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ABSTRACT

This study examined how five high-poverty Texas high schools, which had attained notable achievement levels on selected academic indicators, reached their present levels of performance. The schools shared several characteristics: most students were economically disadvantaged; the location was in a large urban district; there was no selective admission; they had a Texas accountability rating of acceptable, recognized, or exemplary; and student achievement on at least one of three academic indicators was higher than the state average (the Texas Learning Index, the Algebra I End-of-Course Examination, or Advanced Placement enrollment and course offerings). Study data came from observations, documents, and interviews with administrators, teachers, school staff, students, parents, and district administrators. Results found that despite commonalities, each school implemented its practices in unique ways. Practices that were critical to high performance included setting clear goals and establishing high expectations, using data to guide instruction, focusing on instruction and individual learning, supporting teachers and enhancing collaboration, and fostering an environment of respect and affection for students. (Contains 16 references.) (SM)

Opening Doors:

Promising Lessons from Five Texas High Schools

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About the Charles A. Dana Center and the STAR Center at The University of Texas at Austin

The Charles A. Dana Center is a research unit of the College of Natural Sciences at The University of Texas at Austin. The Dana Center provides education leaders with access to knowledge, skills, and resources for improving local education in Texas. The Center also supports informed deliberation about education issues by providing education leaders, researchers, and policymakers with objective research findings about Texas public education. For more information, visit the Dana Center website at www.utdanacenter.org.

The STAR (Support for Texas Academic Renewal) Center is a comprehensive regional center funded by the U.S. Department of Education to provide technical assistance to Texas educators. It is a partnership between the Charles A. Dana Center at The University of Texas at Austin, the Intercultural Development Research Association (San Antonio, Texas), and RMC Research Corporation (Denver, Colorado). The STAR Center supports schools, school districts, education service centers, and the Texas Education Agency in the effective use of federal programs to improve academic achievement for all students, particularly students considered at risk of educational failure. For more information, visit the STAR Center website at www.starcenter.org.

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Brazosport High School

Brazosport Independent School District
Doug Boone, Principal

Martin High School

Laredo Independent School District
Frances Wawroski, Principal

Mountain View High School

Clint Independent School District
Olivia Campos, Principal

PSJA Memorial High School

Pharr–San Juan–Alamo Independent School District
Roberto F. Loredo, Principal

Uvalde High School

Uvalde Consolidated Independent School District
Sara Bixler, Principal

Each of these five schools allowed a team of three researchers to make observations and conduct interviews on their campus. The schools' personnel, parents, and students, as well as local community members, generously gave of their time so that others could learn from their experiences.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Opening Doors:
Promising Lessons from Five Texas High Schools

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is about five high-poverty high schools in Texas that have attained notable levels of achievement on selected academic indicators, including the Texas Learning Index (TLI), Algebra I End-of-Course Examination, or Advanced Placement® enrollment and course offerings.[1] The five schools described in this report are among only a handful of high-poverty high schools that performed better than the state average on one or more of these indicators. Beyond these accomplishments, all of the schools have shown marked improvement in student performance on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills, or TAAS.[2] The goal of this study was to understand how these schools had reached their present levels of performance, and to identify strategies that might help other schools as they create their own responses to the challenge of improving performance and increasing educational opportunity for all students.

Each of the five schools shared the following characteristics:

- The majority of the school's students were identified as economically disadvantaged (i.e., they qualified for free or reduced-price lunch). At two of the schools, slightly over 50 percent of the students were identified as economically disadvantaged; and at the other three schools, over 86 percent of the students were identified as economically disadvantaged.

- The school was located in a large district (over 5,000 students[3]), served students in grades 9–12, and did not have selective admission policies.

- The school had a state of Texas accountability rating of Acceptable, Recognized, or Exemplary.[4]

- Student achievement on at least one of the following three academic indicators was higher than the state average as reported for "all students": the Texas Learning Index, the Algebra I End-of-Course Examination, or Advanced Placement enrollment and course offerings.[5]

For the TLI and Algebra I EOC exams, researchers looked for schools where the achievement gap in passing rates between "economically disadvantaged" and "not economically disadvantaged" students was small and where exam participation rates were greater than the state average. For Advanced Placement enrollment and course offerings, researchers reviewed school data to ensure that participation in these courses was representative of the school's overall student population in terms of the enrollment of low-income students.

The Texas schools selected on the basis of these criteria were

- Brazosport High School, Freeport (TLI);[6]

- Martin High School, Laredo (AP);
- Mountain View High School, El Paso (TLI);
- PSJA Memorial High School, Alamo (Algebra I EOC); and
- Uvalde High School, Uvalde (Algebra I EOC).

In 1999–2000, teams of three researchers made a two-day visit to each of these five schools. They interviewed administrators, teachers, support personnel, counselors, students, parents, and school district administrators, and observed classes, hallways, extracurricular activities, and various meetings. Researchers also examined campus planning materials, program descriptions, meeting agendas, school budgets, achievement reports, and other documents that might shed light on the practices that contributed to the school's achievements.

While recognizing that differences in local circumstances make it difficult for one school to replicate the successes of another, the researchers who carried out this study felt that it was valuable to examine successful schools and the practitioner wisdom that created them. To this end, they have attempted to accurately describe the ideas and practices that seem to support student achievement at the five study schools. Though discussed separately in this report, these ideas and practices are interconnected and interdependent. One practice cannot work as well alone as it can in conjunction with others.

The researchers found that while most of the five schools held in common certain ideas and practices, each school implemented these practices in ways that were unique to its local circumstances. Local differences notwithstanding, these practices seemed critical to the performance of the five schools studied.

Setting Clear Goals and Establishing High Expectations

- School leaders set clear and measurable goals for student achievement. These goals were publicly expressed and shared with teachers, students, and parents. One way that they defined their goals was in terms of performance on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills; but they also worked to improve students' mastery of the curriculum as measured by end-of-course and Advanced Placement exams.

- The staff at these schools wanted their students not only to graduate from high school but also to leave high school fully prepared to be successful in college. Administrators and teachers shared the conviction that all students can be successful, provided they have adequate support and high-quality instruction. Through words and actions, the teachers, administrators, counselors, and support staff at these schools continually demonstrated their belief that their students could learn—and their faculty could teach—the challenging curriculum.

Using Data to Guide Instruction

- Administrators and teachers used student performance data to set their goals for student achievement and to measure their progress toward these goals; to pinpoint instructional strengths and weaknesses; to identify students who needed additional support on specific objectives; and to enhance collaboration around the academic goals of the campus. Assessment data collected by the district was critical to this work.

- School- and district-level administrators facilitated the use of data in the classroom by providing teacher training and support in the use of data to make instructional decisions, and ensuring the timely collection, analysis, and dissemination of student assessment data. At several of the schools, administrators helped make student- and class-level data accessible to teachers, thus allowing teachers to spend their time on instruction.

Focusing on Instruction and Individual Learning

- Staff at the schools worked to build on the strengths of individual students and to address areas where students needed support. They strived to meet the needs of advanced learners by expanding and improving their advanced course offerings and, in some instances, by developing partnerships with local community colleges to allow students to complete college courses while still in high school. Similarly, they put in place structures to individualize and intensify instruction for students who were experiencing difficulty in class. Teachers and administrators also gave freely of their time, both before and after school, to help students with specific learning objectives.

- School administrators gave teachers both the responsibility and the support needed to improve classroom instruction and student learning. They encouraged teachers to experiment with new approaches, without fear of failure, and provided them with the time and resources needed for planning, data analysis, collaboration, professional development, instruction, and pilot programs.

Supporting Teachers and Enhancing Collaboration

- Administrators recognized the central role that teachers play in the success of the school and worked to build an environment where teachers felt appreciated and supported as professionals. School administrators worked in partnership with teachers to identify and solve problems related to student achievement; placed priority on the needs of classroom teachers when making budgetary and other decisions; provided teachers with the time and resources needed for instruction and planning; and responded to teachers' suggestions for school improvement.

- Administrators at these schools worked to facilitate collaboration not only among their teaching staff but campuswide. They maintained open-door policies so that teachers, students, and parents felt free to go to them at any time with ideas, questions, or concerns. They also used structures like their state-mandated school-based management teams to include a broad range of individuals in meeting the academic goals of the campus.

Fostering an Environment of Respect and Affection for Students

- Administrators, counselors, and teachers at the five high schools demonstrated great respect and affection for their students. They repeatedly expressed the importance of nurturing and caring for students and the positive effect this caring had on students' academic success. It helped students feel comfortable asking for help in class and helped teachers better understand the individual needs of students. Staff at the schools fostered this environment of respect and affection by making themselves visible and available to students; listening to student concerns and involving students in decisionmaking on campus; recognizing and celebrating student successes; and otherwise motivating students to succeed.

- At all five of the schools, administrators and teachers encouraged student involvement in extracurricular activities as a way to instill in students a sense of belonging and commitment to the school. They showed their support of extracurricular activities by going to sporting events and plays, attending band and orchestra concerts, and sponsoring student council and community service activities. The students interviewed indicated they valued these expressions of interest.

Opening Doors:
Promising Lessons from Five Texas High Schools

BACKGROUND

For over thirty years, researchers have attempted to identify high school practices that facilitate high levels of learning for all students. Numerous studies at the local, state, regional, and national levels have sought to understand the issues involved in creating and sustaining successful high schools.[7] These studies, while not identical in their findings, point to a set of common practices among high-performing schools. These practices include the development of rigorous and relevant curricula, the provision of teacher training and support, the involvement of community members and parents, and the availability of adequate financial and human resources.

The Dana Center has received many requests for information about how to improve student performance in Texas high schools. To better accommodate these requests, and to complement the existing body of research with additional practice wisdom and experiences from the field, the Center decided to study selected high-poverty high schools that have attained positive results in student achievement. Our goal was not to provide a recipe for school improvement; rather, it was to understand how these schools had reached their present levels of performance, and to identify strategies that might help other schools as they create their own responses to the challenge of improving performance and increasing educational opportunity for all students.

Each of the five schools selected for the study had a high percentage of students who qualified for free or reduced-price lunches.[8] They also had students achieving at levels above the average for the state. Some of these schools had attained Recognized status in the state's accountability system and high scores on the Texas Learning Index in reading and mathematics. Others had Algebra I End-of-Course Examination scores or Advanced Placement enrollment figures that equaled or exceeded those of their counterparts in some of the most affluent areas of the state.[9] The Texas high schools selected for this study were

- Brazosport High School, Freeport;
- Martin High School, Laredo;
- Mountain View High School, El Paso;
- PSJA[10] Memorial High School, Alamo; and
- Uvalde High School, Uvalde.

During the 1999–2000 school year, teams of three researchers made a two-day visit to each of the five campuses. This report provides background information about the research and the schools—school selection criteria, research methods, limitations of the study, and TAAS performance trends—and a findings section that summarizes key ideas and practices held in common by the five study schools. The researchers found that while most of the five schools held in common certain ideas and practices, they implemented these practices in ways that were unique to their local circumstances. Local differences notwithstanding, these practices seemed critical to the performance of the schools. This report also includes a thematic case study of each school that describes the specific strategies used at each campus to achieve student success.

School Selection Criteria

The goal in selecting schools for this study was to identify Texas public high schools that served a large percentage of low-income students and that had achieved high levels of student academic success. Eligibility for the study was limited to schools with populations of 40 percent (or more) economically disadvantaged students, classrooms serving grades 9–12, and a district enrollment of 5,000 or more students.[11] Schools with selective admissions criteria were eliminated from the pool of study candidates. Data on student performance and school demographics collected by the Texas Education Agency were used in selection of the schools.

Measures of academic performance

The researchers looked at several measures of academic performance and decided to choose schools with a state of Texas accountability rating of Acceptable, Recognized, or Exemplary[12] and strong performance on at least one of the following three indicators:

- Texas Learning Index scores in reading and mathematics,
- Algebra I End-of-Course Examination passing rates, or
- enrollment and course offerings in Advanced Placement.

For each of these indicators, the research team analyzed the most recent data available at the time of the selection process (that is, data from various assessments administered in 1998 and 1999, and AP data from 1998–99). In an effort to identify high schools that showed schoolwide achievement, the researchers looked for schools that performed well on all three of the selected academic indicators. However, they were unable to find such schools among high-poverty Texas high schools in large school districts. In the end, the research team chose schools that met at least one of these three criteria.

One of three possible selection criteria was the school's average **Texas Learning Index score in reading and mathematics.** The TLI is a scaled score[13] anchored at the spring 1994 exit-level Texas Assessment of Academic Skills, or TAAS.[14] The TAAS is first administered to high school students in grade 10. Because researchers were interested in selecting schools where students were performing above the expected minimum standards, they set as an inclusion criterion that a school's economically disadvantaged students must have an average 1998–99 TLI score of 80 on both reading and mathematics. A TLI score of 80 represents student performance considerably above the minimum passing level of 70. In choosing the schools, researchers also looked for schools where the TAAS participation rate was equal to or higher than the state average (for 1997–98), and where the TLI achievement gap between students who were economically disadvantaged and students who were not economically disadvantaged was low—five TLI points or fewer in reading and mathematics.

Another of the three possible criteria used to select the study schools was the **Texas Algebra I End-of-Course Examination**. End-of-course examinations measure student learning in certain high school courses—Algebra I, Biology, English II, and U.S. History. Specifically, the Algebra I EOC exam measures how well students understand the mathematical concepts set forth in the Texas state curriculum guidelines (known as the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, or TEKS[15]) for Algebra I. In 1997, Algebra I became the first high school–level mathematics course that Texas students must take in order to graduate. While mastery of Algebra I is a critical task for Texas students, only 45 percent of all Texas students passed the Algebra I EOC exam in spring 1999 (the year schools were

selected for this study). Only 31 percent of economically disadvantaged students passed the spring 1999 examination.

For this study, researchers selected schools where the Algebra I EOC exam passing rate for economically disadvantaged students was above the state average as reported for "all students" for the spring 1998 and spring 1999 administrations of the exam. Using data from the spring 1998 exam, researchers also looked for schools where the achievement gap in passing rates (between students who were economically disadvantaged and students who were not economically disadvantaged) was small (7 percent or below), and where Algebra I EOC exam participation rates were greater than the state average.

The third possible selection criterion was **enrollment and course offerings in Advanced Placement coursework.** Sponsored by the College Board, the Advanced Placement Program allows students to take college-level courses and exams while still in high school. In 2001, the College Board sponsored thirty-three AP courses in nineteen subject areas. In addition to evidence that suggests that taking college-level courses in high school positively affects college completion rates,[16] taking advanced courses can affect students' access to higher education in Texas. Specifically, policies such as the "Top 10 Percent"[17] rule can give students incentives for taking advanced courses.

Despite these incentives, very few high-poverty Texas high schools had students enrolled in the following AP courses in 1998–99: Biology, Calculus AB, English Language, English Literature, U.S. Government and Politics, and U.S. History. Researchers selected these courses because they are widely offered by high schools (nationwide and in Texas), traditionally have high enrollment figures, and represent courses in the four core content areas of language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. For this study, researchers looked for schools in which students were enrolled in four or more of these six AP courses, and in which the percentage of eleventh- and twelfth-grade students enrolled in at least three of the six courses exceeded the average enrollment for all public high schools in Texas. We also reviewed school enrollment data to ensure that enrollment in these courses was representative of the schools' overall student population in terms of the participation of low-income students.

Geographic and demographic diversity

Only a handful of high-poverty public high schools in Texas had TLI, Algebra I EOC, or AP figures that qualified them for inclusion in this study. Final selection was guided by a desire to ensure demographic and geographic diversity among the five study schools. In terms of demographic diversity, the researchers wanted to select schools that had diverse student populations. This was not possible, however, given the sample of schools that met the study's measures of academic success. In terms of geographic diversity, the researchers wanted to choose schools from across the state that served communities of differing sizes—both rural and urban—and were located in large districts (more than 5,000 students). With this in mind, and using the other selection criteria described above, the researchers chose the following five campuses for inclusion in the study:

- Brazosport High School was selected for its TLI scores.[18] The school is located in southeast Texas in the Gulf Coast community of Freeport—just south of the Houston metropolitan area. Freeport is known for its tradition of shipping and seafaring and its burgeoning chemical industry.

- Martin High School was chosen for its AP enrollment and course offerings. The school is located in the southwest Texas border city of Laredo. Laredo is a rapidly growing city and major point of crossing between the U.S. and Mexico.
- Mountain View High School was chosen for its TLI scores. The school is situated in far west Texas, in the desert twenty miles southeast of downtown El Paso. The school sits in the foothills of the Hueco Mountains, close to the Rio Grande.
- PSJA Memorial High School was chosen for its Algebra I EOC exam passing rates. The school is located in the far south Texas town of Alamo. Alamo is one of three communities that comprise the Pharr–San Juan–Alamo region of the Rio Grande Valley. The valley is known for its fertile agricultural lands.
- Uvalde High School was chosen for its Algebra I EOC exam passing rates. The school is in rural southwest Texas, approximately eighty-three miles west of San Antonio. It is the only high school in the Uvalde Consolidated Independent School District, which serves an area of over 1,093 square miles.

In 1998–99, one of these schools had approximately 2,000 students, one had fewer than 1,000, and the other three had student population counts somewhere in between (see Table 1).

Table 1: Enrollment and location of the five study schools (1998–1999)

School	School Enrollment	District	City	City Population
Brazosport High School	1,058	Brazosport Independent School District	Freeport	11,942
Martin High School	1,984	Laredo Independent School District	Laredo	189,021
Mountain View High School	889	Clint Independent School District	El Paso[19]	612,770
PSJA Memorial High School	1,543	Pharr–San Juan–Alamo Independent School District	Alamo	12,600
Uvalde High School	1,346	Uvalde Consolidated Independent School District	Uvalde	16,596

Sources: Texas Education Agency. Academic Excellence Indicator System, www.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/aeis; U.S. Census Bureau, 1999

Most of the schools selected for participation in the study were similar in their student demographics (see Table 2). At three of the five schools selected, 94 percent or more of the students were Hispanic,

and in another school, nearly 73 percent of the students were Hispanic. The remaining school was more representative of Texas's diverse demographics, with a student body that was 12.4 percent African American, 46.4 percent Hispanic, and 40.8 percent white. At all of the schools, over half the students were identified as economically disadvantaged (receiving free or reduced-price lunch). In fact, at three of the schools, over 86 percent of the students were identified as economically disadvantaged.

Table 2: Student demographics of the five study schools (1998–1999)

School	African American	Asian/ Pacific Islander	Hispanic	Native American	White	Economically Disadvantaged
Brazosport High School	12.4%	.3%	46.4%	.1%	40.8%	51.8%
Martin High School	.1%	.1%	98.2%	.1%	1.6%	92.2%
Mountain View High School	.9%	.3%	94.8%	.1%	3.8%	86.6%
PSJA Memorial High School	.1%	.1%	97.4%	.1%	2.3%	86.8%
Uvalde High School	.2%	.4%	72.5%	0%	26.9%	53.6%
State	*14.4%*	*2.5%*	*38.6%*	*.3%*	*44.1%*	*48.5%*

Source: Texas Education Agency, Academic Excellence Indicator System, www.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/aeis

Research Methods

The study progressed through two phases. The first phase of the study involved data collection through individual and focus group interviews, observations, and document reviews. The second phase involved data analysis and write-up, which included open coding of interview transcriptions and multiple full research team meetings to identify similarities and differences among the schools.

Data collection

During the 1999–2000 school year, teams of three researchers conducted a two-day visit to each school to gather information about its strategies for school improvement. The teams included individuals with experience and training in qualitative field research, instruction, and school administration. During the visits, the researchers interviewed selected members of the school community to try to understand how the schools had reached their current levels of performance.

They used an open-ended interview protocol[20] designed to gather information about how the school had changed over time and the practices, programs, and events that were influential in bringing about the school's achievements.

The researchers conducted individual and focus group interviews with administrators, teachers, parents, counselors, and district personnel. They also conducted focus group interviews with a wide range of students, including student leaders and students receiving instruction in general education, special education, and Advanced Placement settings.[21] The researchers audiotaped the individual and focus group interviews to ensure accurate and complete data collection. The researchers drew primarily on transcriptions of these interview and focus group discussions to construct a picture of the practices that the respondents felt influenced each school's academic performance.

In addition, the research teams observed classrooms, meetings, and other activities taking place on campus. Team members were allowed to move freely about the campus, visiting classrooms and campus activities as time permitted. Each of the teams made a point to explore the entire campus and to visit classes in each school's general education, special education, Advanced Placement, and career and technology programs. They also visited the classroom of a teacher identified as "exemplary" by the principal and, when possible, sat in on staff meetings, campus improvement team meetings, and teacher professional development activities. In these walk-throughs and visits, the researchers looked at teacher-student interactions, levels of student engagement, the types of pedagogy being used, and interactions among students, teachers, administrators, and others on campus.

Researchers also examined campus planning documents, program descriptions, meeting agendas, school budgets, achievement reports, and other documents that might shed light on the practices that contributed to the school's achievements. After the visits, researchers conducted follow-up phone interviews with district and school administrators to verify information.

Data analysis and write-up of findings

In 2000–01, each team analyzed the data for the school it visited and shared the findings with other research team members. After each school visit, everyone involved with the project convened to hear the team's initial impressions of factors that might be contributing to the school's success. Individual research team members then took responsibility for coding all transcripts for a particular school and for the analysis and write-up of findings. This work was not done in isolation, however, as the teams continued to meet throughout the analysis process to discuss and verify findings at each school. For some schools, multiple team members participated in the actual coding of transcripts and in writing up the findings.

In the spring and summer of 2000, the research teams also met on numerous occasions to discuss emerging themes across the five study schools. These meetings culminated in a two-day cross-site analysis meeting during which the team examined similarities and differences among practices at the schools. An outside consultant with extensive experience in qualitative research methods facilitated the meeting.

As a result of this process, the research team developed a common reporting structure for the case study reports on each of the five schools. Each report describes the school, its student achievement accomplishments, and some of the key practices that may have contributed to the school's overall success. The research team also developed an overview report (the Findings section of this document) on practices that appear to positively influence student academic achievement at the five study schools.

Limitations

As readers look at the findings of this study, it is important to keep in mind some limitations in the site selection process and research methodology. First among these is that researchers were unable to identify high schools in Texas that met all of the study's general and academic performance criteria. This speaks to the current state of Texas high schools that serve a high percentage of low-income students and to the need for additional attention to school improvement in secondary education.

The research team tried to identify schools that were not only meeting but surpassing basic competency standards, as measured by indicators such as the Algebra I EOC exam and the Texas Learning Index,[22] and college preparation standards, as measured by indicators such as AP enrollment and AP exam performance. The researchers were not successful. In fact, they found few high-poverty high schools with AP enrollment figures that exceeded the state average, much less schools with strong passing rates on AP exams. In the end, the research team chose schools that met at least one of the study's three academic selection criteria. Even so, the five schools chosen are among only a handful of high-poverty public high schools in Texas that had TLI scores, Algebra I EOC exam passing rates, or AP enrollment and course offering figures that qualified them for inclusion in this study.

In selecting schools for the study, the research team also tried to choose a sample of case study schools that was diverse in terms of geographic and ethnic diversity. This was not possible.[23] One of these factors limiting selection was the researchers' commitment to finding schools where student achievement figures could not potentially be attributed to selective admissions criteria. Specifically, researchers contacted some magnet schools with promising academic performance to see if their student achievement data could be disaggregated to show how students in their general education (versus magnet) program were performing. Because the schools were not able to provide such data, the researchers had to eliminate from the pool of possible candidates selected magnet schools in large urban areas such as San Antonio and Houston.

These limitations in the selection process, however, in no way diminish the accomplishments of the five schools chosen for the study and the lessons learned by their example. These schools have performed at levels equal to or higher than the average for the state and, in some instances, beyond those of their counterparts in some of the most affluent areas of the state.

In addition to these factors in the site selection process, there were some limitations of the research methodology itself. Beyond documented limitations of studies of this nature, a limitation of this particular study was the fact that researchers were able to conduct only two days of onsite interviews and focus groups. Additional visits would have allowed them to delve even more deeply into the processes and practices evident at the schools and to conduct more observations of instructional practices. That said, the researchers did conduct follow-up phone calls to gather additional data and verify findings.

TAAS Trends Among the Five Study Schools

Each of the campuses studied had attained notable success on at least one of the three selected academic indicators—the Texas Learning Index in reading and mathematics, the Algebra I EOC exam, or AP enrollment figures and course offerings. Beyond these achievements, however, all the schools had experienced marked improvement in student performance on the TAAS (see Table 3). A review of 1994 and 1999 TAAS scores reveals large increases in passing rates at four of the high schools. The remaining school opened in 1997 and, therefore, no historical data exists for 1994–96. Even though

two of the schools still performed below the average state passing rate in 1999, all four of the schools improved at rates considerably higher than the state average:

- Brazosport High School increased its passing rate on all tests from 52.2 to 83.8 percent (+31.6).
- Martin High School increased from 23.1 to 61.9 percent (+38.8).
- Mountain View High School increased from 21.6 to 79.0 percent (+57.4).
- Uvalde High School increased from 35.8 to 70.8 percent (+35.0).

The state average passing rate increased from 54.5 to 76.2 percent (+21.7) during the same time period. The schools studied showed even greater improvement on specific tests, such as the exit-level mathematics TAAS. For example, at Mountain View High School, mathematics TAAS passing rates improved by 59.9 percentage points (from 26.6 to 86.5 percent) between 1994 and 1999. The state average passing rate in mathematics increased by 23.2 percentage points (from 58.4 to 81.6.)

In the 1999–2000 school year, the year of our visits to these schools, continued improvement on student TAAS scores resulted in higher ratings within the Texas accountability system for three of the five campuses studied. PSJA Memorial and Uvalde moved from Acceptable to Recognized, and Brazosport moved from Recognized to Exemplary. Martin and Mountain View maintained their 1998–99 accountability ratings of Acceptable and Recognized, respectively.

NA=Not available
All scores reflect the campus average for all students.

Table 3: TAAS passing rates and dropout and attendance rates at the five study schools (1993–1994 and 1998–1999)

School	1998–99 School Rating	All TAAS Tests		TAAS Reading Exit Level		TAAS Mathematics Exit Level		TAAS Writing Exit Level		Campus Dropout Rate		Campus Attendance Rate	
		1994	1999	1994	1999	1994	1999	1994	1999	1994	1999	1994	1999
Brazosport High School	Recognized	52.2%	83.8%	73.3%	88.5%	57.5%	94%	79.9%	88.7%	4.7%	.3%	91.2%	94.6%
Martin High School	Acceptable	23.1%	61.9%	40.9%	74.0%	31.7%	74.0%	57.7%	84.0%	3.4%	3.6%	94.0%	94.0%
Mountain View High School	Recognized	21.6%	79.0%	51.7%	87.0%	26.6%	86.5%	56.1%	90.2%	1.7%	.6%	93.4%	94.6%
PSJA Memorial High School	Acceptable	NA	75.2%	NA	83.1%	NA	86.6%	NA	88.6%	NA	3.1%	NA	92.8%
Uvalde High School	Acceptable	35.8%	70.8%	65.9%	84.2%	38.8%	72.8%	75.9%	90.1%	4.9%	2.2%	94.9%	94.5%
State Average	*NA*	*54.5%*	*76.2%*	*77.7%*	*88.8%*	*58.4%*	*81.6%*	*82.5%*	*90.6%*	*2.6%*	*1.6%*	*95.1%*	*95.4%*

Source: Texas Education Agency, Academic Excellence Indicator System, www.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/aeis

FINDINGS: COMMON PRACTICES AMONG THE FIVE STUDY SCHOOLS

All five high schools selected for this study had high percentages of students identified as economically disadvantaged and students achieving at levels above the state average on selected academic indicators, such as the Texas Learning Index, Algebra I End-of-Course Examination, or AP enrollment. Only a handful of high schools in large districts met these selection criteria. The purpose of this study was to understand how the five schools selected had attained their current levels of student performance and to identify strategies that might help other schools in their efforts to improve. While recognizing that differences in local circumstances make it difficult for one school to replicate the successes of another, the researchers believe that it is valuable to examine successful schools and the practitioner wisdom that created them. To this end, this section represents an attempt to accurately describe the ideas and practices that seem to support student achievement at the five study schools.

Before visiting the campuses, members of the research team discussed what they expected to find at the five study schools. One of their biggest concerns was that the performance criteria used to select the study schools might lead the research effort to schools where improvement efforts were not at all systemic. At schools chosen on the basis of Algebra I EOC exam passing rates and TLI scores, researchers thought that possible improvement efforts might be limited to the schools' mathematics or English departments. Similarly, at the school chosen for its AP figures, researchers thought they might find improvement efforts limited to a small cohort of enthusiastic AP teachers and students. Upon visiting the five schools, however, the researchers were pleasantly surprised; they found that improvement efforts were not isolated to specific departments and programs, and that the schools' goals for student achievement extended beyond objectives in particular subject areas.

The researchers expected to find the practices influencing success at these schools to be different from those at the elementary school level; yet several of the findings of this study echoed findings of the Dana Center's research on high-poverty, high-performing elementary schools.[24] In particular, similarities appeared in the degree to which staff at these schools didn't accept excuses for failure, were willing to tailor their practices to the needs of students, and worked to create an environment where students felt recognized, respected, and known. Of particular note is that students described their high schools as places in which people cared about them. Unlike the experiences of many young people, students interviewed at these high schools didn't feel alienated from the learning process or alone in the many decisions they faced during high school. Students and staff alike frequently used metaphors of family and community when describing their schools.

Several complexities unique at the high school level make it more challenging for administrators and teachers to build this type of school environment and to realize their goals for school improvement: high schools' organization around departments and disciplines, their tradition of lecture pedagogy, the developmental age of the students themselves, and the reality that students have completed many years of education (yet may still be very behind in academic skills). Perhaps as a result of these factors, high schools are too often characterized by a similar set of limitations. As the authors of *The New American High School* assert,

> We see schools with a multitude of purposes, unable to focus on what really matters—student achievement. We see little attention to performance data and an inability to plan by using information. We see students, regardless of their background or aspirations, who would rather be almost anywhere but in school. . . . We see teachers who measure their success by the extent to

which they can cover the textbook, not by how much students learn. Above all, we see a system that does not see its purpose as ensuring that all students achieve at high levels.[25]

This was not the case at the five high schools studied. Researchers found that staff at the study schools held in common certain ideas and practices that seemed critical to student performance. Specifically, these schools

- set clear goals and established high expectations for student achievement;
- used data to guide instruction;
- focused on improving instruction and individual learning;
- supported teachers and worked to enhance collaboration around the academic goals of the campus; and
- fostered an environment of respect and affection for students.

Though discussed separately in this report, these ideas and practices are interconnected and interdependent. One practice cannot work as well alone as it can in conjunction with others. For example, administrators at these schools recognized that they could not expect to attain high student achievement goals without putting in place structures to improve instruction and to support the academic needs of individual students. By the same token, while the use of data is presented as a discrete practice, it actually affected nearly all the other practices. Thus, staff at the schools used student assessment data to set clear goals for student achievement, to determine areas where instruction could be improved, to focus on individual learning by identifying students who needed additional support, and to enhance collaboration around the academic goals of the campus.

At the five study schools, researchers noticed a positive and confident attitude among teachers, administrators, students, and parents. Teachers and administrators in the schools told all students that they *could* learn, and these teachers and administrators believed that such achievement was possible. Furthermore, school administrative leaders trusted that their teachers could teach so that all students could be successful. With such support from the school, it appeared that the students, too, were able to deepen their commitment to learning.

However, the road to school improvement has not been easy, and the staff at the five study schools saw their journey toward academic achievement as ongoing. Teachers, administrators, and counselors talked about the effort that school improvement requires, as well as some of the challenges they have had to confront along the way. They talked about the hours that teachers spend with students, before and after school, to address individual students' learning needs; the work necessary to align their curriculum and instructional timelines; and, in some instances, the process of building trust between faculty and administrators.

This section presents a global discussion of five ideas and practices held in common at the high schools studied. While here the focus is on common practices among the five study schools, it is important to note that each of the schools implemented these practices in ways that were unique to their local circumstances. These practices are described with examples from some of the schools.

The case study reports that follow this section describe in detail how each of the five schools responded to these challenges. They highlight strategies that proved successful for each school and

describe some of the barriers that slowed or limited progress. In some cases, the reports contrast the achievement of the school in prior years to recent improvement efforts and the current state of the school.

Setting Clear Goals and Establishing High Expectations

Each of the five schools participating in the study established high expectations for student achievement. As the principal at PSJA Memorial explained,

> I told [the staff] my vision. That our expectations are going to be high and will inspire maximum involvement in all students. We will be conscientious and objective [in order] to impart dignity and knowledge to young adults, in an effort to build minds for the future—effective communicators, critical thinkers, and lifelong learners. [We're] building a cooperative school and community [where] the individual student is first and foremost.

The staff at these schools wanted their students not only to graduate from high school but also to leave high school fully prepared to succeed in college. Importantly, this expectation was not limited to students taking the schools' most advanced courses. Educators and administrators at these schools shared the conviction that *all* students can be successful, provided they have adequate support and high-quality instruction. To fulfill their mission of preparing students for success in college, staff at these five high schools established clear, challenging, measurable goals for student achievement.

One way that these schools defined their goals was in terms of the state's accountability system—a system that takes into consideration dropout rates, attendance rates, and student achievement on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills, or TAAS. Specifically, educators at these schools modeled an expectation of excellence for their students by aiming for an Exemplary rating for the school in the state accountability system. Among other things, an Exemplary rating means that at least 90 percent of the students who took the TAAS passed all core subject areas—that is, reading, writing and mathematics. In addition, it means that at least 90 percent of each ethnic group[26] and 90 percent of students identified as economically disadvantaged passed each subject area test.

None of the schools, however, set their sights *only* on student achievement on the TAAS and on high accountability ratings. They also worked to ensure students' mastery of the curriculum as measured by the more rigorous end-of-course exams.[27] At Brazosport, for example, a veteran mathematics teacher decided that she and other teachers could use some of the instructional strategies that had proven successful with gifted students to improve the Algebra I EOC exam scores. With the support and encouragement of administrators, the mathematics department embarked upon an improvement process that involved master teaching, regular departmental collaboration, and ongoing assessment of student work. Similarly, the faculty at Uvalde decided that their first goal would be to improve their school's Algebra I EOC exam scores. They then provided teachers with both the responsibility and the resources necessary to meet this goal.

Consistent with their mission of preparing students for college, several of the study schools worked to improve the quality and quantity of their Advanced Placement course offerings. While they had not yet achieved this goal, as measured by participation and performance on the AP examinations, the schools recognized the need to focus on this area. At Mountain View, for instance, this involved working with the middle school to intensify and align the curriculum, pursuing professional development for the

instructors of AP courses, and offering special tutoring to provide students with the extra help they need to be successful on AP exams. Moreover, teachers made a point of encouraging students to take the more challenging courses. At Martin, the faculty also focused on increasing the number of students who graduate under the Recommended High School Program and the Distinguished Achievement Program.[28] Their goal was to engage all students in one of these two college-preparatory graduation plans.

While each school worked toward their achievement goals differently based on their own local circumstances, all the schools worked to ensure that their student achievement goals were both measurable and clear to everyone on campus. At these campuses, the achievement goals were publicly known and discussed; importantly, the students interviewed talked about their school's achievement goals. Moreover, educators and students believed in these goals and in the ability of the students to achieve them. As a teacher at Brazosport noted,

> [We] take the adage "All kids can learn" seriously. It's not just words, [we] believe it. You have to buy it. You have to accept it. You can have all the goals in the world and they're just words unless somebody internalizes them, and this school did.

Using Data to Guide Instruction

Administrators and teachers at the five study schools used student performance data to help meet their goals for student achievement. They spent considerable time analyzing and using assessment data to guide instruction and to inform campus decisionmaking. The schools drew heavily upon data from their school districts, which routinely collected information on how well students were learning the content described in the state curriculum guidelines, the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, or TEKS. At Uvalde and Mountain View, for example, the districts conducted assessments every six weeks. At PSJA, they conducted assessments every nine weeks. Staff at the schools drew upon their own assessments of student performance. At Martin, for example, the staff developed their own assessment tool for a baseline measurement of the reading abilities of all freshmen, and developed similar assessments in writing, biology, and U.S. history.

Campus- and district-level administrators facilitated the use of data in the classroom. One of the ways they did this was by providing comprehensive training and support in the use of data to make instructional decisions. Thus, teachers at Brazosport received comprehensive training in the district's "Eight-Step Process"[29] for continuous assessment; teachers at PSJA Memorial attended district training on how to disaggregate data; and teachers at Mountain View attended a year-long series of ten professional development workshops that incorporated performance data analysis. Staff at the school developed this series. Teachers at the study schools reported that once they had learned how to use data to plan instruction, they were better able to gauge individual student needs and schoolwide achievement trends.

Another way that campus and district administrators facilitated the use of data in the classroom was by working to ensure the timely collection, analysis, and dissemination of student assessment data. They helped teachers access this data and often provided technical assistance in the interpretation of data results, so that the academic needs of students could be immediately addressed—either in the classroom or through special tutoring and after-school programs. For instance, at Martin the school's mathematics facilitator gave teachers printouts of how students did in their classes. This allowed teachers to see

which students were having difficulty on which objectives. Similarly, at Uvalde and Brazosport, district personnel took responsibility for disaggregating student assessment data and presenting data to school leaders in a format that allowed them to see student progress at various levels (for example, by student, teacher, and grade level).

Teachers at the five study schools used student assessment data to determine the extent to which students had mastered specific academic objectives and then planned their instruction accordingly. A teacher at Brazosport, who also served as the school testing coordinator, commented,

> I have a roadmap now for each of my students. I know where they're at, and I know where I need to take them. And with the data that's provided me, now I know the most efficient way to get there.

The principal at Mountain View emphasized that the specificity and thoroughness of their data analysis has been critical to the school's success. It was not just enough to know that students were having problems with a particular TAAS objective, for example. Teachers also needed to know which instructional target within that objective was causing students difficulty.

In addition to looking at data for individual students, teachers at these schools used data to determine if an entire class was having difficulty with particular objectives. This showed teachers where to modify their teaching to enhance classroom learning. Sometimes this meant seeking outside professional development, but often it meant looking to other teachers for suggestions or in-house training. Importantly, the data provided a common language for conversations about how the school was meeting its goals and the learning needs of its students.

Thus, while many teachers and administrators might view the collection of benchmark TAAS and other performance data as time-consuming busywork, the staff at these five schools viewed the collection and analysis of student assessment data as an important tool for improving student performance and for identifying instructional strengths and weaknesses. In fact, the use of data appeared to be a motivating force, from which educators planned, implemented, and improved instruction.

Focusing on Instruction and Individual Learning

Staff at these schools worked to build on the strengths of individual students and to address areas where students needed support. They took responsibility for putting in place structures to accelerate learning so that all students could meet the challenges of high school, and they provided the extra time that some students needed to master the content. This included opportunities for one-on-one and small-group teaching. The staff at these schools actively encouraged students to participate in more rigorous classes and designed programs to help all students reach higher levels of achievement.

All the staff interviewed at these five high schools demonstrated a willingness to, as a teacher at Uvalde put it, "meet students where they are," and do what it takes to help them succeed academically. Even on the smallest campus of 889 students, this individualized approach to learning was a complex endeavor. It involved addressing a variety of student needs, including various language and socioeconomic barriers, and required a tremendous effort on the part of administrators and teachers. As a student at Mountain View noted,

> The teachers, if they notice you need help, they're here before school, they're here after school, during lunch, during the SAT class.[30] There is always help. That's what makes us better because there is no way you can't pass, because there is always help.

The schools supported individual learning in a variety of ways. Some of the schools designated time for individual instruction within the school day—structured times when students could receive academic support from teachers and peers. One example of this was the Study Tutoring and Rewards (STAR) period at Uvalde, a fifty-minute period each day during which students experiencing difficulty in class could receive tutoring from any of their teachers. In addition, some of the schools also developed before- and after-school programs to support students. For example, Uvalde and Mountain View offered daily tutoring sessions staffed by classroom teachers; and Martin created an after-school Math Homework Center designed to help ninth-grade students with algebra homework and to provide extended access to school calculators, computers, and other tools. The homework center was staffed by junior and senior students and the master teacher of mathematics.

Staff at several of these schools also worked to meet the needs of advanced learners. They expanded the number of Advanced Placement course offerings and developed special programs that would allow students to take college coursework, either at a local community college or via distance learning. At Brazosport, for instance, the staff applied for and received a distance-learning grant, which has allowed their students to take any of the AP classes offered at the other district high school. The principal, counselors, and teachers also promoted a "dual credit" program between the Brazosport Independent School District and a local community college. This creative partnership allowed high school students in the district to take college courses for credit at no cost to the student.

Administrators at these schools gave teachers the professional latitude necessary to tailor their practices to fit individual students' needs. Because of the openness and flexibility of the school administrators, teachers felt free to experiment with ideas and try new approaches without fear of failure. Teachers reported that this flexibility was particularly important when they were working with students who were able to learn more effectively through approaches beyond the realm of traditional instruction. In some of the schools, these approaches included the use of manipulatives or technological applications. For example, at Martin, students used manipulatives such as tiles to factor quadratic equations in algebra; and at Uvalde, students used new technology—state-of-the-art production equipment—for daily student broadcasts as part of a journalism class.

At these schools, teachers worked with their departments to improve their curriculum and classroom instruction; and district and school administrators supported this work by providing the resources needed to implement change. For example, the mathematics department at Uvalde took a number of steps to improve student achievement on the Algebra I EOC exam. They sent mathematics teachers to professional development workshops on how to align instruction so that the students learn mathematics concepts sequentially. They developed their own curriculum, which introduced functions based on real-life applications with mathematics that interest and motivate students—adopting approaches from several different resources rather than relying solely on the textbook for Algebra I. And they developed support structures for students who needed help with content learned in previous years. Moreover, the district and campus provide two strong incentives to teachers to support the focus on Algebra I: extra pay and small class sizes, with a limit of eighteen students per Algebra I class.

In addition to modifying what happened in the classroom, all of the schools modified their course schedules to address the academic needs of their students. The ways in which their schedules changed varied by campus. At Brazosport, for instance, the teachers developed a plan whereby ninth- and tenth-grade students could receive daily instruction in areas where they need improvement. Staff used student assessments to determine which students would be placed in the daily mathematics, reading, and writing classes. At PSJA Memorial, the staff decided to implement a block schedule where classes meet for ninety minutes each day. A course could be completed in eighteen weeks or in thirty-six weeks, depending on the content. In addition, the staff implemented a trailer course to keep algebra students from struggling through a whole year only to fail the course. These scheduling changes were accompanied by changes in instructional strategies so that the extra time spent in class was maximized to the benefit of students.

Staff at these schools also ensured a focus on instruction and individual learning by addressing schoolwide barriers to success. For example, administrators knew that it was difficult to promote individual learning if disciplinary and attendance problems plagued the school environment. The staff at each of the schools handled such problems in different ways. At PSJA and Uvalde, for example, they instituted zero-tolerance policies, reinforcing the disciplinary expectations of their school communities. At Uvalde, these policies focused on the elimination of gang activity on campus and on the reduction of student tardiness. Brazosport responded to the issue of high absenteeism by hiring a community liaison to follow up with families on student absences. Each school created its own local solutions to the challenge of addressing attendance and discipline problems.

The principals at these schools also encouraged ongoing teacher professional development designed to improve classroom instruction and meet the needs of individual students. Some of these professional development opportunities were national, some were regional, and some were local, emerging from the teachers themselves and from district initiatives.

Supporting Teachers and Enhancing Collaboration

At each of these five high schools, administrators recognized the central role that teachers played in the success of the school and worked to build an environment where teachers felt appreciated and supported as professionals. Administrators worked to enhance collaboration, not just among teachers, but also among administrators, parents, and the broader community. To this end, they tried to involve a broad range of school and community stakeholders in developing the academic goals of the campus and in campus decisionmaking.

At these schools, the principals, assistant principals, and district-level administrators provided daily support to teachers. They worked in partnership with teachers to identify and solve problems related to student achievement. They listened to teachers' professional development needs, and made the time and resources available for training; and they tried to place priority on the needs of classroom teachers when making budgetary and other decisions. At Martin, for example, the principal safeguarded money for teachers' travel to conferences, despite budgetary constraints. At Brazosport, the principal decided not to require teachers to perform any nonteaching duties, such as monitoring the halls or the cafeteria. Instead, the school's four administrators, including the principal, remained visible on campus, allowing the teachers to focus exclusively on instruction.

In addition, administrators at these schools facilitated collaboration and teamwork among their

teaching staff. They structured time for teachers to meet in departmental and cross-departmental teams and maintained open-door policies so that teachers and students felt free to go to them at any time with ideas, questions, or concerns. As a teacher at Uvalde commented, "I don't ever feel like I can't go in, share my thoughts on something—even if it's something I'm not happy with—and not be listened to, and not be respected." Similarly, a teacher at Mountain View said, "I feel comfortable that I can go to [the principal or the] two vice-principals. They're all open to suggestions, whether they're good or bad, criticisms or praises."

Teachers at the five schools attributed their students' increased achievement at least in part to the high degree of collaboration and teamwork around curriculum and instruction. At Martin, for example, teachers spoke about how they had worked as departments to develop a syllabus for every course, along with a timeline of specific learning objectives correlated to the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills curriculum guidelines. With this groundwork in place, they used their common planning periods to work together on lessons and to discuss instructional strategies. As a teacher at Martin explained, this type of collaboration was considered a factor in the school's improvement:

> Before, when we were not scoring high [on the TAAS], it was everyone to his own. I would teach something, she would teach something else—we were not coordinated. That's not what's happening now. . . . We are together now. We plan together, and we know exactly what [specific objectives] we're going to be teaching.

Collaboration around the academic goals of the campuses was not limited, however, to educators. Staff at these high schools considered everyone on campus, including the students themselves, to be partners working toward student academic success. There was open communication among students, counselors, parents, teachers, and administrators. This was evidenced in particular by the fact that parents and students felt free to voice their opinions as well as to seek guidance from faculty and the administration.

The site-based decisionmaking team was one vehicle that some of the schools used to enhance broad-based collaboration in achieving campus goals. State law requires all Texas public school campuses to develop school-based management teams that include administrators, classroom teachers, campus staff, community members, and parents. These teams proved beneficial to the five high schools studied.

Some of the schools relied on their site-based teams to make budgetary, curricular, and policy decisions. This decisionmaking process empowered everyone involved to take ownership of the education provided by the school. At Martin, for example, the site-based decisionmaking team—referred to as the Campus Education Improvement Committee—consisted of twenty-five individuals, including three students and eight community or parent volunteers. "We're the ones setting the policy and what we want to do," a member of the committee emphasized. At Martin and other schools, the committee used data to ensure that the policies and programs they put in place actually led to improved student performance.

To enhance collaboration with parents, several of the study schools made creative efforts to engage parents in the learning process. Martin combined the distribution of report cards with Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meetings in an effort to improve parent–school communication. As a result, administrators noted, the school went from having a handful of parents attending "parent nights" to

seeing as many as 500 parents attending the new "academic nights." PSJA Memorial took a different approach to improving communication with parents by sponsoring community walks, during which they distributed bilingual brochures door-to-door. The brochures explained to parents how important the TAAS was as a measure of student achievement and shared tips on how parents could help prepare their children for the assessments.

The schools also used collaboration to meet the academic goals of the campus by building strategic community partnerships. In some of the schools, classroom activities were supported by field trips and community organizations. A trip to the Santa Ana Wildlife Refuge in South Texas brought the study of ecology to life for students at PSJA, while museum trips supplemented education in the arts and humanities at Brazosport. And in communities where the possibility existed, collaborative relationships with area community colleges helped advance the schools' goals of preparing students to succeed in college.

Fostering an Environment of Respect and Affection for Students

> *We teach students; we don't teach classes.*
> —teacher at Uvalde High School

Administrators, counselors, and teachers at the five high schools demonstrated great respect and affection for their students. They repeatedly expressed the importance of nurturing and caring for students and the positive effect this caring had on students' academic success.

In turn, students at the study schools described their campuses as places where they felt cared about, recognized, supported, and involved. They talked about educators who believed in their ability to excel in school and who were available and willing to help in whatever way needed, academic or personal. As a student and teen parent at Mountain View explained,

> I have a teacher this year and I guess she really cares about me because she knows I have a baby, and I thought I couldn't go to college because I had a baby. I figured I wouldn't make it. But she's like, "No. You can make it." And I have been looking into college ever since because of her. . . . I never thought teachers cared about us, but I think they do [here] because if they're going to push us to [make] A's, then they really do care.

In fostering this environment of respect and affection, staff at these five schools did not lower their expectations for student academic performance. Instead, they viewed high expectations as an expression of caring and tried to motivate students to succeed. The principal at PSJA Memorial, for example, opened the school year with an assembly at which he told his students, "We love you, we care about you, and we want you to succeed. We expect you to succeed." The principal at Brazosport recalled giving students this message:

> You don't ever want to . . . walk across that stage and get that diploma and have one door you can go through. You want to go on and have several doors, or find the master key that you can [use to] open all the doors. [You want to] be able to choose what you want to do in life and not be limited.

Students clearly appreciated the motivation and support provided by staff, and they shared examples

of how this support helped them to progress academically. Some students talked about how staff had encouraged them to take more challenging coursework. Some students described times when a teacher or administrator helped them through a difficult personal experience that was affecting their ability to concentrate in class. Other students talked about how school staff had motivated them to succeed. As a student at Brazosport explained, "I guess that's what gives the students the extra confidence, too. Because they're like, 'If [the principal] believes in me then why can't I?' He pushes us all on."

In addition to motivating students to succeed, staff at these schools worked to build strong lines of communication with students, to ensure that they felt recognized and known. To this end, teachers and administrators made themselves visible and available to students for support. A student at Martin explained,

> This school provides an atmosphere [where] it feels like you can go and talk to somebody. You can go talk to a teacher. You can go talk to a counselor. . . . You feel better. You feel more relaxed. You can talk to somebody. You can come out and be somebody in life.

In addition, some of the schools created formal programs to facilitate student–faculty communication. The staff at PSJA Memorial, for example, created a program in which each staff member advised twenty students throughout their entire high school career. Staff met with students once a month to discuss issues such as grades and future academic or career plans.

At several of the schools, the teachers also made a special effort to recognize and celebrate student successes. These teachers talked about how it was easy to think that high school students don't need the same kind of positive feedback and encouragement given at other grade levels—but noted that they have found that this is not the case. As an assistant principal at Brazosport explained,

> Many times people think at this age group they're too old, too mature for kindness and love, but that's not true. They all still need someone to say, "You're a good kid. Keep it up."

Indeed, teachers at the schools noted that students appreciated pats on the back and even seemingly basic gestures, such as gold seals to mark perfect attendance on their report cards. At Brazosport, for example, staff members created numerous school ceremonies and policies to ensure that a wide variety of students receive recognition. Every day, birthdays were publicly announced on the morning television show and the day's honorees walked the halls sprinkled with glitter and tethered to bunches of balloons. Citizenship Awards were presented whenever a student was especially helpful to a school visitor. And the administration established a policy that teachers would contact parents of each of their students at least once a semester to say something positive about the student.

At all five of the schools, student involvement in extracurricular activities was encouraged. Staff and students alike talked about the importance of this involvement to students' sense of belonging and to their commitment to high school. A Uvalde teacher's comments about ROTC (Reserve Officer Training Corps) exemplify such feelings:

> [ROTC has] taken some of the students who would not otherwise be successful and given them a focus, or an ownership of school, so that they learn manners. They learn a lot of other things, not about ROTC but about becoming a good citizen, about being responsible, and being accountable.

Administrators and teachers at these schools showed their support of extracurricular activities by going to sporting events and plays, attending band and orchestra concerts, and sponsoring student council and community service activities. The students interviewed indicated they valued these expressions of interest.

While the staff at these schools clearly worked at getting to know their students and at helping them to succeed, their commitment went beyond that required of their jobs. The students and staff said that they enjoyed spending time together. Intentional or not, this atmosphere of camaraderie directly enhanced the instructional process—students felt comfortable asking for help in class; teachers came to better understand the individual needs of students; students became personally committed to doing well in teachers' classes; and students, teachers, administrators, and district personnel became more unified in their vision of academic success.

Plans for the Future

Even though the five high schools profiled in this study have achieved impressive goals, they are not complacent. To them, achieving high levels of success is an ongoing process. Facing change with a positive attitude, they look to the future. They plan to continue to refine their work to better meet the instructional needs of their students. Perhaps encouraged by competitive state funding aimed at strengthening student performance in the ninth grade,[31] staff at these schools discussed the need to focus further on developing support structures for incoming freshmen. Staff also plan to expand their capacity to meet the needs of Spanish-speaking parents and students. Other goals they identified as important to continued school improvement include the reduction of class sizes and the ongoing recruitment of excellent teaching staff. A teacher at Brazosport expressed the sentiments of many educators in this study: "You never arrive; you are always looking to improve."

REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the reflections and recommendations that follow, we have tried to further synthesize findings from the five high schools studied. This summary is intended as a starting place for administrators, teachers, and other school district staff to use in discussions about how to improve their own high schools.

Reflections

In this report, we discuss five practices that contribute to student performance at the high schools studied. In the reflections that follow, we summarize what we know about these practices from this study and other Dana Center studies of this nature.[32] It is important to remember that the factors that seem to support student achievement do not stand alone, and they require an array of skills in order to be successful. For example, "setting goals" is more than just the setting of goals, but the formation of vision, the communication of that vision, the building of consensus around achievement goals, the redirecting of resources toward those goals, and the continuous monitoring of progress. The following represent some reflections about the factors contributing to school success:

- **Goals** must not just be established, but communicated and internalized. By involving staff in the development of student achievement goals, leaders can build consensus and develop ownership of campus achievement goals. It is important to identify individuals responsible for carrying out these goals and to redirect resources toward their attainment. In other words, individuals need the buy-in, responsibility, and resources necessary to meet achievement goals. Additionally, progress toward these goals must be continuously monitored and reassessed.

- **Data** must be examined frequently (several times throughout each semester) and used formatively to guide programmatic and instructional decisionmaking as well as resource allocation. Teachers and other school staff need support from district and school leaders in the collection and interpretation of school and student performance data—so that they can focus their energies on how to respond most effectively to identified needs. Assessment data should be examined at various levels, including at the level of the district, school, classroom, teacher, and student as well as by educational objective and item.

- **Instruction** and what's best for **individual learning** should drive decisionmaking on campus, including the time allotted for particular classes. Instruction can be successful when teachers are encouraged to tailor their practices to the demonstrated academic needs of students and to experiment with new ideas and approaches without fear of failure. In addition, students who are experiencing difficulty in class need multiple, flexible means of getting help (inside and outside the classroom), and advanced learners need a range of high-quality advanced courses to challenge them academically. Discipline, attendance, and other issues that could pose barriers to learning must be handled by schools in a proactive and consistent fashion.

- **Support for teachers** in their role as educators and broad-based **collaboration** around the academic goals of the campus are critical to school improvement. Teachers play a central role in student achievement and are being increasingly held accountable for improvement

efforts. In light of this, teachers need the time and resources necessary for planning, curriculum alignment, instruction, and professional development. In addition, they need the collaboration and support of other teachers, administrators, students, and parents. School leaders can encourage collaboration by maintaining an open door to suggestions, questions, and concerns, and by taking advantage of existing structures (such as common teacher planning periods, cross-departmental teams, and site-based decisionmaking teams) to focus efforts around the goals of the campus.

- **Respect and affection for students** must be expressed in words, demonstrated through actions, and reinforced by campus policies and programs. Leaders can model their expectations in this regard by expressing (to students and staff) their belief in each student's ability to grow academically, and by seeking out and responding to students' questions and concerns. To this end, leaders should involve students in campus decisionmaking, and schools should set in place programs designed to meet not just the academic but also the personal needs of students.

  Student and staff involvement in extracurricular activities on campus is an important vehicle for increasing faculty–student communication and students' sense of belonging on campus—as are opportunities for one-on-one tutoring, mentoring, and academic support.

Recommendations

For school leaders:

- Set aside time to work with the entire school staff to examine current levels of student achievement and develop challenging goals for improvement.

- Maintain, and expect from school staff, a "no excuses" attitude; constantly demonstrate, in words and actions, the belief that the students will be successful in reaching the challenging goals, if provided appropriate instruction.

- Work with school staff to identify clear and measurable steps that will help attain the school's student achievement goals. Identify individuals responsible for carrying out these steps and provide them with the support and resources they need to be successful.

- Monitor progress toward achievement of the school's improvement goals, and work with staff to assess the effectiveness of the strategies being used.

- Ensure that staff professional development activities are focused on improving student achievement, and on improving the capacity of teachers to provide excellent instruction.

- Build the capacity of school staff to use data to make instructional decisions. Provide training in the use of student assessment data; make sure that teachers receive the assessment data they need to improve instruction throughout the semester; and identify individuals who can provide technical assistance in the interpretation of assessment results.

- Model the meaningful assessment of student achievement data. Use student assessment and other data (such as attendance rates and enrollment figures) to make programmatic, staffing, and other administrative decisions.

- Set in place practices that allow teachers to focus on the learning needs of students and on improving classroom instruction. These may include practices that relieve teachers of extraneous duties such as photocopying, compiling, and disaggregating student assessment data, and monitoring student behavior outside the classroom.

- Work with staff to establish schedules, advanced classes, concurrent enrollment opportunities, and support programs to meet the individual learning needs of students—including multiple, flexible ways that students can get help outside the classroom. Assess the efficacy of these services on a regular basis, and experiment with alternative strategies if services prove not to be effective.

- Encourage teachers to tailor their classroom practices to the needs of students and to try new ideas and approaches without fear of failure.

- Make the demonstrated needs of classroom teachers a priority in budgetary decisionmaking and resource allocation. Provide teachers with the time and resources needed for planning, curriculum alignment, instruction, and professional development.

- Ensure that school staff has the time to work together collaboratively in departmental and cross-departmental teams, as well as in vertical teams with other schools.

- Maximize your site-based decisionmaking team to foster broad-based collaboration around the academic goals of the campus, including the active participation of parents and students.

- Be visible and accessible to teachers, parents, and students. Listen and convey respect for them and for their perspectives.

- Recognize students for their achievements in both public and personal ways, and demonstrate respect for students' ideas and opinions by actively seeking their advice and responding to their suggestions, questions, and concerns.

- Encourage student and staff involvement in extracurricular activities and demonstrate support of such activities by attending sporting competitions, plays, concerts, academic competitions, and other events.

For district leaders:

- Support school leaders by providing them with the support, resources, and data needed to develop and attain challenging school achievement goals. Work in partnership with school leaders to identify what resources are necessary to meet these goals.

- Gather student assessment data at several points during the semester; provide this data to schools quickly and in an easy-to-use format (including by class, teacher, and student); sponsor training in the use of data to make instructional decisions; and identify individuals to provide onsite technical assistance to school leaders.

- Work in partnership with schools to develop strategies for addressing identified student needs, and give school leaders the flexibility in school scheduling and resource allocation necessary to implement these strategies.

- Provide support for teachers to work together collaboratively across schools, such as in vertical planning teams, and for teacher professional development and training focused around improved instruction.

- Help school leaders gain the collaboration and support of parents and the larger community, including area community colleges.

ENDNOTES

[1] The TLI is a scaled score anchored at the spring 1994 exit-level Texas Assessment of Academic Skills, or TAAS. The TAAS test is first administered to high school students in grade 10, and the TLI describes a student's performance above or below the passing standard of 70. For more information, visit the Texas Education Agency website at www.tea.state.tx.us/student.assessment/resources/guides/tli.html. End-of-course examinations measure student learning in certain high school courses—Algebra I, Biology, English II, and U.S. History. Specifically, the Algebra I EOC exam measures how well students understand the mathematical concepts set forth in the Texas state curriculum standards (known as the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, or TEKS) for Algebra I.

[2] The Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) is a criterion-referenced test given to students in grades 3 through 8 and grade 10. The test is administered during the spring semester of each school year. In grade 10, the test measures student achievement in reading, writing, and mathematics. The grade 10 test is known as the exit-level test; students are required to pass it in order to qualify for graduation from high school.

[3] This was used as one of the criteria because the overwhelming majority of Texas students are served by districts of over 5,000 students.

[4] As part of the Texas public school accountability system, each school receives an annual rating that takes into consideration their students' performance on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) and the school's dropout rate. Among other things, an Exemplary rating means that at least 90 percent of the students who took the TAAS passed all core subject areas—that is, reading, writing, and mathematics. In addition, it means that at least 90 percent of each ethnic group and 90 percent of students identified as economically disadvantaged passed each subject area test. A Recognized rating means that at least 80 percent of the school's students and each student subgroup passed the test. The corresponding passing rate for an Acceptable rating is at least 50 percent.

[5] For each of these indicators, the research team analyzed the most recent data available at the time of the selection process (that is, data from various assessments administered in 1998 and 1999, and AP enrollment data from 1998–99).

[6] Brazosport was selected for its TLI scores but also met the study's Algebra I EOC academic criteria.

[7] Jenkins, 1996; Lightfoot, 1983; Lipton and Oakes, 1990; Marsh and Coding, 1999; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1975, 1996; National Commission on the Reform of Secondary Education, 1973; Saylor and Smith, 1971; Sizer, 1985, 1992, 1996.

[8] The percentage of students who receive free or reduced-price lunches is commonly used as a measure of poverty in public schools.

[9] Information about these performance measures and the geographic context of each school is included in the section entitled School Selection Criteria.

[10] PSJA stands for Pharr–San Juan–Alamo, three communities in the Rio Grande Valley.

[11] This was used as one of the criteria because the overwhelming majority of Texas students are served by districts of over 5,000 students.

[12] As part of the Texas public school accountability system, each school receives an annual rating that takes into consideration their students' performance on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) and the school's dropout rate. Among other things, an Exemplary rating means that at least 90 percent of the students who took the TAAS passed all core subject areas—that is, reading, writing, and mathematics. In addition, it means that at least 90 percent of each ethnic group and 90 percent of students identified as economically disadvantaged passed each subject area test. A Recognized rating means that at least 80 percent of the school's students and each student subgroup passed the test. The corresponding passing rate for an Acceptable rating is at least 50 percent.

[13] The TLI score describes a student's performance above or below the passing standard of 70. This score represents the same level of achievement from year to year, and thus can be used to measure and compare a student's academic growth. In other words, if a student's TLI score was 70 for two consecutive years, the student would be considered to have made a year's academic progress. For more information, visit the Texas Education Agency's website at www.tea.state.tx.us/student.assessment/resources/guides/tli.html.

[14] The Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) is a criterion-referenced test given to students in grades 3 through 8 and grade 10. The test is administered during the spring semester of each school year. In grade 10, the test measures student achievement in reading, writing, and mathematics. The grade 10 test is known as the exit-level test; students are required to pass it in order to qualify for graduation from high school.

[15] The Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, or TEKS, are curriculum guidelines set by the state of Texas. They articulate what over four million Texas children must know and be able to do in each subject area (mathematics, English language arts and reading, and so on). For more information, visit the Texas Education Agency website at www.tea.state.tx.us/teks.

[16] Adelman, 1999.

[17] In accordance with Texas Education Code §51.803, students are admissible to Texas universities as first-time freshmen if they graduate in the top 10 percent of their class from an accredited Texas high school. In their class ranking systems, Texas high schools may reward the completion of advanced coursework by awarding extra points that raise the student's overall grade point average.

[18] Brazosport was selected for its TLI scores but also met the study's Algebra I EOC academic criteria.

[19] While its street address is in El Paso, Mountain View is actually located in a small community twenty miles southeast of downtown.

[20] Readers interested in a copy of the protocol may contact the STAR Center, located at the Charles A. Dana Center at The University of Texas at Austin (www.utdanacenter.org).

[21] Using an informed-consent form, researchers obtained consent from each respondent prior to his or her participation. In the case of student respondents, the researchers obtained the students' consent and that of their parents.

[22] Performance measures related to the TAAS, such as the TLI, are not indicators of "high" academic performance in high school. Students take the exam in tenth grade, and it measures basic competence in reading and mathematics at a eighth-grade level. Similarly, while the Algebra I EOC exam measures content mastery, Algebra I is still the entry-level high school course offered in Texas.

[23] Most of the schools included in the study are located in border communities, and most have student populations that are predominately Hispanic.

[24] Since 1996, the Dana Center has conducted three studies of high-performing, high-poverty elementary schools as well as a study of successful Texas school districts with a large percentage of low-income students. (Charles A. Dana Center, 1999; Lein, Johnson, and Ragland, 1996; Ragland, Asera, and Johnson, 1999; Skrla, Scheurich, and Johnson, 2000)

[25] Marsh and Coding, 1999, p. 5.

[26] The ethnic groups identified by the accountability system are African American, Hispanic, White, Native American, and Asian American/Pacific Islander.

[27] End-of-course examinations measure student learning in certain high school courses—Algebra I, Biology, English II, and U.S. History. Specifically, the Algebra I EOC exam measures how well students understand the mathematical concepts set forth in the Texas state curriculum guidelines (known as the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, or TEKS) for Algebra I.

[28] Beginning in 1997–98, to receive a high school diploma in Texas, a student must complete the requirements of the Minimum High School Program, the Recommended High School Program, or the Distinguished Achievement Program, as well as the testing requirements for graduation. The Minimum program requires the completion of at least 22 credits and is not considered a college-preparation program. The Recommended program is the 24-credit college-preparation program recommended by the Texas State Board of Education. Also a 24-credit program, the Distinguished Achievement Program requires the satisfaction of four measures, which may include an original project or research, a score of three or above on a College Board Advanced Placement examination, completion of college-level courses, and/or high scores on the Preliminary SAT/National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test.

[29] The "Eight-Step Process" lays out eight simple steps that guide teachers' use of data to evaluate students' needs, plan instructional timelines, assess achievement, redirect teaching, maintain progress, and monitor student and teacher outcomes. First developed by an elementary school teacher in the district, the process proved effective in raising student performance on the state assessment, and has since been promoted as a districtwide strategy.

[30] The school set aside thirty minutes each day to help students address areas of academic need. After students pass the TAAS, this time is used to help them prepare for the college admissions process, including preparation for the SAT and ACT college entrance exams.

[31] The Ninth Grade Success Initiative was funded by the Texas Legislature in 1999 to provide resources that could support high schools in decreasing dropouts by preventing academic failure by ninth graders.

[32] Charles A. Dana Center, 1999; Lein, Johnson, and Ragland, 1996; Ragland, Asera, and Johnson; 1999; Skrla, Scheurich, and Johnson, 2000.

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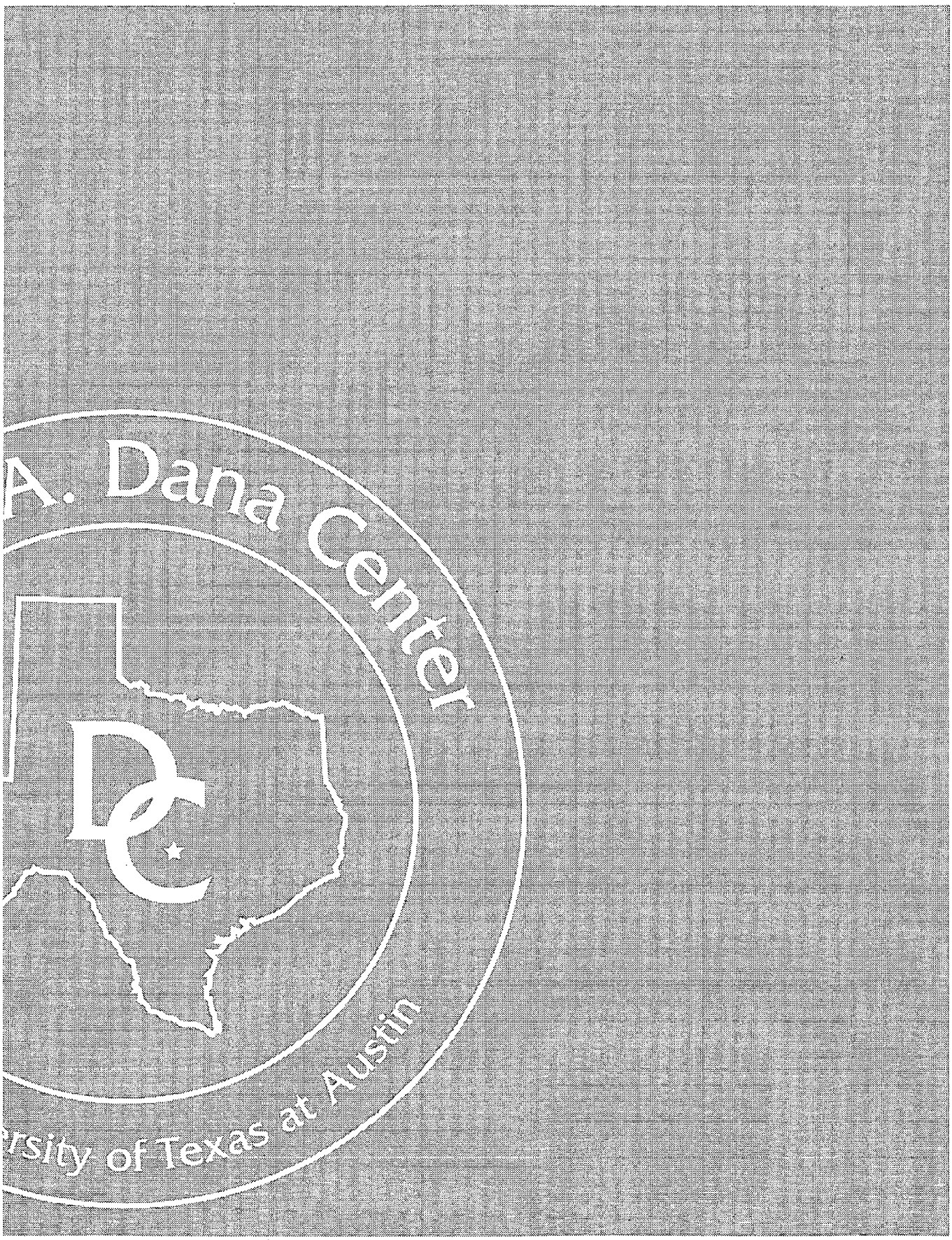
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