

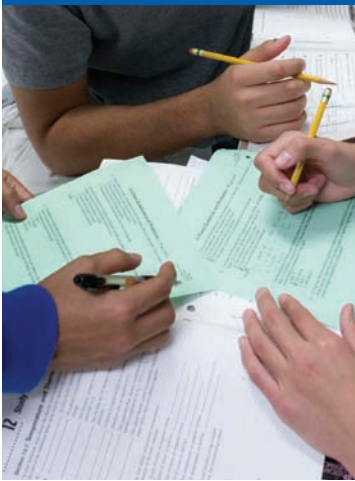
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Texas High School Project Site Report: **Stephen F. Austin High School**

Houston ISD ▪ Houston, Texas

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AUSTIN HIGH SCHOOL

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

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

TEXAS HIGH SCHOOL PROJECT

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

INTRODUCTION

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.² The density of the neighborhood is almost twice that of the Houston area as a whole, and nearly 60% of the adult residents have not graduated from high school.³

Many students must work part-time jobs to help provide for their siblings or, sometimes, for their own children. In a 2007 article, Austin HS counselor Alfredo Vila estimated that of the 304 seniors in that year's class, 250 of them had permission to leave campus during the day, with many of them doing so to work.⁴ Whereas these challenges are nothing new, Austin HS has made increased progress in overcoming them throughout the past decade.

In 2001, Linda Llorente became the principal at Austin HS - her alma mater - and found the school in need of reform. Austin HS had gradually improved from a 19.8% passing rate on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) in 1995 to 90.5% in 2001, but it still faced many other issues.⁵ 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.

Principal Llorente knew that things had to change for Austin HS, and she was not afraid to take whatever steps were necessary to help the students succeed. After working as a principal for many years at a nearby middle school, she had developed a clear understanding of what makes a school successful. And as a former student of Austin HS, she knew that the school and neighborhood were capable of much more.

Although Principal Llorente was the spark that inspired her school's improvement, there is no "Superman" or "Superwoman" in Austin High's story. Through her innovative brand of distributive leadership, Principal Llorente created a system that encouraged the entire school community to come together and work out 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's team began a targeted reform effort and looked for grant money that supported their specific vision for Austin HS. After surveying the available grant opportunities, Austin HS administrators were particularly interested in a state-wide effort to personalize instruction through small learning communities led by the Texas High School Project (THSP).

PARTNERSHIP WITH THE TEXAS HIGH SCHOOL PROJECT

In 2004, Austin High School applied for and was awarded a grant from THSP as part of their high school redesign initiative. Austin High's selection was attributed to ongoing school reform cultivated by new school leadership and preexisting grants. Furthermore, the THSP initiative aligned with many of the policy changes that were already occurring at Austin HS, including the small learning communities, curriculum alignment, and technology in classrooms. With uncertainty in the direction of the new HISD superintendent, THSP decided to delay giving Austin HS a grant.

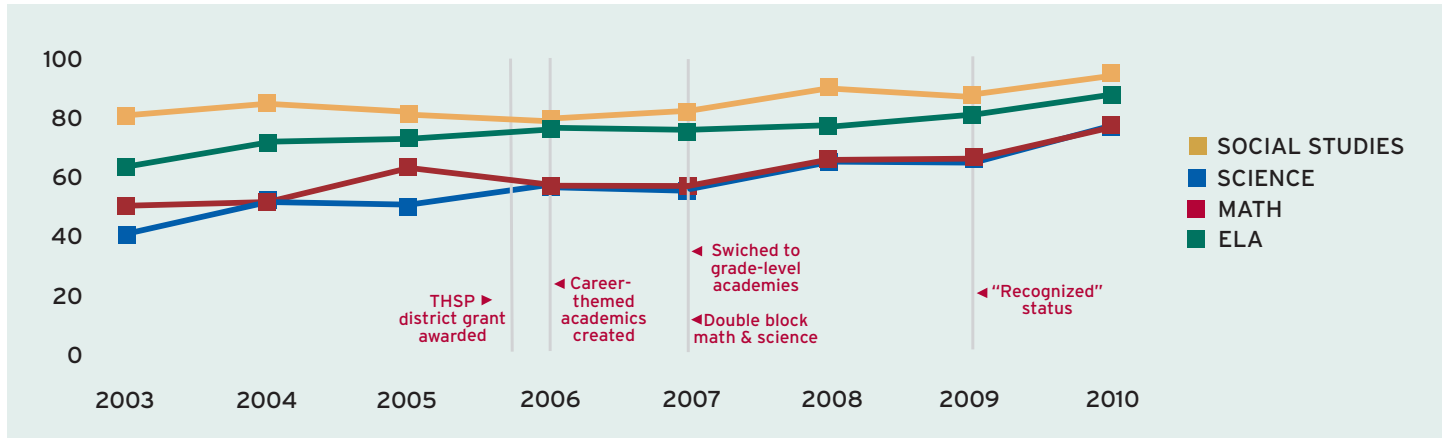
In May 2006, THSP reevaluated the situation at Austin HS and awarded the school, along with three other high schools in HISD, a District Engagement grant. Austin High's portion of the grant was \$200,000. By engaging the district, THSP hoped to accomplish the following goals: increase student achievement; change policies, procedures, and conditions in central administration to ensure the success of high school campus-level redesign; develop a management oversight system to further campus and district goals; and engage parents and community in school redesign.⁶

In general, the THSP grant was aimed at creating small learning communities through the development of career-themed academies. 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.

After a year with the career-themed academies, Austin HS opted instead to personalize the school experience through grade-level academies. During the grant period, Austin HS also implemented "double-blocking" for math and science courses, an organizational structure for curriculum called Same Objective Same Assessment (SOSA) groups, and common planning periods for teachers. In addition, teachers and principals began using data to inform a wide range of decisions. School leaders at Austin HS repeatedly stated that they would not have been able to implement these reforms without the additional grant funds.

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

As depicted in Figure 1, 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 after the 2008-2009 school year, and has remained so ever since. For the first time in a decade, in 2010, more than 75% of students passed the Math Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS).⁷



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

The administration at Austin HS was quick to acknowledge that standardized tests, however, 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 competed 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.

METHODOLOGY

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

After reviewing internal THSP documents, LBJ School researchers interviewed the current principal, all four assistant principals, four content managers, as well as several teachers at Austin HS. This report identifies the policy changes at Austin HS that led to its transition to a strong “Recognized” ranked school that continues to improve each year.

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

EDUCATION LEADERSHIP

The Texas High School Project (THSP) describes education leadership as “campus leaders who are focused on effective instruction and efficient operations.”⁸ Education leadership is embodied not only in principals and superintendents, but in teachers as well.⁹ Whereas teacher effectiveness and curriculum have traditionally been the focus of improving student performance, today a growing body of literature focuses on the role that leaders play in helping students excel. Recent studies indicate that school leadership can have a positive and significant effect on student learning - through direct means, such as influencing campus culture, and indirect means, such as improving the quality of teachers on the campus.¹⁰

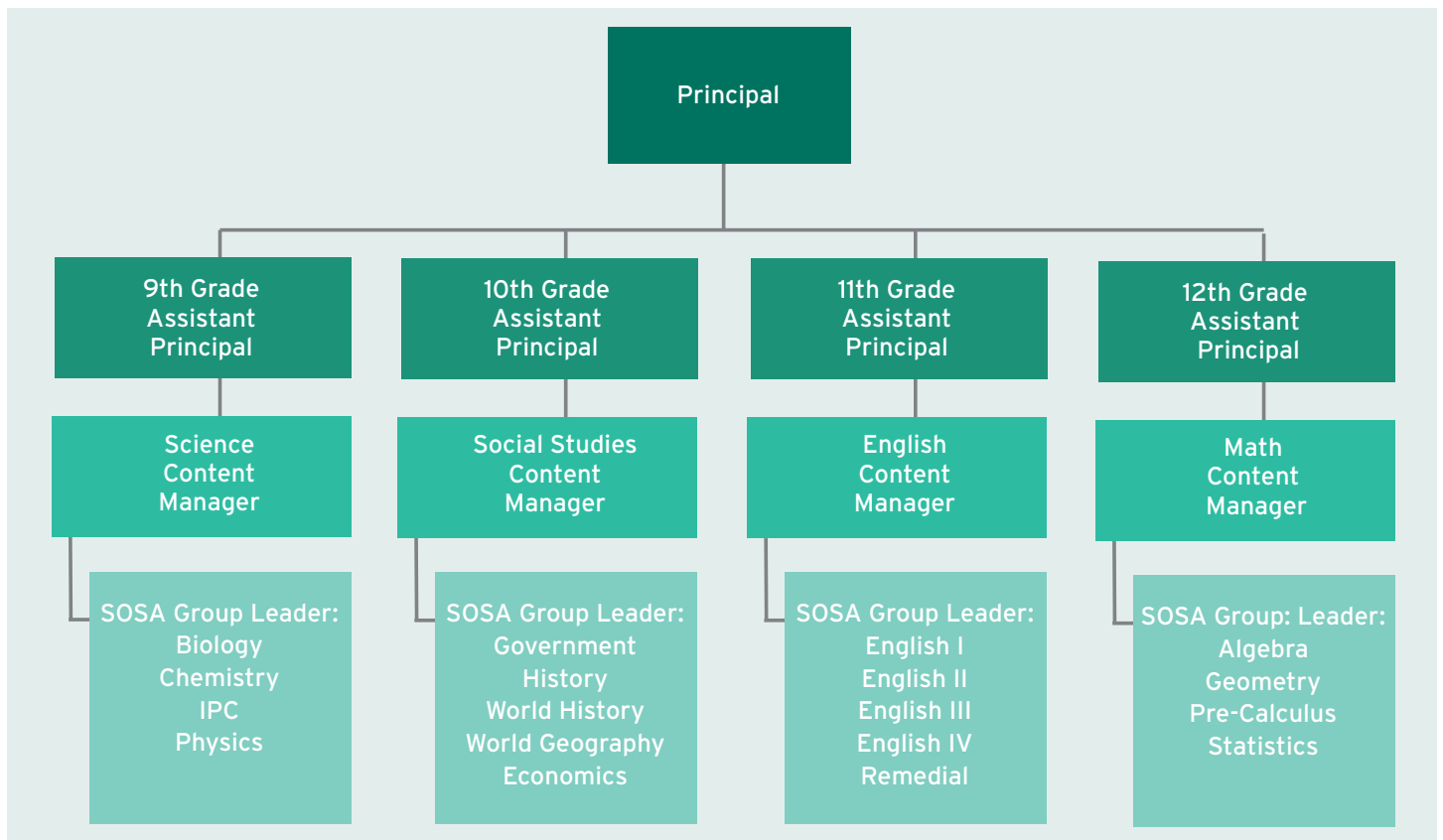
An extensive review of education leadership at Austin High School shows that the implementation of strategic leadership structures contributed to improved student performance by setting high expectations for staff and students, establishing a distributive leadership model, and creating an environment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

IMPLEMENTING STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP STRUCTURES

Principal Llorente was the spark behind the changes at Austin High School. She was initially able to get teachers’ attention by using data to illustrate the condition of the school. The types of data included standardized test scores, attendance rates, graduation rates, and drop-out rates. More importantly, the improvements initiated by Principal Llorente have been sustained because of changes in the structure, systems, and organization of Austin High School.

Principal Llorente is supported by four assistant principals, who are each responsible for one grade level. The assistant principals are in charge of teacher evaluations, student interventions, and assisting in the implementation of plans and programs within Austin HS. Four counselors (one per grade level), help assistant principals with student support issues.

FIGURE 2. LEADERSHIP
STRUCTURE AT
AUSTIN HIGH SCHOOL



Content managers, also known as department chairs, take the lead in curriculum alignment and oversee Same Objective Same Assessment (SOSA) groups. These groups are comprised of teachers in the same subject area and are responsible for aligning curriculum, discussing benchmark tests, reviewing data, and developing intervention plans for students who are at risk. Each SOSA group has a designated leader. Figure 2 illustrates the leadership structure at Austin HS.



SETTING HIGH EXPECTATIONS

Teachers and administrators at Austin HS continually repeated, “failure is not an option.” This attitude and slogan comes directly from Principal Llorente and has become a part of the psyche of the school community. This positive attitude takes form in many practical ways. For example, if a student fails the first six-week grading period, Principal Llorente requires documentation from teachers that shows the steps that were taken to help that student. Principal Llorente commented, “If teachers do not have a folder on at-risk students, then they’re not doing their job.”

“You can’t make excuses for them [students]. There are enough people in their world that are saying they can’t make it and they aren’t the right kind of kid. They can’t hear that here too.”
- Austin HS teacher

Principal Llorente also expects that teachers at Austin HS not only get to know their students academically, but also on a personal level. This encouragement has pushed teachers to ensure their students will graduate. Interviewees indicated that they are motivated by helping students overcome their struggles. Some teachers we spoke with stated they will even go and pick up students who are absent on testing days. One teacher stated, “You can’t make excuses for them [students]. There are enough people in their world that are saying they can’t make it and they aren’t the right kind of kid. They can’t hear that here too.” By developing a deeper understanding of students’ backgrounds, Austin HS has fostered a culture of high expectations.

This culture of high expectations extends beyond the students; it also inspires teachers to hold themselves to higher standards. Principal Llorente is the role model for excellence and she is emulated by the staff, which is evidenced through their extensive participation in after-school tutorial sessions and staff commitment to professional development provided by THSP grant money.

ESTABLISHING A DISTRIBUTIVE LEADERSHIP MODEL

Distributive leadership, also known as shared responsibility, makes school operations more efficient, which helps to improve student achievement. The Shared Decision-Making Committee (SDMC) is an important element of distributive leadership at Austin HS.

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 affecting the school. For example, the SDMC was responsible for developing the school-wide tardy policy that is now enforced by Principal Llorente. Although she has veto power if there are policies that she does not want implemented, interviewees estimated that 9 out of 10 times Principal Llorente supports the committee’s decisions.

CREATING A COLLABORATIVE ENVIRONMENT

Collaboration among teachers due to Same Objective Same Assessment (SOSA) groups has made operations at Austin HS considerably more effective and efficient. SOSA groups have significantly improved student achievement and the working environment at Austin High School. Before Principal Llorente arrived at Austin HS, most teachers worked in isolation. A content manager cited that teachers would only meet in a group setting once every three weeks to discuss administrative issues. Lack of group meetings created three issues. First, the curriculum was not aligned vertically or horizontally. Second, at-risk students did not have the necessary attention to ensure they were not “falling through the cracks.” Finally, a clear line of communication between teachers, department heads, and administrators did not exist.

To help address the lack of group collaboration, Principal Llorente identified SOSA groups as a solution. The THSP grant did not directly fund SOSA groups, but it provided Austin HS the opportunity to redefine their preexisting structures to make way for them. SOSA groups are now responsible for aligning curriculum, discussing benchmark tests, reviewing data, and developing intervention plans for students who are at risk. They have also helped to streamline communication. Teachers and administrators know exactly who to work with when necessary due to the implementation of the SOSA group model.

TEACHER EFFECTIVENESS

Research shows that high quality, effective teachers can have a positive and significant impact on student achievement.¹¹ As such, the Texas High School Project (THSP) is dedicated to the impact area of teacher effectiveness, which focuses on the ability to “hire and develop teachers who help students perform better.”¹² During the course of our investigation, we used the extant body of research on teacher effectiveness as a guiding framework for analysis. This section describes the findings from Austin High School based on themes which are critical to investments in teacher effectiveness; these include recruitment and retention, teacher evaluation, professional development, and collaboration.¹³ We also discuss how teacher buy-in and involvement was instrumental in the school’s reform process.

DEFINING TEACHER EFFECTIVENESS AT AUSTIN HIGH SCHOOL

In our first visit, we asked administrators and staff about their expectations for teachers and how they defined what it means to be an effective educator at the school. All interviewees emphasized the commitment that teachers have to their students, both in forming relationships and holding high academic standards. This notion of an effective teacher was supported by a core belief that “failure is not an option,” regardless of the student’s background or current situation. Teachers were expected to emphasize academic rigor and make connections with students to facilitate success.

The definition of teacher effectiveness was exemplified in the recent changes English teachers made to their writing instruction. The language arts content manager spoke about how English teachers at Austin HS shared details about their lives and thus encouraged students to do the same in their writing, leading to more personal and compelling essays. Although this level of openness and honesty with students may not be a typical teacher expectation, at Austin HS it was crucial to the culture of the school environment and to student success.

"If you choose to work at Austin, then you're choosing to work in an environment where you're going to have to work your rear end off... whatever it is to get through to your kids, that's what I expect people to do."
- 11th grade assistant principal

HIRING AND RETAINING EFFECTIVE TEACHERS


Austin High Schools commitment to an effective teaching staff is evidenced through its low teacher turnover. Recently, 26 teachers at Austin HS were actively recruited for other positions in the district, but chose not to leave. The reason they chose to stay at Austin HS was attributed to the campus-wide support system and the norms and beliefs about teaching held by the staff.

When teachers do leave, the goal of the campus is to find new teachers who hold the same spirit and attitudes about teaching. The 11th grade assistant principal characterized this spirit of teaching: "If you choose to work at Austin, then you're choosing to work in an environment where you're going to have to work your rear end off. These kids need us to dedicate ourselves to them. Whether that means that we make ourselves available after hours, whether it means we give them our cell phone numbers because we know they are going to need to talk to us...whatever it is to get through to your kids, that's what I expect people to do."

Principal Llorente also stated that in interviews with perspective teachers she emphasizes the "failure is not an option" belief and asks if candidates are willing to commit to this school norm. She also expects the content managers to participate in the interviews and to provide major input for decisions regarding who joins the staff.

PROVIDING EVALUATION AND FEEDBACK

Austin HS ensures that their teachers are successful through frequent, purposeful observations. The assistant principals and content managers of each department are required to do ten "walk-throughs," or small evaluations, on a weekly basis. This means that every teacher at Austin HS is typically observed bi-weekly. Walk-throughs are non-evaluative and are not entered into teacher records, but they provide teachers with feedback on their classroom practices. Thus, teachers they can continually improve throughout the school year. An algebra II teacher said the following about walk-throughs: "The content manager gives comments and suggestions, which is good because we don't get to be observed a lot by other teachers besides the content managers and appraisers. We need a lot of feedback from other teachers to improve instruction. They are like a mirror and we use that to improve ourselves."



The observation tools, supplied through professional development opportunities funded by THSP, also include questions for students, such as “What are you learning today?” and “Why is it important?” The addition of these questions gives teachers the opportunity to receive feedback from their students. Teachers are given walk-through feedback through an observation form left in the classroom and at meetings with the observer a few days afterward. Many of the teachers we interviewed spoke about the importance of the feedback they receive and how they use it to improve their instruction and reach the best outcomes for their students.

EXPANDING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Austin HS also promotes effective teaching through multiple, integrated opportunities for professional development; these opportunities were greatly expanded through the THSP grant. Austin HS provided various department-wide professional development opportunities, and the school also encouraged teachers to find training that interested them; then, teachers shared what they learned with other colleagues upon their return. One group of English teachers told an inspiring story about a summer conference they attended and the new strategies they subsequently implemented the next school year to improve 10th grade students’ writing skills.

In addition, the math content manager specifically cited a professional development opportunity about class scheduling funded by THSP, which was pivotal in fostering change and helped the campus become recognized for its improvement in math Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) scores. Math scores at Austin HS showed the highest growth from the previous year in all of Houston Independent School District (HISD).

SUPPORTING COLLEGIALITY AND COLLABORATION

Another key mechanism Austin HS uses to improve teacher effectiveness is the Same Objective, Same Assessment (SOSA) groups. The SOSA groups serve as a way for teachers of the same subject and grade level to come together for common planning and assessment building. Teachers meet in these groups every week to plan their lessons together and also use the groups as an arena to evaluate student work and assessments, which refines their teaching practice. Many teachers we spoke with at Austin HS view the SOSA groups as the most important reform effort at the school because of their connection to increased teacher collaboration and improvement. Through the SOSA collaboration, teachers have a chance to reflect on their instruction each week and gain ideas, which ensures the success of their students.

Feedback from teachers about the well-established collaborative at Austin HS was positive. One teacher stated, “When administrators really support you, teachers feel that they can become a teacher in the classroom and implement what they planned and still get the support of the administrators. It’s not a very big school, but the assistant principals are showing you that if you really do your job and teach and make these kids successful, they have your back. I appreciate the feeling that we have their support and can have open communication with them. That alone makes the difference between us really performing well as teachers and not.”

CREATING TEACHER BUY-IN FOR REFORM

Ultimately, it was the Austin HS teachers’ buy-in to the reform that created a foundation of support for the improvements seen on the campus. The school set clear expectations for all teachers that “failure is not an option” and held them to these high expectations. This goal was supported by existing teachers on the campus, but also became the central question for new hires during the reform process. Observations and collaboration in SOSA groups became methods through which all teachers could establish common standards that would benefit all students. Austin High School’s focus on supporting teacher effectiveness, strengthened by support from THSP, was essential to the school’s achievement in reform and continues to drive its success moving forward.

LEARNING SYSTEMS


The Texas High School Project (THSP) defines learning systems as structures put in place to “support administrative and learning environments that encourage rigorous and personalized learning.”¹⁴ Changes made to the learning systems at Austin High School, as well as a sustained investment, proved to be crucial to increased student performance and overall success. Systems that encourage rigorous and personalized learning for students at Austin HS include altering school structures, aligning curriculum and standardizing assessments, and implementing strategic interventions.

ALTERING SCHOOL STRUCTURES

Small Learning Communities

Austin HS began the effort 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 adopted a grade-level academy system in the 2007-2008 school year, after deeming the career-themed academy model ineffective. The previous summer, teachers and faculty designed a 9th grade academy that would cater only to the incoming freshmen class. Because the transition from middle to high school is often difficult for students, the main priority was to isolate freshman so that they could focus on their studies.



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 that they need 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 assistant principal and counselor from the 9th grade academy moved up to the 10th grade with their students to offer more personalized attention, and the academy was moved to another self-contained part of the school.

A new 9th grade academy was also established for the incoming freshmen in a dedicated 9th grade wing. 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 academy. 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.

Double-Block Scheduling

The adoption of the grade-level academy model was the most dramatic learning systems reform made at Austin HS, but there were many other changes made to increase student success. Teachers we interviewed at Austin HS feel 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.

Principal Llorente met with members of the faculty to brainstorm possible ways that Austin HS could ensure that their students pass the TAKS. 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.

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; Austin HS was able to hire additional teachers with the money the THSP grant freed up in 2007-2008. Students and teachers have been supportive of double-blocking since it was implemented, viewing it as a way to increase academic success. Positive feedback from teachers and students is supported by research on block scheduling, with teachers often reporting an increase in variety of instruction, more student-centered instruction, and improved student-teacher relationships when operating under a block schedule.¹⁵ Under double-blocking, TAKS math passing rates have increased from 37% to 70%. Additionally, in 2010, the National Center for Educational Achievement (NCEA) recognized Austin HS as a high-performing school in math.¹⁶

ALIGNING CURRICULUM AND STANDARDIZING ASSESSMENTS

Curriculum alignment was made a priority in recent years at Austin HS. Principal Llorente said although the curriculum had been vertically and horizontally aligned across some subjects, it was not aligned across all subjects. Teachers saw a need for curriculum alignment and teamwork to ensure that students would stay on track to graduate. In the 2008-2009 school year, Austin HS developed Same Objective, Same Assessment (SOSA) groups. Organized by class subject, SOSA groups consist of teachers within the same department, independent of grade level, who plan lessons together. SOSA groups allow for horizontal curriculum alignment across core subjects and also provide an important support system to teachers at Austin HS.

By vertically aligning the curriculum, teachers in 9th grade are able to discuss material and teaching strategies to help a former student with their new teacher in 10th grade. Teachers said that SOSA groups allow them to address individual student needs, and the feedback they receive from their fellow teachers helps them to teach their students better. Austin HS developed the content manager position, who teaches only one period a day and spends the rest of the time evaluating and meeting with teachers in their subject area. The THSP grant allowed Austin HS to provide stipends to content managers for their additional work.

SOSA groups also provide the opportunity to create common assessments, which are another example of horizontal alignment. These assessments further encourage SOSA groups to work together and talk about expectations, as well as areas that need improvement in learning. Common assessments keep teachers at Austin HS on the same page and using similar language.

IMPLEMENTING STRATEGIC INTERVENTIONS

Several learning systems were altered at Austin HS to provide support to students. All faculty and staff have high expectations of their students, personified in their motto: “failure is not an option.” Many students do not receive support outside of school from their families, so Principal Llorente and the faculty/staff make it a priority to provide students with what they need to succeed in school.

One way Austin HS provides student support is through school uniforms. Students have worn uniforms at Austin HS for a long time, but the new grade-level academies include an assigned color. Every student must wear their grade-specific color polo shirt every day, allowing teachers to recognize which students are out of place and determine their proper location. Additionally, wearing grade-level colors gives students a sense of inclusion among their classmates. According to an assistant principal, wearing uniforms gives students motivation to do well in school and graduate together.

Another way Austin HS has increased student support is through expanded tutoring opportunities. Most teachers at Austin HS make themselves available whenever a student needs help. Teachers tutor before school, during lunch, and after school, depending on the needs of their students. The THSP grant freed up money for teachers to receive tutoring stipends; availability of these stipends decreased substantially once the grant was completed.

Personal Graduation Plans (PGPs) are progress plans created for students at-risk of failing. PGPs are mandatory throughout Houston Independent School District (HISD); however, Austin HS requires them for all students. Students have an opportunity to discuss their PGPs during Advocacy time, which is similar to home room, and held on a weekly basis. Advocacy also provides time for planning class schedules at Austin HS, as well as helping students with their future plans for college and/or careers.

PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT


Effective decision-making depends on the availability, timeliness, and quality of data, both quantitative and qualitative. The Texas High School Project (THSP) aims to help schools “create the infrastructure and processes to identify, track, and analyze data critical to key decision-making.”¹⁷ Critical data range from standardized tests and classroom assessment scores to attendance and discipline records. Although educational data move constantly between classrooms, campuses, districts, and the state, this report focuses on the data being analyzed and the decisions being made within Austin High School at the classroom and campus levels.

Further, data collection and management are just a small piece of effective performance management. Research shows that using data purposefully to identify strengths and weaknesses among students and responding to findings through interventions or new school policies are critical to meaningful improvement.¹⁸ As such, this section explores the ways Austin HS has focused its performance management around informed decisions from a variety of its collected data.

Over the grant period, Austin HS used the resources provided by THSP to implement three key changes in the area of performance and data management. The school has committed to purposeful data use, provided time and opportunities for staff to collaboratively analyze data and plan accordingly, and tracked student performance to develop specific learning and intervention plans based on data.

ANALYZING DATA PURPOSEFULLY

With technology making data collection increasingly easier, teachers often complain about “drowning in data” as they attempt to sift through an inordinate amount of student data and struggle to find meaning. Fortunately, one of the true strengths of the performance management system at Austin HS is its purposefulness and simplicity. All the various forms and documents that comprise the school’s data review process have been thoroughly vetted as to their intuitiveness and overall ease of use.



Administrators realize that collecting this information is one more hurdle for already overburdened teachers, so any changes they make are well reasoned and well planned. For example, teachers commented on how difficult it was to navigate the data projection sheets used to analyze student Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) benchmark performance. In response, Principal Llorente relied on her content managers to rethink the order and structure of the paperwork to make it more intuitive. After removing extraneous information and simplifying the layout, teachers became much more consistent with data projection submissions.

Additionally, the Same Objective, Same Assessment (SOSA) groups' data use is facilitated by the content manager or department chair, who grades most of the assessments. These experienced teachers are able to present the other teachers with adequate, yet manageable amounts of information and after useful advice for struggling teachers that is directly tied to the results from recent student assessments.

Through the "Teacher's Workbench" feature of the *CampusOnline* software in use at all Houston ISD schools, content managers can generate a variety of streamlined reports that serve as the starting point for the SOSA meetings. Teachers review specific objectives that presented a struggle for classes or individual groups of students. This information is also presented to the teachers in an easily digestible format of graphs and charts.

As "decoding the data" was a focus of Austin High School's performance management reforms, administrators also took steps to make teachers more data savvy. Austin HS used THSP funds to hold school-wide professional development sessions, which introduced teachers to new, effective ways to interpret the information presented to them. Some of the funds received from the THSP grant were also used for professional development sessions that reinforced and expanded ideas about the role data should have in building and maintaining successful schools.

One of the best illustrations of Austin High School's reliance on data is the office of Principal Llorente. From her desk, Principal Llorente is within arm's reach of a truly impressive amount of regularly updated student performance data. Austin High School's data systems are driven by a clear sense of purpose, built conveniently into teachers' schedules, and used to inform strategic student interventions.

BUILDING DATA REVIEW INTO TEACHER SCHEDULES

Although Austin HS had meetings similar to SOSA groups before THSP, these planning sessions were redefined during the grant process to include more consistent and meaningful data analysis. By making data analysis a regular occurrence, many teachers and content managers noted an increased level of professionalism and dedication to adopting pedagogically sound strategies. Today, these common planning periods have become important times that allow teachers to regularly reflect on their own performance, as well as that of their students. Because curriculum and assessments are standardized across SOSA groups, variance in test scores is mostly attributed to different ways of presenting the information. Strategies that are proven to be more successful are discussed, shared, and adopted.

"I think we get to better understand our data because we are meeting with people who understand the same data...It is beneficial to the kids because you give them feedback faster, and beneficial to us too because we can improve our instruction faster based on the data that we talked about. "
- Algebra II teacher

Other questions specifically articulated in the template for SOSA meeting notes include, "What successes did we celebrate today?," "How did we ensure success?," and "What do we need to keep doing?" By connecting this detailed analysis of performance with more abstract goals articulated by the content managers and principals, teachers are constantly reminded of the purpose of these data review sessions. In interviews, we heard the following about the success of analyzing data in SOSA groups from an algebra II teacher: "I think we get to better understand our data because we are meeting with people who understand the same data. When we give a test, we can talk about it right away. Since we are in the same hallway, we can meet every day if we want to and talk about the result of something that we did together. It is beneficial to the kids because you give them feedback faster, and beneficial to us too because we can improve our instruction faster based on the data that we talked about."

Content managers could also readily cite instances where real-time data analysis had a meaningful effect on student achievement. For instance, the math content manager and her fellow teachers noticed that students were consistently struggling to meet various Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) standards on the benchmark assessments. The department then rethought its strategy in presenting the TEKS by increasing emphasis on these concepts in lesson plans and allocating additional class time to the skills tested on the TEKS assessment. With this extra attention given, the students were able to better understand the concepts; now, this timeline extension is a permanent fixture in that particular SOSA group's curriculum.

DESIGNING DATA-BASED STRATEGIC INTERVENTIONS


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, which are discussed in organized review sessions called "10-minute meetings." These one-time meetings, implemented in 2002, are led by each individual teacher and include Principal Llorente, as well as the teacher's content manager and assistant principal.

The 10-minute meetings are designed to help familiarize teachers with the students they will be responsible for during the upcoming semester and to identify potential interventions for those who may need them. This first step is integral in getting information into teachers' hands with plenty of time to adjust lesson plans and prepare additional materials, if needed.

As part of the preparation for these meetings, teachers are given "TAKS Tracker Reports," which graphically depict their students' performance on each of the ten objectives tested every year. Demographic information and subgroup status, including at-risk, Limited English Proficiency (LEP), gifted and talented, and special education status are also provided. Before the meetings, teachers are required to thoroughly answer a list of questions about their proposed strategies with each student. This 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 one assistant principal explained, "10-minute meetings" are specifically designed for a single purpose: to ensure that teachers have made the first step of the data analysis process. Because data are recognized as such a powerful tool, lack of preparation for these meetings is not tolerated.

Administrators also monitor student performance through the use of data projections. These projections are updated at least once a month by the student's teacher and include grades on major assessments, and the teacher's best sense of whether or not each student will pass the upcoming TAKS test. Projections are also reviewed by the appropriate content manager, assistant principal, and Principal Llorente. If students are consistently projected to fail, an "intervention folder" is started and assistant principals ensure that the student is scheduled to attend some sort of intervention.



“Intervention folders” function as a brief history of any intervention the teacher has tried over the year to improve the student’s scores. These interventions include requiring tutoring, contacting parents, and implementing different pedagogical strategies, among other things. Departments set their own requirements for this element, but most ask that the folders be submitted monthly. Also, assistant principals will occasionally request “intervention folders” for specific students they are concerned about. These documents tie together the scores on tests developed by the SOSA groups, district-developed interim assessments, and discipline referrals to create a fairly complete picture of the student’s short-term school history.

Prior to implementing these data systems, teachers would only receive standardized test scores after the fact, with no formal way to pass on detailed information to the student’s next teacher. Attempts at intervention were only as good as the teacher making them, and because they were not documented, could not easily be improved upon or communicated to other teachers. Today, formalized processes for reviewing and analyzing data ensure every student receives consistent and meaningful help as they progress through high school.

CONCLUSION

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

In the reform effort, Austin HS administrators reorganized the leadership structure and created a collaborative environment with distributed responsibility among all stakeholders. The campus also redefined teacher expectations and expanded professional development opportunities. Learning systems were developed that included changes to the layout of the school and class schedules, which aided in the creation of small learning communities. Also, grade-level uniforms were distributed to students to bring about a badly needed sense of identity. Lastly, Austin HS made concerted efforts to streamline their data analysis process to make it as simple and purposeful as possible. In addition, Austin HS dedicated time for teachers to review data and designed unique interventions based on student performance. With the belief that all students can achieve at high levels, the staff at Austin HS dedicated themselves to making this success become a reality through whatever channels were needed.

All these reforms worked together to bring about change at Austin HS, but the most important development was adopting the idea that “failure is not an option” into the culture of the school. Our findings show that the various policies and structures implemented at the campus have resulted in positive change; however, it has been the support of the people involved during the implementation process that has made all the difference. In moving forward it is important to note that with all reform efforts, smart, dedicated people who are empowered to share ideas, try new things, and focus on student learning are the catalyst for long-term change.

APPENDIX 1: AUSTIN HIGH SCHOOL REFORM TIMELINE

SCHOOL YEAR	ACCOUNTABILITY RATING	THSP FUNDING AND EVENTS	OTHER IMPORTANT EVENTS
2001-2002	Low Performing		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Principal Llorente hired "10-Minute" data meetings begin
2002-2003	First Year TAKS (No Rating)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shared Decision-Making Committee (SDMC) started
2003-2004	Acceptable		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Receive A+ grant to fund School Improvement Facilitator and Literacy Coach salaries
2004-2005	Acceptable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> THSP grant application completed in tandem with DEIN 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Project LISTO grant application and award
2005-2006	Acceptable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> THSP grant awarded: \$300,000 over two years Planning for themed academies and block scheduling 	
2006-2007	Acceptable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> THSP grant year 1: \$150,000 HSTW technical assistance begins on campus Implement themed academies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Drop Everything and Read (DEAR) programming starts Advocacy advisory programming begins
2007-2008	Acceptable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> THSP grant year 2: \$150,000 End of themed academies Start 9th grade small learning community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Double-blocking starts Professional Learning Communities redefined Dean of Instruction added Uniforms move to color-coded polos
2008-2009	Recognized	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Start 10th grade small learning community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Same Objective, Same Assessment (SOSA) vertical teaming starts Content Managers begin work
2009-2010	Recognized	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Start 11th grade small learning community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Campus online district data software rolled out "TAKS Tracker Reports" used on campus
2010-2011	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Start 12th grade small learning community 	

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