingly unsafe and disengaged with school. During the 2001-2002 school year, attendance dipped to 88% and the high school completion rate fell to 67%.¹⁵

Campus administrators responded the following school year with a family outreach plan. Assistant principals began making daily phone calls to parents of absentees. The school assigned students to detention for unexcused absences and held conferences with the parents of students who had excessive absences. Attendance and completion rates have since improved to 92% and 81%, respectively.¹⁶

When it became clear that North Side was making progress in getting students through the school system, the focus began to shift to improving the quality of education students received. According to a report conducted by the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) in 2005, part of the reason for low student performance at North Side was an environment of low expectations. Some teachers stated that they doubted all students could learn at a high level. Students at North Side were not expected to take any additional courses to complete an academic or career concentration. None of the three types of diplomas granted by the school required four years of mathematics, and there were concerns that the senior English classes were not meeting college and career readiness standards.


Additionally, a gap in achievement existed between Latinos and other subgroups, especially when it came to college readiness. Only 32% of Latino seniors in 2004 took the SAT, compared with 41% of African Americans and nearly 73% of white students. Moreover, only 6.5% of Latino students met the college readiness criterion on the SAT, compared with 62.5% of white and 40% of African American students.¹⁷

In 2005, then-Principal Cathleen Richardson and a small leadership team comprised of counselors and teachers successfully applied for a High School Redesign (HSRD) grant from THSP totaling \$400,000 to continue their school's progress. The THSP grant, which included assistance from SREB's High Schools That Work (HSTW) initiative, was specifically designed to help the campus reinvent itself as a group of cohesive small learning communities.

Principal Richardson left after the first year of the grant (2005-2006) with little progress made, and Virginia Dean, formerly the principal at a nearby middle school, took over as the new principal. New assistant principals, including one who had worked with Principal Dean previously, also joined the North Side staff the same year. Although the new administration faced an environment in which many teachers were not supportive of the new direction, Principal Dean and her staff persisted with implementing the plans designed with the help of THSP and HSTW.

In 2006-2007 - Principal Dean's first year at North Side - the 9th grade was divided into four teams. Each team of students shared common math, science, language arts, and social studies teachers. With the team structure, a set of core teachers was able to communicate daily about a common group of students.

For 10th through 12th grade students, THSP helped the school establish four small learning communities, each with a separate theme: Medical; Science, Technology, Engineering, Math (STEM); Service (hospitality management and education); and Business. The goals of the small learning communities were to improve student achievement, increase attendance rates, and decrease dropout rates by providing students with a more intimate educational setting, as well as an opportunity to focus on content that interested them.



The first year after the implementation of small learning communities was tumultuous for North Side. Many teachers felt that too much was changing at once, and as Principal Dean pushed through with the new initiatives, she struggled to maintain teacher support. By the beginning of the following school year, 70% of the teachers retired or left the school. North Side also experienced a spike in the dropout rate during the same year.

THSP's and North Side's leadership were faced with the dilemma of either continuing the small learning communities after replacing the majority of the school's staff or changing to another model.

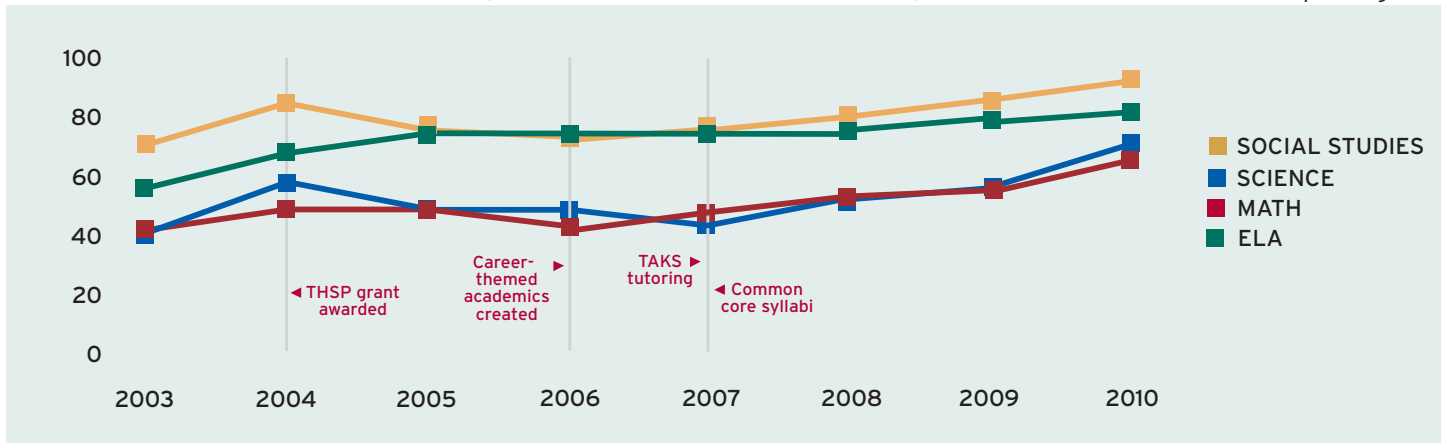
As a result, North Side has since moved away from the small learning community model and instead adopted a district initiative called Student Interest Programs (SIPs). SIPs are clusters of courses that include a college or career readiness theme; the themes at North Side are medical, hospitality, tourism, and graphic design.

Throughout the duration of the grant period, which ended after the 2009-2010 school year, the financial and personnel resources THSP and HSTW provided North Side allowed for an on-site coach who mentored administrators on best leadership practices, as well as professional development for all staff. Additionally, grant funding allowed North Side to provide tutoring services after school and on Saturdays and to structure the class schedule so that teachers could have common team planning and conference periods.

In the 2010-2011 school year, North Side welcomed a new principal, Antonio Martinez. Principal Martinez, who is himself a product of Fort Worth schools and previously led a nearby elementary school, remains committed to North Side's new approach. Though he was not involved with the THSP grant, Principal Martinez stated that the structures put in place by his predecessors positioned the school well for pursuing further reforms.

As seen in Figure 4, North Side experienced significant improvement in student perfor-

FIGURE 4. TEST SCORE TRENDS AT NORTH SIDE 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.

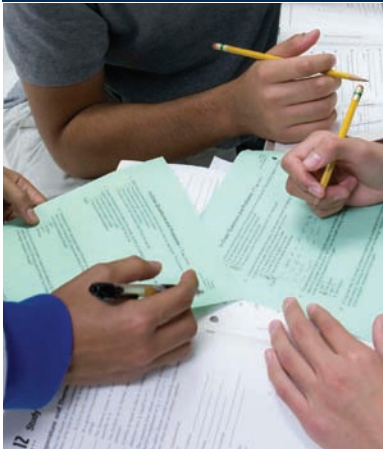
mance across each grade level and subject area. Specifically, North Side has seen improved Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) scores, a declining dropout rate, and improved student attendance.¹⁸ In addition, by their own accounts, staff and faculty members are happier and have better relationships with each other, their administrators, and their students following the THSP grant.

However, even with the increase in test scores, North Side's overall accountability rating has

2004-2009, completion of advanced and dual credit classes increased nearly three-fold to 27%. Over the same period of time, the amount of students graduating under the state's Distinguished Academic Program (DAP) increased more than 30%.

During the 2006-2007 school year, North Side also had a 48% decrease in the number of students taken to court for attendance problems compared to the previous year. The school also had a 28% overall decrease in the number of failures in the freshmen academy.

North Side was able to capitalize on the opportunity presented by THSP and transition into a more rigorous and equitable campus. With a determined new principal, a staff committed to reform, and several years of improvements under its belt, North Side seems well positioned to continue raising its standards and challenging its students.



THE FOUR IMPACT AREAS

The Texas High School Project (THSP) identified education leadership, teacher effectiveness, learning systems, and performance management as the main drivers impacting student achievement in high school.

Each impact area may be used as a lens through which to understand specific reforms that took place at each of the four high schools. In the following sections, a definition of each impact area is followed by examples from the four schools of the intent and effect of the policies that led to reform. Also discussed is the way in which each reform measure fits into the larger reform effort on each campus.

EDUCATION LEADERSHIP


The Texas High School Project (THSP) describes education leadership as “campus leaders who are focused on effective instruction and efficient operations.”¹⁹ Education leadership is embodied not only in principals and superintendents, but in teachers as well.²⁰ While 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.²¹

An extensive review of all four schools shows that the implementation of strategic leadership structures contributed to improved student performance by establishing a distributive leadership model, setting high expectations for staff and students, and creating an environment of collaboration among teachers.

ESTABLISHING A DISTRIBUTIVE LEADERSHIP MODEL

All four schools cultivated distributive leadership at their campuses. Distributive leadership, also known as shared responsibility, makes school operations more efficient, thus improving student achievement. Distributive leadership gives all staff an opportunity to emerge as leaders and furthers investment in school success. Prior to THSP funding, most of the schools' leadership was concentrated entirely in the central office. Now, leadership is clustered based on the needs of various groups at a particular campus - from subject area groups to career-themed academies.

At Austin HS, the Shared Decision Making Committee (SDMC) is an important element of distributive leadership. The SDMC is made up of elected teachers, administrators, parents, and a community member. The committee meets once a month to discuss relevant and important issues that are affecting the school. For example, the SDMC was responsible for developing the school-wide tardy policy. Although Principal Llorente has veto power, interviewees stated that most of the time Principal Llorente supports the SDMC's decisions.




Akins also embodies distributive leadership through its unique structure. There are currently six academies at Akins and each has its own assistant principal, academy coordinator, and counselor, 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. In addition, academy coordinators act as liaisons between teachers and assistant principals and help assist with the communication of needs and the formulation of expectations. Counselors are also better able to serve students and help them become “college ready.”

When Principal Daniel Girard first arrived at Akins, he determined that there was a lack of buy-in from staff regarding the new career-academy structure. He stated that “there was a debate here on campus between academy and department, and it was a strong debate.” Principal Girard managed this debate by having all staff read the High Schools That Work (HSTW) materials and familiarize themselves with the roles and responsibilities of both department and academy leaders. Principal Girard continued to communicate to his staff that effective relationships between staff and students are created in the academies due to the small learning community format as well as the department’s focus on the rigor of instruction and efficient data use. Opening up information channels and giving staff a clearly delineated leadership structure alleviated what was once a power struggle on the campus.

SETTING HIGH EXPECTATIONS

All four schools selected by THSP for this project serve challenging urban student populations, many of which are majority low socioeconomic status. Nevertheless, all four schools have been successful due in large part to a cultural shift. This shift, exemplified by new school slogans such as “failure is not an option” at Austin High School and “all students can learn” at Akins High School, required these schools to build an environment that motivated and supported students.

North Side High School Principal Virginia Dean strongly encouraged high expectations on her campus. Faced with declining Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) scores and increasing dropout rates during the 2005-2007 school year, Principal Dean determined that she needed an effective way to motivate and inspire staff. She called every faculty member into the school library, where she had posted pictures of the students who had not passed TAKS the prior year. She handed teachers a list of the names of non-passing students and asked, “What can we do to help them? What is your connection with these students?”



During interviews conducted by the LBJ School research team years later, teachers recalled the event vividly. From that day forward, a new type of accountability was introduced at North Side. Teachers were expected not just to teach their lessons, but to be part of a school-wide solution. Empowering teachers in such a way motivated them to volunteer ideas and share strategies. For example, one idea that came out of this meeting was intensive tutoring, which would become an integral part of North Side's progress over the next few years.

CREATING AN ENVIRONMENT OF COLLABORATION

The final commonality in leadership at all four schools was the creation of an environment that supports collaboration. Key to the continued success of reform is the consistent sharing of information and providing an opportunity for teachers to receive feedback from both administration and their peers.

Austin HS achieves collaboration through their Same Objective, Same Assessment (SOSA) groups. Prior to the repurposing of SOSA groups, teachers did not have an opportunity to meet regularly to ensure that at-risk students were not "falling through the cracks." SOSA groups are now effective tools for aligning curriculum, discussing benchmark tests, reviewing data, and developing intervention plans for students who are at-risk. Teachers have a structured time to reflect on their practice with colleagues and make adjustments when needed. This practice has helped establish school improvement at Austin HS as a sustainable, consistent occurrence.

Principal Williams from Dunbar High School is a prime example of a leader who promotes collaboration. He wanted to institute block scheduling immediately upon his arrival at Dunbar, but found that staff were very reluctant to change. Without the necessary support, Williams knew it was best to let the idea rest, focusing instead on other key areas. However, he continued to expose his staff to the concept of block scheduling through various professional development sessions, including the *Model Schools Conference*, which was financed by THSP funds.²² Providing this information helped teachers grow more accepting of the idea, but it was Principal Williams' commitment to working collectively to create a schedule that was acceptable for everyone that finally won over faculty support.²³ Also, by showing his willingness to collaborate with teachers, Principal Williams fostered a sense of trust that created a much more positive school environment.

TEACHER EFFECTIVENESS

Research shows that high quality, effective teachers can have a positive and meaningful impact on student achievement. As a result, the Texas High School Project (THSP) is dedicated to improving teacher effectiveness, which focuses on the ability to “hire and develop teachers who help students perform better.” The value of this goal is supported by a range of studies, which suggest that the recruitment and retention of effective teachers is dependent on successful evaluation, development, and collaboration.

During the course of our investigation, the extant body of research on teacher effectiveness was used as a guiding framework for analysis. Common themes developed at all studied campuses. These themes suggest that although policies, resources, and contexts varied across schools, a universal commitment to improving teacher capacity and efficacy remained a strong objective of each campus’ reform efforts.

Following a description of how the schools defined teacher effectiveness, this section outlines the commonalities and best practices from four research-based themes. These include recruitment and retention, teacher evaluation, professional development, and collegiality and collaboration. A summary of how teacher buy-in and involvement was instrumental in all schools’ reform processes concludes the discussion of teacher effectiveness in the four schools.

DEFINING TEACHER EFFECTIVENESS

Many faculty members at the campuses reviewed in this study mentioned that teacher effectiveness was an important part of the redesign process. Effectiveness was often defined and measured in terms of student achievement, but staff at all campuses included a variety of other definitions as well. When asked, “What makes an effective teacher?” teachers and administrators overwhelmingly responded that it is the ability to translate rigorous academic standards into classroom content, as well as the capacity to build positive relationships with students.

Turning a passion for teaching and a commitment to students into academic success became the focus of teacher effectiveness efforts at all campuses. These activities included designing hiring protocols to find dedicated, personable teachers; helping to develop current teachers with evaluation and continuing education; and creating structures that allowed passionate educators to work together to solve problems.

HIRING AND RETAINING EFFECTIVE TEACHERS

It is always a challenge to make a struggling school attractive to dynamic teachers. However, with a combination of THSP assistance and critical district supports, these campuses were able to attract a number of qualified candidates interested in being a part of the schools' new direction and in building a cohesive, invested faculty.

New protocols and processes were established to help guide the hiring process at many of the schools. At Dunbar High School this process involved implementing a rigorous interview structure to help guide personnel decisions. The interview procedure included asking prospective hires to teach an impromptu class and allowing students to gauge whether an applicant would be a good fit. Principal Williams explained that the students' feedback was almost always "right on" and that the inclusion of student feedback helped bring a number of high quality teachers to the campus.

Other campuses improved their hiring protocols by including members of the leadership team in interviews and asking rigorous questions that could direct administrators toward applicants who would be a good fit with the school. These hiring processes helped increase the quality of hires at the four schools, though other policies at the campuses were responsible for the successful retention of new teachers.

Akins High School, the only one of the four schools without teacher retention issues, attributed its success at keeping teachers in part to its academy structure. Many teachers at Akins cited the academies as the main reason they stayed at the school, even when they had the option of taking other positions. The other three schools also used their school structures as a way to help retain their teaching staff. These efforts included increasing common planning time in grade-level or themed small learning communities and offering leadership and development opportunities to talented teachers. Additionally, all campuses worked to develop their teachers in the hope teachers would remain at the school and add to the school's academic quality.

PROVIDING MEANINGFUL EVALUATION AND FEEDBACK

Once hired, teachers were evaluated using a number of formal and informal methods. The evaluation processes used at the four campuses are aimed to help teachers become reflective educators. Each school improved their evaluation policies to help foster reflective teaching and develop individualized plans for teacher development. The evaluation process at each campus involved four steps: setting expectations, observing classes, providing feedback, and offering development opportunities.

The first step in the evaluation process involved setting high expectations. Teachers felt that establishing clear expectations helped encourage meaningful reflection on their practice. 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.” Administrators at all campuses worked to define what good teaching looked like before entering classes to evaluate teachers.

All campuses used the state-mandated Professional Development and Appraisal System (PDAS) to evaluate teachers. In addition, each campus incorporated more evaluation opportunities into the school day. At one school, brief, unannounced visits, commonly referred to as “walk-throughs,” began to be conducted by school administrators. Walk-throughs are often recorded using a variety of locally developed protocols, which are then used to produce feedback and foster discussion after the visit.

In other schools, similarly styled evaluations were completed in a more informal manner by support staff, such as department heads or lead content teachers. This gave teachers more people to look to for support in developing their practices. Further, THSP funds were often used to support and expand evaluation processes by financing additional administrative positions, such as a dean of instruction.

In the third step of evaluation, administrators and other evaluators worked to provide timely and meaningful feedback to teachers based on their observations. This was often done both in writing and through informal conversations. These feedback sessions were frequently linked to ongoing professional development opportunities, either for the group or on an individual basis. This last step completed the evaluation process, but it also helped prepare for the future as new goals and expectations were developed for the next round of observation and evaluation.

EXPANDING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Each campus worked to establish a direct link between teacher evaluations and professional development. Using feedback from evaluations, administrators set agendas for group development and sent individual teachers to other schools or conferences to absorb new knowledge and bring new ideas back to the campus. It is in this area that THSP funds were most helpful. THSP financed professional development opportunities and even helped bring professional development to campuses on many occasions.

One of the best examples of professional development was several of the schools' visits to the *Model Schools Conference*. Teachers were sent to these conferences and brought back a number of pedagogical and structural changes for the campus to use. Dunbar went to this conference for several years in a row and additionally visited affiliated schools from the conference in California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, and Texas. Teachers brought back ideas from these visits that directly translated into several of the most successful reforms at Dunbar, including block scheduling and classes separated by gender. In addition, teachers were able to view how other campuses with similar student and community characteristics handled various issues in the classroom.

Not all professional development took place away from the campus, however. Several of the most meaningful professional development opportunities occurred as a result of on-campus meetings. Campuses used district-set times, such as "Late Starts" for Akins or summer planning retreats at North Side and Dunbar high schools, to bring in THSP and High Schools That Work (HSTW) personnel to provide professional development to groups. These THSP-funded experts also returned to the campuses to provide feedback throughout the year.

One example of on-campus professional development occurred at North Side, where THSP funds were used to create the North Side Teacher University. This was a yearlong program that allowed teachers to meet every six weeks on a Saturday and invite experts in the teaching profession, as well as North Side's own staff to come and model new teaching methods. Teachers at North Side felt that this "homegrown" professional development opportunity helped them improve as both teachers and leaders.

SUPPORTING COLLEGIALITY AND COLLABORATION

The dedication to developing teachers went beyond traditional professional development and became embedded in the day-to-day reality at each of the four schools. All campuses provided time for teachers to meet and talk about their students, their content, and their pedagogy. This helped to create a culture of collegiality for all schools where teachers were comfortable supporting each other and learning from one another.

One of the ways a collegial culture was created was through the use of “learning walks,” a short and informal evaluation strategy taken from a THSP-funded conference and adopted by both Dunbar and Akins high schools. During learning walks, a small group of teachers observes another teacher modeling a new or innovative instructional strategy in a real classroom setting. Afterwards, the teachers all meet to discuss what they saw and reflect on how they could incorporate these observations in their own teaching. This process has helped teachers become more comfortable with discussing their practices and using local expertise to improve their own instruction.

Collaboration also increased at all campuses throughout the reform process. The improvement in collaboration was aided by the creation of small learning communities that gave teachers common planning times to talk about shared students and/or shared subjects. Teachers at all campuses embraced common planning as a time to solve problems as a group and work together for students’ benefit.

One of the clearest illustrations of school-wide collaboration was at Austin HS. With the help of THSP they redefined the school’s Same Objective, Same Assessment (SOSA) groups as a place for teachers of the same subject and grade level to come together for common planning and assessment building. Teachers used SOSA groups to align curriculum horizontally across classes, and “content managers” – often referred to as department chairs on other campuses – facilitated vertical alignment across the department. Although SOSA groups are relatively small, with only five to ten teachers, the formal structure helped facilitate the necessary planning time and communication required to implement school-wide reforms.

CREATING TEACHER BUY-IN FOR REFORM

The steps that the schools took to create support among teachers and provide opportunities for evaluation, feedback, professional development, and collaboration were vital to ensuring success at each school. With the help of THSP, campus leadership allowed teachers to reflect on their own practice as well as work in groups to identify problems, brainstorm solutions, and put meaningful changes into action. These activities culminated in a renewed sense of purpose and urgency at each of these campuses.

As a result, the positive changes made in the structure and culture of the schools would not have been possible without active teacher buy-in. Across all four schools, the success or failure of many reforms hinged on their level of teacher support. Without teachers' buy-in and readiness for change, the schools would have faced insurmountable challenges to implementation.

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.” Changes made to the learning systems, as well as a sustained investment by school teachers and administrators, proved to be critical to increasing student performance across all four high schools. Although there was significant variation among the different learning systems implemented at the high schools, changes to these systems fell under three categories: altering school structures, aligning curriculum and standardizing assessments, and implementing strategic interventions.


ALTERING SCHOOL STRUCTURES

Akins, Austin, Dunbar, and North Side high schools all altered school structures with the goal of positively impacting the way in which students learn. One of the most pronounced changes made to the structure of student learning was the implementation of small learning communities. Per THSP grant requirements, all four high schools adopted the small learning community model in some form. Other changes to the structure of student learning included increasing teacher collaboration through teaming and strategically organizing instruction time with block scheduling. What follows are specific examples of some of these structural changes.

Small Learning Communities: Akins and Austin HS

Small learning communities were introduced at each school to offer a more personalized educational setting and allow students to link their learning to college and career aspirations. Despite their common goals, Akins and Austin high schools ultimately settled on small learning community structures that differ significantly from each other.

In 2006, Akins fully implemented six small learning communities based on Career Advancement Technology Education (CATE) courses.²⁴ 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.



At Akins, implementing small learning communities included reorganizing the school to help minimize student distractions and foster teacher collaboration. Now, teachers and classrooms are grouped by academy rather than by 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 discuss 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. The academies give students the opportunity to build relationships with teachers and fellow students. As a result, students identify strongly with their academy and sometimes value their academy even more than the school itself.

Austin HS began the process of transitioning from a traditional classroom structure to small learning communities to combat challenges such as poor attendance and low TAKS scores prior to receiving the THSP grant. With the acquisition of the THSP grant in the 2006-2007 school year, Austin HS adopted a career-themed academy model. Students chose a career they wanted to pursue, such as medicine or business, and took classes focused in that area.

Although this small learning community model has been successful in other schools, it was not a good fit for Austin HS and was eliminated after one year. Teachers and faculty felt that high school students were too young to know which career they wanted to pursue, and if students changed their minds mid-year, it was difficult to transfer across career academies. Additionally, students lost their way within the school grounds and did not know where they belonged, something Austin HS has identified as a contributing factor to poor attendance.

Austin HS introduced its grade-level academy system in the 2007-2008 school year. The previous summer, teachers and faculty had designed a 9th grade academy that would cater only to the incoming freshmen class. Austin HS implemented the 9th grade academy by moving all 9th grade classes to a separate wing of the school so that teachers could keep track of and discuss common students.

Additionally, an assistant principal and a counselor were assigned to work with and to get to know the freshmen. During the first year of the new structure, teachers felt that they were better able to keep track of the freshmen and offer them the support they needed to successfully transition from middle school.

After the success of the 9th grade academy, Austin HS expanded the model by creating a 10th grade academy for the advancing 9th grade students in the 2008-2009 school year. The grade-level academy model continues to be a success at Austin HS; the 2010-2011 school year marks the first class of students that have spent all four years of high school in their respective grade-level academies. Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) scores have steadily increased across multiple subjects since implementing this academy structure. Next year, the current 12th grade academy principal and counselor will start the process over again with a new 9th grade class.

Building Relationships through Teaming: North Side

Increased efforts at teacher cooperation were cited by all four schools as key to achieving higher levels of student success. By making changes, such as creating teacher planning periods and allowing teachers to plan collaboratively, teachers were better able to connect with and teach students.

One of the major changes at North Side was an increased emphasis on teacher teaming. During the grant period, North Side adopted a district initiative called Student Interest Programs (SIPs). These SIPs consist of clusters of courses that relate to a college or career readiness theme. The SIP program was piloted at North Side and is now being turned into a district-wide initiative for all high schools.

Although North Side moved from career academies to Student Interest Programs (SIPs) in their third year of the THSP grant, the idea of small learning communities was still important. With SIPs came an emphasis on teaming. THSP helped North Side establish 9th and 10th grade teams at the school. Each team consists of one teacher from each of the four core areas: math, science, social studies, and English. The teacher leading each team is responsible for approximately 100 to 125 students. Professional development was provided by High Schools That Work (HSTW) which, according to teachers, helped enhance teaming efforts at the school, improve communication between teachers and administrators, and build strong collaborative relationships between teachers.

Teaming is instrumental for curriculum enhancement and for targeting “bubble” students - those students wavering between acceptable and below-level performance. Teams also encourage camaraderie among students, who are able to get to know well a small group of classmates.

An added benefit of teaming has been teacher morale. Teachers reported enjoying working closely and collaboratively with a small group of their peers and students and felt it was beneficial for student learning. This finding fits with the extant literature on the subject of teaming, which suggests the practice recognizes the complexity of the teaching process and addresses the interdependence of teachers who are trying to achieve broader goals.²⁵

Double-Block Scheduling: Austin HS

Scheduling was another tool the schools used to increase student achievement, particularly with regard to the TAKS scores. Teachers at Austin HS felt that the format of the TAKS test is a major obstacle for students because of its “regressive nature”: the test includes a mixture of current grade-level material and material from previous years. Austin HS faculty say this makes it difficult for students to prepare for and ultimately pass the exam because so much emphasis is placed on material they have not focused on since the previous year.

Although Austin HS switched to the double-block scheduling model prior to receiving the THSP grant, administrators consistently stated that without the extra funds from THSP, they would likely not have been able to sustain it. This new schedule required hiring more core teachers, something Austin HS was able to do with the money the THSP grant freed up in 2007-2008.

Under double-block scheduling, TAKS math passing rates have increased by nearly 20%. Additionally, in 2010, the National Center for Educational Achievement (NCEA) recognized Austin HS as a high-performing school in math. Although it is difficult to determine how much of that change can be attributed to the switch to double-block scheduling, school administrators and teachers consistently cited the reform as having a clear positive effect on math achievement scores.

ALIGNING CURRICULUM AND STANDARDIZING ASSESSMENTS

Attempts at aligning the curriculum were made at all four high schools with varying degrees of success. Some schools focused more on standardizing curriculum across similar content areas (horizontal alignment), while other schools concentrated on aligning curriculum across grade levels (vertical alignment). Select schools also began using standardized assessments to measure teacher and student progress, something that aided in the alignment process by identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum.

At Akins, efforts to align the school's curriculum began by closely synchronizing it to the state-wide grade-level standards established by the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS). Though such a strategy was mostly effective in vertically aligning the curriculum, due to the different content covered by the various academies, horizontal alignment was not a priority. In addition, at Akins common assessments were developed to serve as a checks-and-balance to ensure rigor. These assessments influenced the department leadership team (assistant principal, department chair, and instructional lead teacher) to work together in establishing expectations and areas for improvement in learning. Standardized assessments also kept teachers on the same page and using similar language.

Dunbar focused their efforts at curriculum alignment on the adoption of common assessment tools for teachers. Before the THSP grant, teachers worked in isolation, often with no feedback or peer guidance. Dunbar sought to remedy the problem with "Bell Ringers," which are weekly common assessment tests given to all students studying the same subject. These tests give teachers timely information about the curriculum they teach and allow them to easily monitor the progress of their students. More importantly, teachers are able to 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.

STRATEGIC INTERVENTIONS

All four schools used different tactics to reach out to struggling students and also used multiple strategic interventions to keep students from falling through the cracks. At Akins, advisory periods allow students to receive personalized attention from teachers in a small group setting. Dunbar uses a formal mentoring system to ensure that any struggling student is getting the help he or she needs. North Side established a formal Saturday tutoring program, which actively seeks student participation and allows students additional opportunities to learn.

Advisory: Akins

An advisory period is part of the weekly class schedule for all students at Akins. This period is designed so that a small number of students (generally 15) work with the same teacher for 25 minutes every Tuesday and Wednesday. During this time, students participate in career-based training, discussions, grade checks, attendance, reviews of tutor logs, and the monitoring of “bubble students” - students who are at the cusp of performing at the next 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 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. Within their advisory classes, teachers are expected to know who needs help in order to stay on track toward academic success and to provide motivation for students to do their work and enjoy school.

Mentoring: Dunbar

Dunbar’s 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.

Tutoring: North Side

After the dropout rate spiked during the 2006-2007 school year, North Side doubled its efforts with respect to tutoring. Before the THSP grant, tutoring was done informally and with little success. The grant provided funding for a formal Saturday and after-school tutoring program. Teachers encourage students in danger of failing to attend tutoring sessions by showing them classroom data and incentivizing participation.

During these sessions, two types of tutoring are offered: core area tutoring and content-specific tutoring for students who have failed one or more section of the TAKS test. The Saturday tutorials provide both types, as well as tutoring for students working on credit recovery. A small cadre of teachers provides the tutoring, and THSP/HSTW funds have enabled these teachers to be paid for their work.

The year after the Saturday tutoring program began, the dropout rate steeply declined and TAKS scores improved (see Figure 4). Scores continue to improve each year because North Side staff systematically identify struggling students and build specialized tutoring plans for each student.

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.”²⁶ Critical data range from standardized test 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 analyzed and the decisions made at the classroom and campus levels.

Data collection and management are just a small piece of an effective performance management system. Research shows that using data purposefully to identify strengths and weaknesses among students and within the school, making time for teachers to access and review data, and implementing interventions or new school policies based on data analysis are critical to meaningful improvement in student performance.

Common themes have been identified in the area of performance management across the four campuses. Though the objectives underlying new data policies were fairly consistent, reform measures differed across the schools based on specific needs, circumstances, and the ideas of those involved in reform efforts. Austin, Dunbar, North Side, and Akins high schools provide excellent examples of the gains in student achievement made possible by a data-driven culture centered around purposeful analysis of data, providing time for teachers to review and analyze data, and designing strategic interventions based on data analysis. Further, staff at all four schools expressed a continued commitment to improving and expanding performance management efforts as the emphasis on data analysis grows.

ANALYZING DATA PURPOSEFULLY

All schools in Texas report data and receive feedback from the district regarding performance. With technology making data collection increasingly easy, teachers often complain about “drowning in data” as they attempt to sift through an inordinate amount of student data and struggle to find meaning in it. Schools use a combination of district-based student management software, such as *Connects* and *Data Smart* in Fort Worth ISD; *CampusOnline* in Houston ISD; and the *Advance and Information Management System (AIMS)* in Austin ISD; spreadsheets; charts; and other in-house systems created by administrators, departments, or individual teachers to track current student data.

One science teacher at Akins reported keeping “about eight spreadsheets with different stuff in them...just everything they want us to keep track of on our kids.” Other teachers commented on the difficulty of gathering the many types of data needed to track student progress: some data can be accessed directly by teachers, but some information must be requested from administrators who have direct access to the longitudinal district databases.

Despite these challenges, teachers and administrators at Akins, Austin, Dunbar, and North Side are doing more than simply collecting and reporting data. Data at these schools are collected, analyzed to identify strengths and weaknesses at the classroom and campus levels, and acted upon.

At Austin HS, the various forms and documents that comprise the school’s data review process have been thoroughly vetted for their intuitiveness and overall ease of use. For example, teachers commented on how difficult it was to navigate the data projection sheets used to analyze student TAKS benchmark performance. In response, Principal Llorente relied on her content managers to rethink the order and structure of the paperwork to make the process more intuitive. After removing extraneous information and simplifying the layout, teachers became much more consistent with data projection submissions.


Last year at Akins, data analysis led staff to introduce the 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 holding teacher trainings and sharing among colleagues the best practices for teaching ELL students.

BUILDING DATA REVIEW INTO TEACHER SCHEDULES

Due to the importance of reading and understanding data in order to inform school policy, the schools we investigated all made efforts to build time for data review into teacher schedules. Teachers already have many responsibilities: grading, teaching, lesson planning, and getting to know students. Staff at the four schools recognized that without time to truly learn, collaborate, and effectively use the data being collected, opportunities to understand the needs of students would be lost. As a result, they sought to ensure that teachers had some time in their schedules for data analysis.

Providing teachers with the time necessary to collect and analyze data, as well as make appropriate adjustments, is important in creating a data-driven culture. THSP, through its funding and technical assistance, helped teachers to understand achievement data and its impact on students through common planning periods, extra paid workdays, and trainings. Teachers cite the extra time in the school day as a key reason they are able to effectively analyze and use data.

THSP, through its funding and technical assistance, provided the time and money for North Side's staff to meet, understand, and plan their instruction based on specific data. Beginning in the summer of 2004, North Side's teachers, counselors, and administrators met during the weeks before the students arrived to analyze individual student performance and demographic data. Over the years of the THSP grant, the summer collaborative meetings expanded to three-day Summer Planning Academies (SPAs) off campus. In addition to being a time for staff to reflect and get to know one another better, teachers, administrators, and counselors credited the additional paid planning time with increasing their knowledge of how data could be used to plan instruction that addressed specific student needs.



At Dunbar, teachers also participated in SPAs to get to know their new students through data. Dunbar SPAs were used to introduce teachers to new software capabilities and to expand their technical knowledge 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 together.

At Akins, both academies and departments keep and analyze student- and classroom-level data. Academy data (individual student records) are circulated among teachers during district “Late Starts.” These data are used to identify at-risk students and to discuss possible strategies for helping students improve performance. Looking at student data within academies allows teachers to understand their students’ performance in a holistic way. By communicating with his or her other teachers within the academy, a teacher concerned about a struggling student may find patterns or learn about strategies that have helped the student perform at a higher level in other classes. 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.

Teachers at all four schools ensure that time is set aside specifically for data analysis, which they view as a necessary part of their performance management systems. The school-wide effort to incorporate data analysis into decision-making has enabled educators to make huge gains in their ability to identify students in need of extra help. Many teachers felt that without an emphasis on the importance of understanding and using data, they would not employ it to the same extent.

DESIGNING DATA-BASED STRATEGIC INTERVENTIONS

All four schools used some form of targeted tutoring to impact student achievement during the school year. Teachers and department heads look at student benchmark data to determine which students have yet to master certain standards and prescribe tutoring to address those specific needs.

Grant funding allowed North Side to provide tutoring services after school and on Saturdays and to structure the class schedule so that teachers could have common team planning and conference periods. The program has attracted and maintained a large group of regular attendees thanks to incentives designed to keep students coming back and as a consequence of the results students see after attending tutoring sessions.

At Akins, the science department pioneered a policy for ensuring students know state standards for the TAKS test. The department created 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 has to attend a tutoring session covering that specific skill. Teachers have credited this program with boosting the school's science TAKS pass rate from approximately 25% to 75% in just a few short years, prompting other departments to begin similar diagnostic programs.

One of the guiding principles of Austin High School's data review process is that it should alert faculty and administrators to intervene before problems become critical. The best example of this at Austin HS is the integration of longitudinal TAKS data and student interventions before the start of the school year. Both topics are discussed in organized review sessions called "10-minute meetings." Teachers are required to thoroughly answer a list of questions about their proposed strategies. The list of questions includes: "What immediate interventions have you put in place to help students master learning objectives?" and "... Approximately how many of [your students] would benefit from tutorials?" As 12th Grade Assistant Principal Arthur Petterway explained, these meetings are specifically designed to ensure that teachers have completed the first step of the data analysis process and that they begin the year with plenty of ideas to provide students with the support they need.

ENHANCING AND EXPANDING DATA SYSTEMS

A more complete knowledge of where students stand in terms of topic mastery, higher individual TAKS test scores, and improved school ratings are just a few of the advantages of conscientious, consistent data analysis backed by targeted intervention plans. With what they have learned from HSTW and other professional development paid for by the THSP grant, many teachers at the four schools have now stepped up as leaders in performance management within their departments, and staff point to the expansion of performance management initiatives as an important way to ensure continued increases in student achievement in the future.

For example, a new math department initiative at North Side for the 2010-2011 school year included a four-week “shutdown period” in which all students rotated among the teachers to focus on each TAKS standard. High-performing students assist the teachers as peer tutors, and the struggling students’ performance is tracked via a database built by one of the math teachers. The math department is confident that this new scheduling and tracking system has made teachers’ planning and instruction more efficient during the crucial weeks leading up to the TAKS. Further, other departments are sharing their expertise and resources to develop similar systems.

At Akins, one goal for the future is to improve advanced placement test enrollment and scores now that a “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 AP English III a few weeks into their junior year because it was too demanding. Now teachers in the English department are looking for ways to better prepare students for advanced placement classes the following year. They have begun instituting steps for students toward completing highly rigorous work as freshmen and sophomores, so that they are better prepared for the pace of classes their junior year.

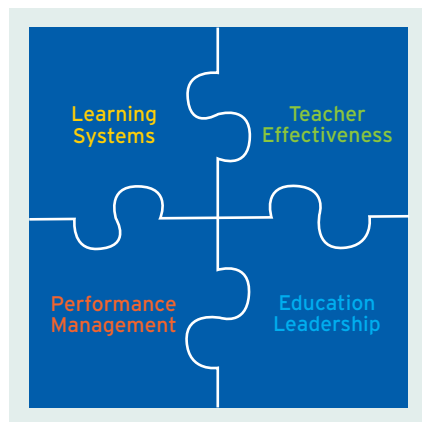
MOVING FORWARD WITH DATA

Very few decisions are made today at Akins, Austin, Dunbar, and North Side without the explicit use of data analysis to inform them. The data-driven culture at the four schools has evolved from the need to address the diverse learning requirements of large student bodies. Performance management policies at all four schools have centered on the belief that data can and should inform decisions on the campus and that good school policies are born from good data analysis. To give credence to this belief, administrators have sent a consistent message that data analysis is important by providing teachers with time to review and understand data.

An emphasis on performance management has contributed to a shift not only in views about the importance of data, but also in the overall culture at the four schools. The belief that all students can and will learn, a central tenet of all the schools, is much easier to realize when students can be systematically targeted through data-based interventions that make their improvements - and improvements in aggregate performance data at the school level - immediately visible.

CONCLUSION

Critical to the examination of reform at these four campuses is the idea that the changes at each campus did not always fit neatly into one of the Texas High School Project's (THSP) impact areas. There is a great deal of overlap among the impact areas, and many of the policies we examined influenced multiple reforms. For example, the high expectations of campus leadership can lead to recruitment of effective and qualified teachers, and restructuring learning systems can make for a more data-driven campus.



Looking at each policy, or even each impact area in isolation, will result in a limited understanding of the transformation that occurred. Though it is necessary to describe the details of particular policies if they are to be recreated elsewhere, it is equally important to reflect on how each policy fits into the overall “puzzle.”

Numerous interventions/initiatives took place in the different schools; *what* was done might not be as important as having the structures in place that make reform possible. Teacher and administrator buy-in - or “readiness for reform” - was crucial on all four campuses. According to staff who were interviewed, it was only after teachers became comfortable with the idea of reform and began to believe their school could be different that they were able to change.

Likewise, commitment to implementation was a crucial driver in building successful schools. Without rigorous and deliberate implementation, policies can fall into disuse or be ineffective despite their intentions.

These schools also needed some degree of autonomy and voice among staff to create an environment in which good ideas could be honestly debated and staff were free to try new things. Finally, a culture of improvement, trust, respect, and commitment to student achievement - for kids and adults - provided an important foundation for visible results stemming from reform efforts.

IMPACT OF THE TEXAS HIGH SCHOOL PROJECT FUNDING


On each of the four campuses, teachers and administrators noted specific programs and initiatives that were made possible through Texas High School Project (THSP) funding. In some cases, the grant funding created temporary changes, as with off-site professional development and conferences for teachers and administrators. In other instances, the money was used to fund structural changes, the effects of which can still be found at the schools today. Although not every new policy or reform at the campuses could be directly attributed to the THSP grant the schools received, it is important to note the many indirect benefits of a multi-year restructuring grant.

Direct Impact of THSP Grant Funding

The THSP grants directly funded reforms that staff at Akins, Austin, Dunbar, and North Side high schools believe impacted the success of their campuses and students. Funding provided by THSP contributed to important changes in all four of the impact areas we studied: education leadership, teacher effectiveness, learning systems, and performance management.

Funding contributed to educational leadership on the four campuses by allowing the schools to create new staff positions and reorganize their hierarchical leadership models to distribute responsibility to more levels of the school. At Austin HS, the THSP grant was used to repurpose the Same Objective, Same Standard (SOSA) groups, comprised of teachers in the same subject area who are responsible for aligning curriculum, discussing benchmark tests, reviewing data, and developing intervention plans for at-risk students. Dunbar used funding to add members to their administrative and counseling staff. North Side created an “on-site coach” - a position that lasted the four years of the grant cycle - who mentored administrators on optimal leadership practices. At Akins, the only site that maintained the High Schools That Work (HSTW) academy structure, the academy coordinator position was created using THSP funding and remains in place today.

On all four campuses, funding from THSP provided staff with opportunities for professional development both in-house and around the country, contributing to teacher effectiveness. North Side created the North Side Teacher University, regularly scheduling trainings for teachers and administrators covering a host of different topics and including speakers from within the school and outside experts. On other campuses, teachers were able to attend trainings away from the school, bringing what they had learned back to their schools to train other teachers and expanding the overall knowledge base of staff as a whole.



Grant funding significantly impacted learning systems at all four schools. At Austin and Akins, funding was used to purchase technology and supplies that the schools needed. Austin, Dunbar, and North Side all used TSHP funding to create tutoring programs - for SAT tutoring at Austin HS and TAKS tutoring programs at Dunbar and North Side that targeted specific areas of weakness in individual students. Akins used funding to make a permanent change in the structure of their learning systems, paying for the reorganization of teachers and subject areas within the school building to give each academy a “home” on campus and fostering academy identity among students.

Professional development, funded by the THSP grant, also affected performance management at Austin and Dunbar. At these schools, teachers and administrators were able to attend trainings where they learned how to use their performance management systems more effectively and gained data literacy. At Dunbar and North Side, funding allowed for paid summer planning for teachers centered on data analysis, meaning that when school started the following year, teachers knew their new students and had ideas on the first day of school for how to help them be successful. At Akins, funding contributed to common planning periods, which are used primarily for data analysis; during the school day, departments analyze data to better horizontally and vertically align their curricula and improve learning overall, and during AISD “Late Starts,” academies meet to discuss individual student performance in single classes and overall.

Staff who were interviewed pointed to these specific initiatives as funded directly by the THSP grants on their campuses. They fall into all four impact areas - education leadership, teacher effectiveness, learning systems, and performance management - that THSP has identified as key areas for creating lasting reform in schools. That each school we researched has implemented reform measures in each impact area and has been met with increased student performance on standardized tests indicates the importance of addressing all four areas when seeking to improve schools.

Indirect Impact of THSP Grant Funding

Not all changes in the school are traceable to grant funding. In many cases, changes staff cited as instrumental to the success achieved on their campuses were an indirect result of the THSP grants received by the schools. The grants gave schools a starting point from which to begin making changes. As time went on, the campuses evolved participatory, idea-driven cultures fueled by the spirit of reform and the belief that all students were capable of learning at higher levels.

Changes in culture are particularly notable at the four schools. At Akins, Principal Girard referred to the “tipping point,” which occurred two years into his tenure as principal. This tipping point signaled the change in the dominant ideology at the school - from one focused on doing things the same way as before to one of collaboration, new ideas, and constant improvement. Austin HS built a culture of excellence around its marching band and its other extracurricular offerings. North Side recognized the school’s important role in connecting students and parents to the local community and became aware of the effect that involvement in more aspects of student life could have on learning. Dunbar’s mentoring program created a sense of mutual accountability for student success and encouraged collaboration among faculty.

On all four campuses, there has been a continued emphasis on understanding and analyzing data - even after the grant cycles expired. Constant improvement did not end with the grant funding; it is still the expectation that more students achieve at higher levels every year and that teachers continue to hone their skills in the classroom at each of the four schools. The results of investments in professional development and performance management at Akins, Austin, Dunbar, and North Side have had lasting effects: they have led to permanent changes in the way student progress and teaching methods are evaluated, provided the means for reviewing and creating school policies and student intervention programs, and empowered teachers to collaborate and attempt innovative solutions to problems in student achievement.

The intangible changes in culture that staff identified since redesign processes began at the four schools have persisted to the present. At Akins, when one teacher was asked what had changed since grant funding ended, she responded that teachers and administrators used to have the opportunity to attend more off-site professional development conferences or trainings, but that aside from that, there has not been a noticeable difference.

North Side and Dunbar no longer hold their summer planning meetings because they do not have funding to pay teachers for the extra days of work. Although programs such as North Side's successful Saturday tutoring sessions have ended, the culture of improvement and focus on student-centered learning remain as the campuses find ways to continue on their current positive trajectories without grant funding. For example, North Side is expanding its community outreach efforts and using volunteers to maintain some of the services it can no longer provide to students on its own.

Without funding linked directly to restructuring leadership and teacher schedules, supporting professional development and outside expertise, and providing seed money for tutoring programs, these schools might have lacked the organizational support needed to sustain the reforms. The grant money provided by THSP provided the means for schools to make structural changes, which in turn led to a shift in culture at the schools that makes it possible for progress to continue despite the end of the funding. In many ways, the grants acted as confirmation that meaningful, long-term change in student learning is possible if faculty and staff are willing to commit to a new way of thinking and acting as educators.



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