

Student Data Dig 2019: Ann Richards School

What was the purpose of the Student Data Dig?

As part of a broader effort to prioritize student voice, address student mental health and wellness, and empower students to determine their own path to success, Ann Richards School for Young Women Leaders (ARS) is planning to offer an elective course on social and emotional learning (SEL) skill development for 10th-grade students in the 2019–2020 school year. To inform course planning and development, researchers from the Austin Independent School District's (AISD) Department of Research and Evaluation (DRE) facilitated discussions with 9th- and 10th-grade ARS students in Spring 2019 using data from the AISD Student Climate Survey.

What was the data dig procedure?

How were students selected?

ARS staff selected students based on grade level, availability and willingness to participate, and representativeness of the relevant grade-level cohort. Students represented a diverse mix of interests, personalities, social groups, and backgrounds. The underlying goal was to select students who provided a range of perspectives that could inform the SEL course. Approximately 10 to 12 students participated in each discussion.

What data did students look at?

In collaboration with the SEL specialist, DRE researchers developed a dashboard that summarized 9th- and 10th-grade ARS student responses to the following survey items from the 2018–2019 AISD Student Climate Survey:

- During my school day, I am aware of when my feelings change.
- I don't give up, even when I feel frustrated.
- I use ways to calm myself down.
- It is easy for me to talk about my problems with the adults at my school.
- At my school, I often notice how others are feeling.
- If I get angry with a classmate, we can talk about it and make it better.
- I say "no" to friends who want me to break the rules.

Survey response options comprised *A lot of the time*, *Sometimes*, *A little of the time*, *Never*, and *Don't know*. The proportion of students who responded *A lot of the time* or *Sometimes* to each survey item was displayed via DRE's [interactive data platform](#). With ARS students generally reporting more positive climate than other AISD schools, researchers elected to isolate ARS data for grades 9 and 10 to avoid comparisons and encourage self-reflection.

What did students do with the data?

Using a protocol adapted from the School Reform Initiative's [Protocols for Youth Engagement](#), students worked through the following steps:

- **Look at the data:** Students quietly observed their grade-level survey data.
- **Describe the data:** Students wrote down descriptions of what they saw and shared

their descriptions with a partner. Some students shared their observations with the entire group.

- **Interpret the data:** Students attempted to explain their observations and descriptions by making connections with personal experience.
- **Implications of the data:** Students brainstormed ideas for how the proposed course could support areas for growth with respect to SEL skills.
- **Reflection:** Students provided ideas for what was missing from the data that could help teachers structure the SEL course to better meet students' needs.

What themes emerged from discussions?

Before discussing themes, readers will note that the number of students who participated in these discussions represents a small percentage of the ARS student body. The thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of these students are not intended to represent the experience of all ARS students. Indeed, follow-up discussions by ARS staff concluded that additional voices and perspectives should be included to properly assess students' needs.

Students in both sessions were quick to notice their strengths. Data indicated that students felt confident in their ability to notice when their feelings change, notice how others are feeling, resolve conflict, and abide by school rules. Students connected data to their experiences by talking about strong peer relationships, emotional and academic resilience, and their ability to empathize with friends. Students believed these strengths were interconnected, with strong relationships reinforcing resilience and fostering empathy.

With respect to areas for growth, students in both sessions quickly noticed the survey item with the lowest agreement ("It is easy for me to talk about my problems with the adults at my school"), which prompted discussions about why it was difficult for students to engage with teachers or counselors. Tenth graders explained that they did not want to "feel like a burden" to adults and feared being judged as "weak" by adults and peers. Ninth graders explained that they did not feel equipped to approach a teacher or counselor to talk about their problems, which led to the suggestion that the SEL course should focus on equipping students with the skills and mindset to approach adults. Ninth graders discussed the uncertainty of knowing when it was acceptable to use specific strategies to calm themselves down (e.g., put their head down or take a walk). Consequently, students suggested integrating mindfulness and other strategies aimed at emotion regulation into the SEL course.

Building off the discussion about why it was hard for students to talk about their problems with adults, students discussed the stigma of going to a counselor, which they felt increased the necessity of being equipped to support friends when needed. Others felt that the SEL course would be a good opportunity to educate students about the importance of self-care; mental wellness; and the language to talk about one's moods, emotions, and feelings.

Both groups pointed out that they relied on each other for emotional support because they had known each other through shared classes for years. Similar opportunities to connect with adults, they explained, were more limited. One exception was elective courses, which were an opportunity for students to build relationships with teachers over multiple years. Students suggested the SEL course invite different school staff to speak, as a means of providing students with an opportunity to get to know adults other than their teachers.

Students from both grades discussed the stress and pressure associated with the expectations of attending a competitive, rigorous school. Students explained that much of their stress was compounded by the regular occurrence of having multiple papers, projects, and exams on the same day. Students communicated a desire for teachers to validate their feelings of stress and suggested enhanced teacher coordination to minimize overlap in due dates and exam dates. Relatedly, students discussed the difficulty of expressing vulnerability in a high-expectation, high-pressure environment. Students felt they had to "put on this front, this image, even to other schools" and that "it's

hard to be in that frame all the time.” One student said, “We are afraid to be vulnerable. We’re taught to be put together.”

Community-building (or sharing) circles were discussed as a good opportunity to connect with others, talk about one’s feelings, and receive validation from others through sharing similar feelings or experiences. Students also enjoyed sharing and celebrating accomplishments with each other. Circles also provided students with an opportunity to connect with their teachers.

How did students and teachers feel about the data dig?

Students completed a short survey at the end of the data dig. **In total, 19 students completed the survey, 95% of whom agreed with the statement “I believe students’ feelings and opinions will inform future decisions at Ann Richards,” and 84% of whom agreed with the statement “I believe schools should regularly review their survey data when making decisions.”** Such widespread support reinforces the value of providing structured opportunities for students to talk about their school experiences as a means of informing future strategic planning.

As noted in previous research by DRE ([Lamb, 2018](#)), the value of student data digs is closely linked to the involvement of key decision makers. In this case, teachers took notes and asked clarifying questions to better understand how to structure the course to meet students’ needs. Follow-up discussions indicated that students’ feedback directly influenced the structure and content of the course. In addition, a school counselor attended both sessions, took notes, and asked clarifying questions in order to better support students.

What’s next?

As part of the broader effort to ensure student success and wellbeing, ARS staff and students restructured every Monday as “Personalization Day,” which empowers students to choose how best to prioritize their school day. Such efforts are a clear indication that student perspectives are part of the decision making process and that student success is not only academic, but holistic.

DRE researchers will continue supporting campuses that want to conduct data digs during the 2019–2020 school year. Researchers intend to build teachers’ and administrators’ capacity to identify, interpret, and discuss their respective school’s publicly available data and to incorporate discussions into strategic planning and decision making.

References

Lamb, L. (2018). *Student data dig 2018: Bowie High School*. Austin, TX: Austin Independent School District.



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