COMPLETING THE VISION: AUSTIN ISD SMALLER LEARNING COMMUNITIES PROJECT, 2005-2006

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

In Spring 2004, the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), *High Schools That Work*, audited the Austin Independent School District's (AISD) high school college and career preparation program. The findings from the audit indicated that AISD high schools, especially those with large proportions of economically disadvantaged students, needed to provide increasingly challenging core coursework, additional access to academic supports, and better college and career preparation for all students. To address those concerns, SREB recommended that AISD create smaller learning communities.

Established by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, the Smaller Learning Communities (SLC) Program is a competitive federal grant program dedicated to the development, implementation, and expansion of smaller learning communities in large high schools. Grantees may use their funds to: (a) research, develop, and implement strategies for creating SLCs; (b) provide professional development opportunities for teachers focused on instructional strategies to be used in a SLC; and (c) develop and implement strategies to include parents, business representatives, and community partners in the activities of the smaller learning communities.

In October 2004, Akins, Austin, and Lanier high schools received $1,284,329 from the U.S. Department of Education to create and implement smaller learning communities over a three-year period. In 2005-2006, these high schools engaged in the beginning and intermediate phases of planning and implementation. SLC program staff completed a thorough needs assessment and planning phase that included: (a) analyzing student- and campus-level data, (b) identifying best practices from successful SLC programs, and (c) meeting with stakeholders to elicit ideas and create a shared vision for the redesign process. Akins and Lanier established 9th grade academies led by a team of administrators, counselors, and teachers; created teacher teams with common planning periods; and implemented student advisory periods to provide academic support and college and career preparation. Akins also established thematic academies based on career pathways for 10th through 12th grades. At Austin, changes in campus leadership and the differing needs and opinions of stakeholder groups made it necessary to postpone implementation and spend more time educating various groups about the purpose of SLCs. SLC design teams and work groups were established. Teachers and staff participated in multiple professional development opportunities focused on the development of SLCs and advisory classes.

METHODOLOGY

Evaluation Objectives

This formative evaluation report was intended to provide program stakeholders with information about program planning and implementation outcomes. They may use the report to measure progress toward meeting articulated goals and to support ongoing decision making for program improvement.

Data Collection

Evaluation staff from AISD's Department of Program Evaluation and external contractors collected qualitative and quantitative data pertaining to clearly defined performance measures. A description of data sources and collection follows.

- ***Student Enrollment and Achievement Data****:* Student attendance rates, course enrollment and passing rates, TAKS scores and passing rates, SAT and ACT scores and passing rates, dropout rates, and graduation rates were used to determine student needs and program implementation priorities.

- ***District Surveys****:* Campus-level results from the *AISD Parent Survey*, *Student Climate Survey*, and *High School Exit Survey* were used to describe baseline student and parent perceptions of and attitudes toward the high school experience.

- ***SLC Year 1 Evaluation Report****:* As required by federal law, an external evaluator completed an evaluation of SLC program implementation for the 2004-2005 school year. Program staff used the findings and recommendations presented in this report to make program implementation decisions.

- ***SLC Site Visits****:* In May 2006, staff from the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) conducted site visits at Akins and Lanier high schools where SLC implementation had begun. The site visits were a part of the U.S. Department of Education's national study of SLC implementation processes and identification of technical assistance needs. SEDL staff interviewed students, teachers, and SLC program staff and observed classroom instruction during the site visits.

- ***Program Records and Notes****:* Program implementation plans and requirements, budget records, and meeting notes provided detailed information pertaining to overall program implementation.

Data Analysis

Mixed methods were used to establish baseline performance, describe program implementation processes, and identify issues associated with the effective implementation of the program. Descriptive statistics summarized student enrollment, academic achievement, and survey results data.

Contextual analyses described information provided across evaluation reports, interviews, observations, and field notes. Student outcomes pertaining to clearly defined performance measures will be examined and reported at the end of grant period, Fall 2007.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The examination of the SLC programs at Austin, Akins, and Lanier high schools during the 2005-2006 school year revealed that each campus had completed varying levels of program implementation and experienced

successes and challenges in the process. A summary of major points of interest follows.

SLC Staffing

Each school designated staff to facilitate the planning and implementation of the program. SLC staff coordinated and facilitated all activities including course scheduling, advisories, professional development sessions, parent involvement, and community outreach. They also worked with the district's SLC program manager to handle program budget expenditures and ensure federal grant compliance.

Program Planning

To elicit stakeholder support for school change, professional development was an integral part of the initial planning and implementation phases. At Akins and Austin, program staff, administrators, counselors, and teachers visited successful SLC sites to observe best practices in full implementation and to create buy-in or shared vision. Teachers, staff, and administrators at all three schools participated in multiple meetings designed to inform all stakeholders about SLC structures and philosophies. Each campus established ongoing study groups charged with the continuing tasks of planning for implementation and communicating with campus stakeholders.

Professional development sessions were found to be instrumental in the implementation of SLCs. Akins staff reported the site visits to successful SLC programs were the most important factor in their ability to move forward in their planning and program implementation (Samii-Shore, 2006). Austin staff also reported the SLC site visits were effective in creating excitement and developing ideas for implementation. Based

on these favorable reports, Lanier staff planned to engage in similar site visits in the coming school year, with the expectation that lessons learned would help strengthen campus support and facilitate the implementation of SLCs.

Parent involvement also was important in the program planning phases (Samii-Shore, 2006). Throughout the school year, the schools encouraged parents to attend campus- and district-level forums. These forums provided information about the importance of improving the high schools and described the components of school redesign using the SLC philosophies and strategies.

At each school, the level of parent participation and support uniquely influenced the planning and implementation of the SLCs. At Akins, parent meetings were well attended and parents were active partners in the process. As a result, Akins had strong parental support and was able to proceed according to plan. Conversely, parents of Austin students expressed mixed reactions and wanted opportunities to become more involved in the process. Consequently, campus leaders at Austin decided to spend additional time planning and increasing parental support.

Program Implementation

As the name implies, the major component of the program established smaller learning environments within the larger school context. Akins and Lanier staff established SLCs; however, they experienced scheduling challenges in the process (Samii-Shore, 2006; Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2006). Maintaining appropriate class size within the traditional seven periods per day structure made it difficult to schedule students within a single SLC. They also found

it difficult to schedule students in Advanced Placement (AP) courses and career pathways or majors within the SLC structure. Common teacher-planning periods at Akins and Lanier were to provide time for teachers to develop integrated lessons, analyze student data, and engage in professional development sessions. Scheduling these common teacher-planning times proved to be problematic. To address these obstacles, Akins and Lanier staff will explore the use of block scheduling and provide related professional development opportunities for teachers in 2006-2007.

The student advisory class was a critical program component for supporting student academic progress, communicating information regarding students' college and career plans, and developing relationships between students and at least one adult on the campus. In 2005-2006, SLC staff at all three high schools facilitated the development of an advisory curriculum and provided related professional development opportunities for teachers. Akins and Lanier staff began student advisory classes during the 2005-2006 school year. Austin high school will begin advisory classes during the 2006-2007 school year.

Students and teachers from Akins and Lanier high schools provided feedback regarding the advisory classes (Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2006). Both groups reported the classes had the potential for relationship building. However, they expressed the need for a more engaging and relevant curriculum to maximize the potential of the experience. Advisory curriculum development and improvement will continue in the 2006-2007 school year at each school.

Teacher professional development opportunities played a critical role throughout the planning and implementation phases of the SLC program, and areas for continuing development were identified (Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2006). Teachers and school staff needed ongoing professional development sessions to increase their understanding of the foundations of SLCs and the steps to be taken to fully realizing student success, to use student achievement data effectively, and to increase academic rigor in the classroom. These professional development sessions needed to be ongoing, aligned with SLC performance goals, and embedded in the workday.

District Capacity Building

Austin ISD is committed to transforming its high schools to provide rigorous academic preparation for all students, to establish positive relationships between students and adults, and to demonstrate relevancy between the high school curriculum and individual student college and career aspirations. Over the past two years, the district's leaders have developed their understanding of and advocacy for creating SLCs. The district's Office of High School Redesign has been established and actively supports full implementation of SLCs at all AISD high schools by providing the necessary resources and time.

SUMMARY

Overall, substantial progress was made toward the implementation of SLCs at Akins, Austin, and Lanier high schools. Each school used student- and campus-level data to develop a comprehensive plan for implementation. Each school began implementing those plans as their campus

contexts allowed. They also utilized formative evaluation information to modify implementation as needed. These practices indicate the schools were engaging in a continuous cycle of improvement.

Each school invested a considerable amount of time garnering the support of stakeholders for school change. The communication with and inclusion of teachers and parents were key factors in the rate and quality of SLC component implementation. Akins acquired committed support from its teachers and parents early in the process and was able to move further along in SLC implementation in 2005-2006.

District-level commitment to high school redesign provided important support for the implementation of SLCs for Akins, Austin, and Lanier, as well as for other high schools across the district. The district provided and will continue to provide resources and time to support the work. The district's supportive role strengthens the schools' capacity to implement change and sets forth an expectation of program integrity and accountability for meeting academic standards.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Each school recognized challenges in its implementation of SLC components and articulated individualized plans for addressing those challenges. The following recommendations are provided for consideration as the schools enter their last year of federal funding.

- *Provide ongoing and substantive teacher professional development to improve classroom instructional practices and create a comprehensive understanding of college and career preparation.* Improved instructional practice will increase academic rigor in the classroom. Specialized training may be needed to ensure that instructional time provided within block scheduling is effectively utilized. Greater understanding of teacher roles in college and career preparation may improve teacher support for advisory classes. This professional development strategy should not merely be a series of "how-to" trainings; rather, it should be supported through the establishment of professional learning communities focused on the needs of students.

- *Improve and maintain communication with parents and community members to encourage their involvement.* Frequent and two-way communication is encouraged to facilitate the development of relationships. Increased parent awareness and understanding will strengthen support for school change.

- *Explore solutions for solving logistical problems related to implementation structures.* Challenges associated with developing a strong advisory curriculum, scheduling students appropriately within SLCs, and finding time for ongoing professional development opportunities must be addressed. Finding sustainable solutions requires ongoing collaboration between campus- and district-level staff.

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