

Strategic Response to Middle School Performance Report

Key Challenges

The Middle School Level Performance Report points to a number of challenges at the middle school level in Austin ISD.

- **Achievement gaps persist between student groups** on an array of objective measures, including the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), and the Technology Literacy assessment.
- **TAKS results for science and social studies vary widely.** Of the 17 middle school campuses in AISD, five (Pearce, Martin, Webb, Dobie and Burnet) would not have met the 2007 panel recommended passing standard in science. In social studies, four campuses (O. Henry, Bailey, Murchison and Small) met or exceeded the 90 percent passing rate necessary for exemplary status, while three campuses (Martin, Pearce and Burnet) did not meet either the 2007 or 2008 standard. With 8th grade science to be used in determining ratings in summer 2008, this is an area where close monitoring and support will be essential to the success of all middle schools relative to next year's state accountability ratings.
- There are several instances where **student performance seems to plateau or decline when further improvement is both possible and desirable.** For example, while 7th and 8th grade performance on certain subjects in TAKS showed improvement, other measures show a noticeable lack of incremental improvement (particularly English proficiency among English Language Learners after their third year in U.S. schools).
- **There are inconsistencies in student performance across subject areas.** Middle school mathematics appears to be a particular area of focus for improvement in terms of student passing rates as well as TAKS scores. The data illustrate wide variability within schools as well as between them, which, in turn, appears to be associated with schools missing Exemplary or Recognized state accountability system ratings.
- **There are inequities in discipline rates among student groups.** Higher proportions of African American students are referred for discretionary removals than white students.
- **Complex relationships exist** between such factors as (a) student and staff perceptions of climate and student performance on state tests, (b) teacher experience or turnover and student performance on state tests, and/or (c) principal turnover and student achievement.

- **Turnover among middle school principals is both high and unstable.** From year to year over the last five years, the number of principals who have left their positions varied remarkably. Overall, just under half of all middle schools experienced no turnover during the last five years, and almost a third of all middle schools had three or more different principals assigned over the five-year period.

Strategic Response

A review of middle school data reveals several areas that must be addressed to better support student learning. The following information highlights initiatives and improvement efforts for the middle level education program. The information is divided into three areas: intellectual development and achievement; personal, social, and cultural development; and equitable opportunities and outcomes. Our two district-wide values that 1) high standards are set for all students and that 2) effort creates ability under gird our improvement initiatives.

Intellectual Development and Achievement

Identify and Implement Academic Best Practices

Schools use the district's three-tiered intervention model to ensure that teaching in the classroom is relevant and challenging and provides for active and differentiated instruction. For students who need additional interventions and support, each school provides specific, focused and targeted interventions.

These interventions include research-based practices, beginning with analysis of individual student data from district benchmark assessments, as well as state assessments (TAKS) that are now available in the Austin Instructional Management System (AIMS). Data analysis identifies the specific instructional focus for the intervention that will be provided at each school.

Multiple learning and teaching approaches provide for individually-targeted interventions. Additional instructional time for students who have not passed the state assessments will be provided in the form of double-block classes for English Language Arts and/or mathematics. For reading support, the READ 180 program will be provided. This program has shown evidence of success for both English Language Learners (ELLs) and native English speaking students. Additional time in mathematics will allow for increased individual attention to the specific skills students may need to learn. The district is piloting a new mathematics intervention program with both English and Spanish versions that holds promise as a successful intervention tool as well. After-school tutorials and Saturday academies will be available for students, depending on specific circumstances and needs, especially in the areas of science and social studies.

Instructional specialists will work with subject area teacher teams in professional learning communities. They will support planning for common lessons and common assessments for the Individual Planning Guides (IPGs), monitor lesson implementation and provide for de-briefing and discussion among teachers about how to improve lesson design and delivery.

Summer literacy and mathematics academies will be available for students who need Tier III support. These academies are designed to target specific areas of TAKS

that are needed to ensure students are successful in the state-mandated Student Success Initiative (SSI), which requires students to pass both the reading and mathematics TAKS assessments in order to be promoted to 9th grade. Summer programs are provided for rising 6th and 8th grade students.

For students with advanced academic needs that require depth and complexity in teaching the curriculum, the Advanced Planning Guides (APGs) are available in all schools, with teachers trained in the AP Strategies program that supports the Pre-AP curriculum.

Administer Six Weeks Tests

Six Weeks Tests are administered at certain campuses to support student learning. The tests are aligned to the IPGs, specific to the district's pacing guide, and scored via the AIMS. AIMS provides a variety of ways to analyze the data and create reports that assist teachers in identifying areas of need for their students. Principals and teachers use this information to gauge student performance, plan intervention strategies, assess impact of interventions, and plan for professional development.

Identify Best Practices for English Language Learners (ELLs)

The program for ELLs at middle school focuses on instructional strategies for students and professional development for teachers. English Language Learners need a classroom environment that fosters rapid second language acquisition, acculturation, and enhancement of self-esteem. The English as a Second Language (ESL) class focuses on developing adolescent students' abilities to read, write, and discuss academic texts in English in rigorous academic courses.

By focusing on key processes and student engagement in interactive tasks, ELLs are prepared for high-quality work and academic rigor. New concepts and tasks need to be contextualized and taught explicitly, and teaching and learning should focus on substantive ideas that are organized cyclically. All lessons should have a language and context objective incorporated into the grade level TEKS being taught. Students will access content through accommodations and specialized instructional strategies from teachers who are ESL certified and/or who have received sheltered instruction training. Middle school teachers receive professional development in their content area with strategies to differentiate instruction for ELLs.

Strengthen ELLA Program at Webb Middle School

The purpose of the English Language Learners Academy (ELLA) is to provide an intensive English Language program for students in 6th – 8th grade. This program allows first year immigrant students to accelerate their knowledge of subject matter, develop English language skills, prepare for the TAKS test, increase student achievement, prepare to be successful in mainstream classrooms, and diminish the dropout rate of 8th graders going into 9th grade. The international group of teachers at ELLA use Sheltered English Strategies and alter their lesson plans to accommodate student needs.

Regularly Review Performance of Academically Unacceptable Campuses

The Superintendent, Chief Academic Officer, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and the Associate Superintendent for Middle Schools meet monthly to review

the performance of Academically Unacceptable campuses. Interventions are discussed and implemented as appropriate.

Conduct Curriculum Team Meetings

The Associate Superintendent for Middle Schools, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and the Curriculum Team meet every two weeks to discuss the student performance at Academically Unacceptable campuses. Issues regarding curriculum, instruction, assessment, resources, professional development, and staffing are discussed and improvement strategies are developed.

Continue to Develop Vertical Team Strategies

All campus principals meet with their vertical teams regularly to discuss program continuity and improvement. Moreover, each vertical team plans for transition activities for their students from elementary to middle school and from middle school to high school.

Personal, Social and Cultural Development

Establish 6th Grade Clusters

Sixth grade clusters identify the youngest group of students for special consideration in recognition of their need to acclimate to the demands of middle school. Depending on the particular facility, clusters separate 6th graders physically from the remainder of the student body either through a separate wing, floor or portable building. In addition clusters provide for a dedicated 6th grade team of teachers and other staff, allowing for an *inviting, supportive and safe environment*. They also foster *meaningful relationships and learning*. The clusters, while creating a supporting environment for 6th graders, allow for students to access school-wide elective choices such as band and languages other than English.

Provide Additional Dropout Prevention Specialists

Three campuses, Pearce, Mendez, and Kealing, received dropout specialists this year. The main responsibilities for dropout specialists include reviewing dropout data regularly, supporting intervention plans for students at-risk of dropping out of school, conducting home visits, acquiring support services for students and families, and collaborating with educational support staff on campuses.

Create Additional Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) Classes

The AVID program, which focuses on college and career awareness, takes a group of students in the academic middle of their class, places them into a rigorous course of study and supports them by giving them a daily elective that provides academic support.

Introduce Where Everybody Belongs (WEB)

WEB is a middle school transition program that welcomes 6th and 7th graders and makes them feel comfortable throughout the first year of their middle school experience.

Student-led camps occur in the summer and ongoing activities occur throughout the school year to continue positive relations among students.

Conduct Leadership Conferences for African-American and Hispanic Youth

These leadership conferences bring community members, parents, school staff, and students together for the purpose of providing youth with leadership and mentoring opportunities.

Increase Positive Behavior Support (PBS)

Additional local funding and the Safe School Healthy Student grant awards will enable staff to provide additional support and to employ enhanced methods of evaluation to give more focused feedback to campuses.

Encourage Parent Engagement

All principals reviewed their campus performance at the beginning of the year with parents during Back to School and Open House activities. All campuses are also expected to have a functioning PTA by the beginning of the next school year.

Equitable Opportunities and Outcomes

Hire Executive Principals

To support instructional leadership, Executive Principals were placed at campuses needing additional support and assistance. Executive Principals work directly with Campus Principals under the direction of the Associate Superintendent. The Executive Principal reviews the systems in place to support teaching and learning and guides the Principal in establishing systems that are needed.

Provide Professional Development for Teachers

In order to ensure that the teachers have the necessary professional skills and knowledge to support the academic and relationship needs of these students, a weeklong summer professional development academy was provided for new teachers. Teachers were introduced to research-based strategies in language arts, mathematics, science and social studies; the Principles of Learning; and best practices to support English Language Learners as they learn the academic content defined in our standards-based curriculum.

Continue to Hold Sessions with Campus Principals

The Associate Superintendent for Middle Schools meets monthly with all campus principals to review student data, discuss improvement efforts, and determine plans for additional interventions. In addition, the Associate Superintendent for Middle Schools will conference three times individually with each principal to set campus goals, monitor student progress, and evaluate campus effectiveness. Principals also have the opportunity to bring topics for discussion and areas of concern relating to middle level education.

Provide Incentives for Staff

As part of the district's proposals for initiating incentives, designated staff at selected campuses will receive retention bonuses, rewards for student academic

performance and stipends for the additional work that will be required to support students throughout their middle school years. Other salary incentive programs are designed to attract teachers to teach specific subjects. These include signing supplements for math, science and special education teachers.

Other incentives include compensating middle school principals for additional workdays to ensure that AISD middle school principal compensation is competitive with surrounding school districts.

Offer Professional Development for Assistant Principals

The Middle School Assistant Principal Development Series offers a structured approach to training Assistant Principals in school leadership so that these professionals will be prepared to assume leadership positions as middle school principals. The training covers topics such as, working effectively with parents and community members, student discipline, curriculum, data analysis and use of data for instructional purposes and addressing the needs of special populations.

Enhance Middle School Staff Recruitment and Retention Efforts

The AISD has stepped up its efforts to attract experienced middle school teachers and administrators by recruiting and screening candidates earlier in the year. Principal candidates are screened through the Principal Assessment Center to help the district in its efforts to give serious consideration to the most qualified candidates. The District is also exploring ways to attract more experienced teachers to low-performing schools. Specific programs include the Early Bird Signing Supplement for High Needs Schools and Moving Expenses for High Needs Schools.

The district is also recruiting aggressively both internally and externally to provide leadership training and to promote middle school teachers who wish to become assistant principals and principals.