
THE FUTURE OF AUSTIN'S HIGH SCHOOLS

**A Discussion of and Recommendations about
Four Key Issues from a Study Conducted by
Doctoral Students, Faculty and Staff from**

**The University of Texas at Austin's
COOPERATIVE SUPERINTENDENCY PROGRAM**

**For The Austin Independent School District's
OFFICE OF HIGH SCHOOLS**

**Juanita Garcia, Ph.D.
The University of Texas, Austin**

**Robert Donmoyer, Ph.D.
The University of San Diego**

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What to do about inadequate high schools is a problem that confronts virtually all school districts—certainly all urban school districts—within the United States. Indeed, one would be hard pressed to identify any urban school district that could be considered exemplary in the area of high school education. Only a handful of districts, in fact, have tackled the issue of high school reform in any substantial way, and it is far too early at this point to assess the success or failure of these reform initiatives.

WHY ARE HIGH SCHOOLS SO PROBLEMATIC?

High schools are problematic for a number of reasons, including the following:

- In most places—certainly in most urban districts—high schools are large, impersonal institutions. The size of most urban high schools virtually guarantees that high schools are the antithesis of a place where “everybody knows your name.” In most high schools, for example, creating schedules for large numbers of students is such a complex and arduous task that it must be computerized, and computers can never know the quirks and possibilities of individual students (or the strengths and limitations of individual teachers).
- People in large, impersonal organizations tend to feel disempowered, and disempowered individuals are seldom motivated to perform at anything close to peak capacity. Ever since the Rand Corporation's study of educational innovation was published in the 1970s, study after study has confirmed the importance of involving teachers in both the pre-planning and the ongoing modification and improvement of reform initiatives, yet it is difficult to get people involved in ways that are more than procedural display when an organization is as large as most high schools are. Indeed, it is difficult for teachers in most high schools to be heard even when they have valuable information to share about the unintended consequences of a particular reform initiative. Instead, both legitimate and self-serving complaints all too often are lumped together under the label *teacher resistance* and teachers, in response, adopt what might be referred to as a Kris Kristofferson (i.e. a “help me make it through the day”) approach to teaching.
- Large organizations also require task differentiation and specialization. In and of itself, specialization is not a problem, but, if the whole is to be greater (or at least not less than) the sum of the various specialized parts, careful coordination and extensive communication are required. All too often in the large and complex (and exceedingly busy) world of high schools, communication is limited and, consequently, coordination is problematic. Different members of a school's administrative and support services teams may even be working at cross purposes. In one high school in which we have worked (which, incidentally, is not in Austin), the guidance program has been counseling large numbers of students to take Advanced Placement (AP) English in 12th grade, a college-level course that requires that students analyze and interpret highly sophisticated pieces of

literature; simultaneously, the district's curriculum department is requiring that teachers in the prior grades teach a functional skills curriculum that intentionally downplays the analysis (and even the reading) of literature.

- The coordination problem is exaggerated by a number of interrelated characteristics of American culture including: (a) a tendency to throw programs at problems without first carefully analyzing the problem and (b) an aversion to thinking in terms of trade-offs and to making the hard choices required to insure success. In American schools, especially American high schools, these tendencies have resulted in an unfocused, cluttered curriculum, the dissipation of resources, and morale problems among teachers and administrators who are expected to implement what one Austin school employee referred to as “the reform de jour.”

By contrast, the handful of secondary schools that tend to be cited nationally as models of exemplary practice normally are highly focused on achieving a manageable number of goals, and they make hard choices so that resources are aligned with goal attainment. One of these schools, on the west coast—a district-sponsored charter school geared to promoting academic achievement—for instance, decided not to participate in the district's interscholastic sports program and to offer a much less costly inter-murals program instead. The school used the dollars it saved to dramatically reduce class size and reduce the teacher-student ratio. Few high schools would even consider, much less make, this sort of hard choice, yet in trying to have something for everyone, they often achieve very little.

- There is another tendency in United States culture that is a kind of corollary to the two cultural characteristics just discussed: the tendency of Americans to embrace quick-fix, relatively superficial solutions. It is easy, for instance, to simply call for the elimination of Career and Technology Education from high schools and declare that all high school students will go to college, but it is difficult and complicated (and, quite possibly, impossible) to prepare all students to actually succeed in higher education or even to convince some students to embrace this goal as their own. Still, we have seen educational leaders and boards of education glibly implement the easy goal without even attending to the more difficult questions.

For example, it is easy to push large numbers of students into AP classes—again a strategy that is being embraced by high schools and urban school districts throughout the country—but much more difficult to carefully rethink the K-12 curriculum and re-culture schools at all levels so students will be prepared academically *and psychologically* to do what is supposed to be exceedingly rigorous AP work. It is even more difficult to reallocate resources in ways that will support students being prepared to skip over college preparatory courses and begin taking what are, in essence, challenging college-level courses during the high school years. One indication that most high schools and districts have taken

only the easy way out is the reluctance of a number of prestigious universities to award college credit for AP coursework even when students score well on the AP exam.

- There also are political reasons for high schools' problems, and politics get played out at both the micro and the macro levels. At the micro level, for example, it is not unusual for a district's most experienced and best paid (and presumably its most skilled) teachers to teach in schools with the least challenging students and for the schools whose students most need skilled instructors to be filled with the district's most inexperienced instructors. The same pattern also plays out *within* school buildings where the school's most experienced teachers often get to teach small sections of advanced (and highly motivated) students while the normally very large and sometimes unruly freshman-level classes are assigned to "the new kids on the block."

These and other inequities at the micro level, of course, simply mirror inequities within the larger society, and America's schools have been justifiably criticized for being guided by self-fulfilling prophecies that perpetuate and legitimate the less than level playing field that exists beyond the schoolhouse door. On the other hand, it is unreasonable to expect schools alone to compensate for and totally eliminate social inequities. Yet critics of urban education often do, indeed, often dream this impossible dream, and because high schools are the last stage in the K-12 process and the place from which students exit into either higher education or the world of work, they are especially vulnerable to being judged by unreasonable expectations.

The items above represent only a partial list of reasons why America's high schools are in trouble. Suffice it to say that the problems are both complex and widespread. Given these complexities and the widespread nature of the problems, the Austin Independent School District is to be commended for tackling the issue of high school reform. As a first step in the reform process, the AISD Office of High Schools commissioned a study, which this document draws from, conducted by the instructors and doctoral students in the University of Texas's Cooperative Superintendency program. These doctoral students hold superintendency and other administrative positions in districts across Texas.

ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS STUDY

This study was quite modest in terms of funding. Yet because the district's Office of High Schools was able to leverage the talents of the 22 University of Texas Superintendent Fellows (i.e. a group of current and future superintendents enrolled in one of the University of Texas' most selective doctoral programs) and the faculty and staff associated with the Superintendency Program, in exchange for providing a real-world and highly beneficial learning experience for the students, the study was much more extensive than the funding level would suggest.

The Superintendent Fellows, in fact, interviewed 436 individuals, either individually or in small focus groups. The pool of interviewees included administrators (other than school principals), teachers, students and parents from each of the district's twelve high schools. Interviews focused on identifying interviewees' perceptions about what currently was working and what was problematic about high school education in the district. Interviewees also were encouraged to articulate specific ways the current situation could be improved and how high school in the district could be made better. Four hundred and five of the 436 interviewees also filled out questionnaires that netted quantitative data that were analyzed and used to triangulate the analysis of the qualitative interview data.

In addition to the interviews conducted by the Superintendent Fellows, faculty and staff members associated with the program conducted additional interviews with the principals of the district's twelve high schools. These interviews focused on the same topics addressed in the Superintendent Fellows' interviews. Finally, an additional round of interviews with the principals, selected teachers, and district officials were conducted by the authors of this report. The purpose of this last round of interviews was twofold: (1) to check both the accuracy of the summaries of the information that had been generated and the viability and appropriateness of selected recommendations generated from these findings, and (2) to determine what changes, if any, had been made in district policy in the areas the report focuses during the several month period between the time the data were collected and the time that this report was written. All totaled, more than 500 individuals were interviewed for the study.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

The Superintendent Fellows provided the district a preliminary report that includes a wide array of findings, everything from findings about extensive support for arts programs in the district's high schools to findings about the perceived need for pregnancy prevention initiatives. Because focus is no less important in acting on the findings of a report than it is in running a successful high school, in this document we will highlight only four issues uncovered in the work described above. In selecting which issues to discuss, we were guided by a decision to focus on district-level rather than school-level issues and on issues that almost certainly needed to be attended to if individual schools are to be positioned to make the sorts of modifications at the school-site level that are required for students to be successful.

Before discussing the four issues we selected, we need to acknowledge two things. First, we want to acknowledge that the Superintendent Fellow's report on which this report is based documents many positive perceptions among interviewees about such things as the quality and dedication of the people who work in Austin's high schools and the district's central office, the quality of the district's core curriculum, the variety of the support services that the district provides, the relative safety of the school environments, and the diversity of the student and community populations. Because space is limited, however, and because this report is being prepared for an audience that is about to embark on developing a blueprint for reform, our focus here will be on perceived problems with the district's current approach to high school education.

Second, although those interviewed were asked to envision new ways of approaching high school education, this request mostly netted findings that were unoriginal, unworkable, or too vague to be useful. This result should not be surprising. Interviewees, after all, had considerable expertise about what schools are currently like and what is and is not working within them; indeed, from their various vantage points as parents, students, teachers and administrators, they have been experiencing what is happening in the district's high schools on a daily basis, often for a large number of years. They have not, however, had enough opportunity to step back and reflect on what might be done differently.

Consequently, the recommendations represent *our* best responses to the problems that the interview data identify. These recommendations are based on our knowledge of the literature on high school reform, our experience working in and knowledge of a number of school districts throughout the nation, and reflection. This report benefits from that reflection time, and we acknowledge the support of the two universities that provided it.

FOUR KEY ISSUES

The following four issues appeared to be especially significant: (a) the need to redefine leadership roles; (b) the need to support English Language Learners and other students with special needs; (c) the need to relieve tension at the school level resulting from attempting to accommodate the unique needs of students while adhering to district policies and mandates; and (d) the need to improve communication and relationships. Each of these issues, as well as recommendations about how the district might respond to them, will be discussed in the remainder of this section.

**Issue # 1:
The Need to Redefine Leadership Roles**

Overview of this Issue

Some of the most dramatic findings related to administrator roles and relationships. Interestingly, the most troubling findings did not come from teacher, counselors, or assistant principals. For the most part, supervisees and parents were complimentary and viewed high school administrators, in general, and principals, in particular, as having very difficult jobs. There were a handful of critical comments, of course—for example, comments related to some administrators’ limited availability—but the number of negative comments from subordinates and parents was surprisingly small. Indeed, the most troubling findings about various administrator roles came from the administrators themselves.

Problems with the principal role. A consistent theme among the district’s twelve high school principals, for example, was the loneliness and feelings of isolation associated with the role. One principal, for example, said the following:

The Austin Independent School District culture does not provide for mentoring or support. If you confide in somebody or ask someone...tell me how to handle this, it will show up on your growth plan or come back at you as a negative, you’ll get written up for it. We’ve had probably seven fights since school started...This is very disturbing...important to me but if I call downtown or say, you know gang, I’m having an increase in fights and in fact, I asked for additional security before school started and was denied. If I come back and say I’ve had seven fights and I’m submitting my request for additional security, it will be that I don’t have control over my school. And so this is the environment that I find myself in. Who do I ask for help or support?...Really, there’s nobody because it comes back to you in a negative manner.

Another principal suggested that the problem was not just with “downtown”; the dynamics of the principal group itself could be problematic according to this principal:

The high school principals as a group all-together is not a really safe group. It’s not a place where it’s easy to say these are some areas in which I really need development because there’s [sic.] some folks there who quickly say things that make that dialogue difficult.

This person went on to note, however, that “there are subgroups within that group where we can [say] ‘I’m really struggling with this or with that,’” but then added: “You quickly learn that...[even this group is] not a place you want to be vulnerable because you somehow—although everybody else may agree with you—get this feeling, like, what’s the matter with you.”

In some cases the sense of loneliness and isolation may be either partially self-imposed or imposed by members of a principal's staff. Imposition occurs through an outdated and, we would argue, problematic view of the principal as a kind of superhero. One principal, for instance, suggested that it was impossible to have real dialogue about solving the school's problems with members of the administrative staff because staff members expected the principal to have all the answers. Unfortunately, the data collected could not tell us whether this view really represented staff members' thinking or whether it was, in fact, more representative of the principal's own conception of the principal role.

Some of the principals' comments, however, suggested that the superhero conception of was constantly reinforced by district expectations. "They want us to be instructional leaders when what we really [are forced to] spend our time on is crisis management," one principal told the interviewer. The person continued:

Then they want us to be facilities managers and to be a community leader...[They] want us to be a counselor...grant writer...money getter from all different sources, they want us to be visible at community events...want us to respond to a thousand, a hundred e-mails a day in a timely manner. They want us to make every parent/teacher happy which is impossible...want us to make sure our campuses are safe with inadequate resources, and they want our campuses to be safe when we don't have the autonomy to create policies to make our campus safe based on individual campus needs or situations.

Whatever the source of the idea that principals must be—or must at least *appear* to others to be—superheroes, the idea can be quite dysfunctional. One relatively new principal, for instance, told the interviewer:

You want to know a fact. I don't know how to document [problematic employees]...Everybody keeps telling me to document, document, document, so I can get rid of ineffective assistant principals...I don't have the time but I also don't really know how to...I would welcome some help in learning how to document.

This principal did not feel comfortable asking for such help either from district personnel or from his peers. This principal, however, did discuss what would help him do his job better:

What would be most helpful to me is exactly what we are doing right now...talking about issues without you judging or evaluating me....It helps me to reflect on what I'm doing and perhaps I can even come up with some good solutions...(laughing) Can you interview me several times a year?

Interestingly, similar sentiments were expressed by a veteran principal who, unlike the relative novice quoted above, knew how to do all aspects of his/her job and had great confidence in his/her abilities. This veteran said:

I know I am an effective principal with many years of experience, but I am seriously considering leaving the district because I don't feel supported or trusted...I'm willing to work the long, long hours and do whatever it takes to make the school successful, but I need to feel supported and trusted...What I miss the most is dialogue in a safe environment!

The problem with the assistant principal role. The need to rethink leadership roles was not just a theme in the principal interview data. This theme also was found in data provided by other types of administrators. The theme was especially strong among the assistant principal group, particularly among interviewees from this group who aspire to use the assistant principal position as a stepping-stone to the principalship.

The source of the problem here is relatively easy to understand: Because large organizations require a division of labor and a significant degree of specialization to function, assistant principals normally become technicians responsible for a narrow range of tasks (e.g. discipline, scheduling, grant writing, etc.) rather than leaders with a broad knowledge of and wide experience within all aspects of the high schools in which they work. Thus, it is hardly surprising that the district recently did not promote from within when several high school principal positions became vacant. Technicians, after all, seldom have an opportunity to develop the broad skill set required to lead as complex an organization as a high school.

One of the current principals who had been promoted to the principalship from an assistant principal position supported this line of analysis when he/she said the following during an interview: "I was an assistant principal for four years and, I'll be honest with you, I thought I knew what being a principal would be like but nothing prepares you for the demands, challenges, isolation of this job."

Indeed, one might argue that many who play the assistant principal role (as it is currently defined, that is)—and especially those who play the role well and enjoy doing so—are unlikely to have the temperament and almost certainly will lack the experience and socialization to successfully lead as complex an organization as a high school. This analysis—even if correct—however, will hardly be a comfort to the assistant principals who felt hurt, angry and demoralized when they were passed over and the district selected outsiders to fill the open principal positions.

The need for formally designated teacher leaders. Finally, many interviewees noted the very limited attention given to the development of teacher leaders in the district's high schools. In principle, the presence of formally-designated teacher leaders in a school could lighten the almost impossible load currently carried by high school administrators, especially in the areas of curricular and instructional leadership. Of course, as teacher leaders are designated and developed, the focus must always be on coordinating the work of teacher leaders with the work of administrators and support service personnel. All these groups must center their work on a clearly-defined school focus and on a manageable number of goals that are simultaneously challenging and realistic. In the

absence of this sort of focus and coordination, the presence of formally-designated teacher leaders will likely aggravate rather than help solve a school's problems.

Recommendations

Actively Challenge Traditional Thinking about the Principal-as-Superhero

District officials should actively challenge the superhero conception of the principal role and promote a conception of the principal as a collaborative problem solver, i.e. a person who works with others to identify and analyze problems, who is not afraid to admit that he or she does not have all the answers and is not threatened when others generate viable solutions, who is, in fact, committed to solving problems rather than to his or her own pet solutions, and who, ultimately, relies on evidence rather than wishful thinking, political power, or public relations to decide what is working and what things need to be modified.

District administrators certainly should challenge traditional thinking about the principalship and promote a more problem-solving conception with their rhetoric. Ultimately, however, actions speak louder than words and concrete images of alternative ways to lead a high school will be required if change is to occur.

Establish Demonstration Sites that Experiment with and Model Alternative Approaches to Leadership

The images alluded to above might be supplied by visiting exemplary principals in other districts throughout the country or by bringing these principals to Austin to interact with Austin principals and their administrative staffs (and, eventually, members of the school's support services staff and teacher and parent leaders, as well). One-shot experiences normally have limited impact, however. At best, they can inspire people to think about doing things differently, but they do not provide the sustained support that significant change almost always requires.

It may be necessary, therefore, to establish close-at-hand models of alternative ways of leading schools within the district. This could be done by designating certain high schools as Leadership Development Schools and providing the resources required for these designated schools to experiment with and become models of a collaborative approach to leadership that other leaders in other district schools could emulate.

Leadership Development Schools attempt to develop leadership ability among all of a school's stakeholder groups (administrators, teachers, parents, students and, ideally, also by central office administrators responsible for the school). They do this, in large part, by engaging representatives of these groups in problem analysis and inquiry. One problem that might be addressed by a Leadership Development School principal and his or her administrative team, for instance, would be how to redesign the assistant principal role so (a) those who play the role are better prepared to be principals yet (b) the technical tasks currently assigned to assistant principals still get accomplished.

Redefine the Assistant Principal Role

Whether or not the above recommendation about designating certain sites as Leadership Development Schools is implemented, the district needs to develop some process to rethink and redesign the role of the assistant principal. A redefined role should provide the sorts of on-the-job experiences that will prepare at least the most talented of the district's assistant principals to become excellent high school principals. The current practice of recruiting principals from outside the district—a practice that was born of necessity given the district's failure to develop a well-prepared "bench" within the administrative ranks—comes with a high price tag in two ways: literally (Wooing principals away from their homes and communities is costly) and metaphorically (Going outside rather than promoting from within has created understandable morale problems within the assistant principal group in Austin).

Focus on Administrative and Leadership Teams Rather Than Individual Administrators

Since successful leadership in the complex high school environment requires a team effort rather than the actions of a single principal functioning as a kind of superhero, central office administrators need to reinforce this idea, whenever possible, by thinking in terms of teams of administrators and acting accordingly. Among other things, this means that, when an administrative position becomes vacant, applicants for the position should be assessed in terms of how well their skills are likely to mesh with and complement the skills of the rest of the administrative team rather than in terms of a generic list of criteria.

Similarly, whenever possible, professional development should be provided to a school team rather than to individual administrators. When appropriate, the team should include all members of a school's leadership team (including counselors and teacher leaders) and not just administrative team members, to insure that different subgroups within a school are focusing on the same goals and not working at cross-purposes. In addition, the substantive focus of professional development activities should be on helping teams build their capacity to collectively identify barriers to student achievement and ways to remove them. This means that those in charge of planning professional development for school leaders should abandon the didactic approach to professional development that often is used in the district (and that high school administrators believe is ineffective). Those responsible for planning professional development experience for high school leaders should, for the most part, employ facilitators rather than speakers and organize professional development experiences around interactive problem solving rather than around formal presentations.

Separate the Coaching/Support Function from the Supervising/Monitoring Function

Acknowledging that one does not have all the answers requires a level of confidence and a comfort with risk taking. Acquiring confidence and a developing a degree of comfort with taking risks, in turn, requires a highly supportive environment and supervisors who are more inclined to assist in problem solving and to nurture than to judge. In this accountability era, however, central office administrators are not doing their jobs if they merely provide problem-solving assistance, comfort, and reassurance. They must hold school-level leaders to high standards and enforce consequences—including removal from administrative positions—if these standards are not met.

Thus, central office administrators who wish to promote the more problem-oriented, collaborative sort of leadership at the school level recommended above must engage in a very difficult—some would say an impossible—tightrope-walking act that involves central office administrators simultaneously applying pressure and supplying support. Performing this tightrope walking act skillfully is especially crucial for newer, less-established, and, hence, understandably insecure leaders. This kind of support is especially important for those who preside over sites populated by students that do not arrive at school primed to play the school and testing games and, who, consequently, must work harder to achieve success.

One *structural* strategy for successfully negotiating the pressure/support dichotomy is to decouple coaching/support from supervision/monitoring by assigning each set of tasks to different individuals. This could be done by redefining the job descriptions of central office administrators. An even better way to accomplish this goal might be to hire executive coaches from outside the system who are not colleagues of and do not report to those who supervise and evaluate principals or other administrators. Executive coaches are used extensively in the corporate world; most urban high schools are no less complex—and no less difficult environments for leaders to negotiate—than the corporations.

If the district decides to approach the decoupling process by using the executive coaching strategy, a starting point may be to assess a modest executive coaching initiative that was instituted by the Office of High Schools during the 2003-2004 academic year. There is a perception that the coach that was hired was not extensively used. There is a need to determine, first, if this perception is, indeed, correct, and if it is, whether the limited use should be attributed to the characteristics of the particular coach that was hired, a lack of structure (e.g. the absence of regularly scheduled meetings between a principal and coach), the fact that the identified principals had no choice in who would coach them, or other factors. Since the initiative was quite limited and involved only one coach and only a handful of high school principals, these questions could be answered with a limited investment of time and effort.

Issue # 2:
**The Need to Support English Language Learners and
Other Students with Special Needs**

Overview of the Issue

Many interviewees, especially interviewees who were high school teachers, spoke of a problematic pattern that gets played out daily with high school students with various sorts of special needs: These students are expected to do things they cannot do; they fail; they become discouraged and often become discipline problems; discipline problems eventually result in the students being removed from class (and, even, sometimes, from school) for extended periods of time to insure that the students' problematic behavior does not continue to negatively impact the learning of others; absence from class, however, means the students who has been removed falls even further behind academically, and, eventually, with little to no hope of graduating, the students drop out of school.

Although the interview data suggest the pattern described in the above paragraph gets played out with a wide array of students who are having trouble in school for many reasons, the most frequently mentioned group—presumably because of its size and because the cause of the students' problems is so obvious—was the district's English Language Learners (ELL). A number of teachers, for instance, noted that there were few course offerings for these students; consequently, many ELL students spend an inordinate amount of time in physical education classes. If this is, indeed, representative of the current situation, while only three semesters of physical education are required to graduate, additional time spent in physical education classes represents time not spent in other courses that are needed for graduation.

The students, themselves, often expressed a sense of hopelessness: They knew what was happening (and not happening) and understood that they probably would not graduate; consequently, dropping out became, for them, a very sensible option.

Since most of the interviews were conducted, the district has created The International High School for recent immigrants which is functioning as a school-within-a-school at Johnston High School. Sheltered classes designed for English Language Learners who are in the district's regular high schools also were added to the schedule during the previous academic year.

The International High School is too new for anyone to assess its effectiveness, but the high school's goal of going beyond teaching conversational English and teaching more academic forms of English, as well, is laudable. It certainly makes sense to teach students academic forms of English—to teach them, in other words, the vocabulary and the forms of discourse used in the different academic disciplines—because mastery of academic forms of English will be required to succeed in rigorous high school and, eventually, in college classrooms.

The goal of integrating International High School students—in appropriate ways and at appropriate times—into the regular Johnston program also makes sense. The danger in isolating English language learners in a school-within-a school setting where they spend most of their day interacting with other non-English speakers is that they will have too few opportunities to hear and practice English to learn a second language well. The International High School’s plan to integrate its students into the Johnston program suggests that those who have planned the International High School’s program are sensitive to this potential difficulty and have a strategy for minimizing it. Tensions between International School students and regular Johnston High School students that erupted as the final draft of this report was being written, however, suggest that there may be more difficulty with implementing this strategy than those who planned the International High School program might have imagined.

The sheltered class idea also appears to be a reasonable response to some of the problems that were identified in the original round of data collection. Follow-up interviews conducted immediately prior to the preparation of this report, however, identify a number of implementation difficulties.

Teachers and principals, for instance, claim that requests to train teachers who have been designated to teach sheltered classes have been rebuffed with the argument that there is neither time nor funding for such training. This is what one principal said, for example:

No training has been provided for the core teachers asked to teach ELL students or to develop special sheltered classes. I requested teacher training last Fall, Spring and Summer to no avail. Finally, I was told there was no time. Therefore, principals are required to develop specific plans to enhance the language skills of new immigrants and scaffold their learning in all academic subjects in order to pass TAKs and graduate, without district supported or professional development for the teachers actually doing the work. We are asked to produce something, while given no actual tools with which to make it happen. Frustration abounds as we each use our personal skills and resources to try to meet student needs and district expectations for our English Language Learners.

The concern here seems to be that, in the absence of training geared to preparing teachers to work effectively with the English Language Learner population, sheltered classes will not be much different than regular classes. The one obvious difference, of course, is that those enrolled in sheltered classes are separated from English-speaking students. In the absence of teaching practices that take advantage of this separateness, segregating English Language Learners from English speakers may be more a problem than a solution because it limits the opportunity that English Language Learners have to acquire English informally.

We also heard about difficulties in scheduling English Language Learners into sheltered classes. Some interviewees attributed these scheduling problems to a communication breakdown between the members of the administrative team that has been charged with

implementing the sheltered class concept and the school counselors that actually do the scheduling. Others seemed to attribute the problem less to a lack of shared understanding about what should be done and more to philosophical disagreements and/or political turf wars between administrators and counselors. It is also possible that at least part of the problem has to do with the difficulties involved with altering established routines and standard operating procedures imposed by the computer program used to schedule large numbers of students. Such programs inevitably constrain what schedulers are able to do.

The data that were collected do not indicate which of the above explanations is more correct. We can only state at this point that there were a number of comments about administrators and counselors working at cross-purposes rather than in complementary ways on a number of issues including the issue of scheduling students into sheltered classes.

Recommendations

Target High Priority Needs, Including the Need to Support English Language Learners and Other Special Needs Students, and Reallocate Resources Accordingly

The sheltered class idea represents a sincere desire on the part of the district to support English Language Learners, and the lack of district-level support for implementing the sheltered class initiative, though certainly problematic, is at least understandable given the number of initiatives that have been launched in the district in recent years. During this time the district has faced many pressing problems that had not been addressed adequately (or at all) in the past. Consequently, district officials and the Board of Education all too often were forced to adopt an approach to reform that one reform guru characterizes as “Ready, Fire, Aim!” Now, however, it makes sense to focus on the third component of the “Ready, Fire, Aim” strategy by prioritizing goals and initiatives and reallocating resources to the goals and initiatives with the highest priority, even if such reallocation efforts require the downsizing or elimination of lower priority programs.

Clearly, supporting English Language Learners and other students who are not succeeding in school needs to be among the district’s highest priorities. After all, if these students do not pass state tests at certain grade levels, there will be severe negative consequences for the students, the district, and, ultimately, the larger society. Consequently, resources need to be reallocated to support the initiatives and strategies that are intended to assist ELL and other special needs students to ensure that initiatives such as the sheltered class initiative are carefully planned and adequately supported. Almost certainly, this reallocation will require that the district eliminate some current initiatives and do fewer things. Simply throwing programs at problems almost never works, especially when the programs are not well planned or well funded. Or, as the author of the “Ready, Fire, Aim” strategy might say: Now that many volleys have been fired in response to many pressing problems, it is time to start targeting the fire on the things that are most important. Clearly supporting special needs students, including the district’s English Language Learners, should be one of those targets.

Conduct a Formative Evaluation of the International High School for Recent Immigrants

Events that occurred at Johnston High School as the final draft of this report was being written indicate that the International High School idea may turn out to be more difficult to implement than district officials realized. We encourage the district to fund an external evaluation of the High School, not for purposes of making a thumbs-up or thumbs-down decision about the continuation of the school, but for the purpose of providing evidence-based advice to district, International School and Johnston High School leaders about what existing policies and procedures are working and what may need to be changed. The evaluation design should incorporate input from representatives of relevant stakeholder groups. (For more on integrating stakeholders into the evaluation process, see the recommendations subsection in the next part of this report.)

Revitalize Workforce Education Programs, in Part through Consolidating Existing Programs

The district's goal of preparing every student to go to college, if a student wishes to do so, is certainly a noble one. High schools, however, cannot force students to embrace the goal of going to college and to do the sort of work in high school that will prepare them academically for the college experience. Furthermore, before a student can be eligible for college, he or she must actually finish high school.

Workforce education and training programs (i.e. programs that used to be called vocational education and that are currently referred to as Career and Technology Education in Texas) have always been a sanctuary for students who lacked the interest and motivation to engage in more traditional academic work. Among other things, they provided a much-needed oasis of relevance for certain students who had little interest in the high school's traditional academic program.

Of course, vocationally-oriented programs have also, at times in the past, been dumping grounds for students that schools did not want—or did not know how—to teach. Such programs also often provided less than adequate preparation for the world of work. Given these, and a number of other, negative historical scenarios, it is not surprising that workforce education programs have been discontinued in many school districts.

Fortunately, the Austin Independent School District is not one of these places. The district, however, needs to revitalize its current approach to workforce education and make workforce education more efficient. The starting point for such a revitalization effort must be a program consolidation effort. Currently, similar workforce programs are offered in a number of high schools to a small number of students at each school. These small programs must be consolidated into a single program housed in one district school so that resources are not dissipated and can be used to update and improve the workforce education that is offered. Then, an advisory group should be convened to recommend specific improvements. This group may need access to a team of professional evaluators to help it get an accurate picture of what is currently happening before it can make

recommendations about what should be done to improve workforce education in the district. (The discussion of Issue #4 below provides a rationale for creating the sort of advisory group alluded to here.)

**Issue # 3:
The Need to Relieve Tension at the School Level
Resulting from Attempting to Accommodate the Unique Needs of Students
While Adhering to District Policies and Mandates**

Overview of the Issue

As was noted at the outset of the previous section, English Language Learners are not the only students who bring unique sets of problems to school. High school students have many other sorts of special needs that must be accommodated if student achievement is to be maximized, if students are to remain in school until graduation, and if high school graduates are to be confident and emotionally healthy adults. Indeed, one does not need to be a romantic to assert that *all* teenagers are in some way unique and that each has his or her own collection of special needs to which high schools should attend. Any parent who has survived his or her children's teenage years will understand the wisdom in that statement.

But while teenagers are unique, policies and programs are, by definition, designed to be general. Policies are written and programs are planned to apply to all students, or, at best, to categories of students, rather than to unique individuals. They also prescribe general standard operating procedures that everyone is expected to follow; such prescriptions, of course, constrain those to whom a policy applies and limit their ability to respond to unique situations and the unique needs of individuals in those situations.

In recent years, the district has been proactive in developing policies to govern the district's high schools and in mandating that an array of programs and initiatives be implemented at the twelve high school sites. There was good reason to do this. The evidence suggested that many high school students were not achieving at high or even adequate levels, and, consequently, that the hands-off approach that the district had been using in the past had not worked. Furthermore, state and federal accountability policies—including the state's testing policy that linked test results to high-stakes consequences for students, schools, and districts—provided a real incentive for the district to intervene and mandate that certain policies and procedures be implemented and followed.

The policy that was most frequently talked about by the teachers and principals that were interviewed was the IPG/Benchmarking policy that (a) transformed state standards and a limited number of other goals into discrete chunks of curricular content (The chunks are called IPGs.); (b) prescribed that these curricular chunks, i.e. the IPGs, had to be taught within a designated period of time; and (c) tested whether the prescribed standards had, in fact, been mastered by the end of the designated period.

During their interviews, district officials vigorously defended the district's IPG/Benchmarking policy, and the case they made was quite compelling. They noted for example, that (a) the IPGs defined for the entire district a badly needed curricular scope and sequence; (b) the scope and sequence were directly linked to the state standards that all schools are required to teach to and that all Texas students are expected to meet; (c) that other districts in Texas had done similar things years before (and had the test scores to prove it) and that the current leadership team and board had been forced to play a quick game of catch-up; (d) that the activities listed in the district's curricular materials were merely examples of what might be done rather than requirements that all teachers had to follow in teaching the prescribed curricular content during a specified period; (e) that consequently, the policy still allowed teachers considerable discretion in determining *how* they teach prescribed curricular content; (f) that the reason that some teachers and principals were not aware of the discretion they still had could be chalked up to the sorts of communication difficulties that inevitably occur in large school districts or large organizations of any sort; and (g) that those in charge of implementing the IPG/Benchmarking policy had established a wide variety of feedback loops to minimize a range of communication difficulties.

Principals and teachers, however, often told a somewhat different story about the IPG/Benchmarking policy. Some noted, for example, that alleged "communication problems" have continued for three years and implied that there is something more than communication difficulties at work here. We also heard that the district's one-size-fits-all approach to scope and sequence creates real problems for teachers who teach certain kinds of subjects.

Teachers of Advanced Placement classes frequently were cited as examples of the problems that emerge when a one-size-fits-all approach is mandated from the district level. Students taking these classes have already mastered the state standards and will almost certainly do well on the state tests, it was argued. Consequently, imposing the benchmark testing process on what is supposed to be a rigorous, college-level course represents an unnecessary and incredibly time consuming intrusion on the teaching process and on the effort to prepare AP students for tough *national* tests that will determine whether they receive college credit for their work.

The data also raise questions about whether an approach to curriculum design that breaks down a school subject into bits of knowledge and then organizes the bits into a prescribed sequence for teaching might work better with a relatively linear, step-by-step discipline like mathematics than a more holistic subject like English. Mastering English, after all, is a bit like learning to play basketball. A basketball coach does not cancel practice after all of the team members have mastered the basic skills; rather he or she schedules scrimmages so team members can continually practice their skills, not in isolation, but by playing something that resembles a real game.

At any rate, three years into the implementation of the IPG/Benchmarking policy, high school English teachers are still having difficulty implementing the IPG/Benchmarking process. The data suggest that at least part of the problem here is a bit more pragmatic

than the problem of design/subject matter fit that was just described, however. Many interviewees, for instance, talked about the time and effort associated with—and the limited payoff provided by—administering and recording the results of the English benchmarking tests. One interviewee, for instance, noted that the test takes “five days to administer and another day to input [the data] three times per year.” This interviewee added: “This amount of time seems excessive.”

We also heard about the extensive amount of teacher time required to assess and record the results of the district’s various benchmark writing tests for the large number of students that high school English teachers were expected to teach; how the time spent administering the lengthy test and assessing and recording the results intruded on instructional and planning time; how the timing of the process made it difficult for teachers to use the information that was generated for diagnostic and teaching purposes; and how the design of the district’s record keeping system also makes the recorded data essentially unusable.

English Department Chairs and principals told of efforts to request what they believed were modest and sensible modifications in the process; of nothing happening for months; of finally being invited to a meeting in late Spring of the previous academic year during which their concerns appeared to be acknowledged and where they were given the impression that requested modifications would be made; and, then, once again, saw no action.

When district officials were asked about what principals and English Department chairs had said during interviews, the officials indicated that some of the information that we had been given was inaccurate. One official initially dismissed what principals and the English Department chairs had said as “myths.” Later, this and another district official were more conciliatory and more specific: We were told that the benchmarking test in writing had never been administered more than twice a year. We were also told that many of the problems with the usability of data had been caused by the unwillingness of the company that had been hired to manage the benchmark test data to make modifications that would have made the data more accessible and usable to teachers. This company’s three-year contract was up for renewal this year, we were told, which meant that there would soon be an opportunity to rectify the usability-of-the-data problem.

Finally, we were told that many of the recommendations of English teachers and principals—including the recommendation to exempt AP students from the benchmarking process—were in the process of being implemented. Unfortunately, this news had not been communicated to principals and key teacher stakeholders. Indeed, within a day of us being told that modifications were in the process of being implemented, principals were meeting with the superintendent to complain about inaction on their requests for policy modifications, and to try to communicate, once again, about the site-level problems created by the district’s policy.

Presumably, what we have here is an example of the sorts of communication difficulties that inevitably occur in large districts and that will be discussed in the next section of this report. Many principals, however, undoubtedly would characterize what has occurred here as something more than a “failure to communicate.” In fact, during their interviews, principals, almost to a person, spoke of the excessive amount of time spent going to the district office and pleading for modifications not only in the district’s IPG/Benchmarking policy but also for changes in the many other policies that had been mandated by the district’s central administration and Board, as well. One principal, for example, said the following:

Site-based management is history in this district. Two or three people meet behind closed doors and develop initiatives without considering the impact it will have on campuses. Then when all the problems show up, we have to come back to the table and fix it. Why can’t we [i.e. the principals] be involved in making the decisions that affect us?

Another principal rattled off a lengthy list of programs that had been imposed on his school by the district. These programs did not necessarily address the school’s real problems, the principal told the interviewer, but they required considerable amounts of oversight time, especially since program coordinators needed to be supervised and program dollars needed to be spent (within a specified time frame) and accounted for. Even these additional dollars could be a very mixed blessing according to this principal:

We have so much money, there is not enough time or resources to spend it – [since] we’re limited with what we can and cannot spend it for – but, if we turn it down and then don’t make enough improvement, we’re told that we had the opportunity for [i.e. to be given] more money.

Some of the school level complaints we heard almost certainly can be attributed to the knee-jerk reaction that occurs whenever there an intrusion on local autonomy, even when the intrusion is justified and highly functional in terms of promoting student learning. But the evidence suggests that there also are other factors at work here and, more specifically, that the district has not yet found the appropriate balance between mandating what is essential (and, hence, non-negotiable), on the one hand, and providing site-level discretion over things that could—and probably should—be done in different ways in very different school contexts, on the other.

Certainly, some degree of discretion is needed if school people are to have the flexibility required to respond in appropriate ways to the unique needs of their students and the particular problems in their particular situations. At the same time, the history of the district prior to adopting its current ways of doing business clearly signals that a blind commitment to site-based decision-making also is exceedingly problematic. This is especially so in a society that can no longer assimilate students who fail in school and at a time when a school’s failure to educate large numbers of students can no longer be swept under the rug and kept out of public view. The question is: How can an appropriate

balance between direction and discretion, i.e. between top-down mandates and site authority for making decisions, be established?

Recommendations

Focus on Results and Give Increased Discretion to Schools that Get Positive Results

One starting point for finding the appropriate balance between district direction and site level discretion would be to begin focusing on results and giving substantial discretion to those schools that achieve results that are positive. Providing discretion might even include letting highly successful schools decide whether or not they want to use the district's IPG/benchmarking process or, alternately, which elements of that process they want to implement and with which groups of students.

When we previewed this recommendation to certain district officials while preparing the final draft of this report, we heard both support for the general concept and at least two reservations. One reservation related to the fact that, even in highly successful schools, some students were not successful. This observation suggests that it may be advisable to make the granting of discretion contingent not only on student performance on state measures of achievement but also on the submission of a credible plan for accommodating the needs of the subpopulation of failing students in the school.

In addition to the caveats provided by district officials who were interviewed, we would add two additional caveats about implementing our focus-on-results recommendation. First, it is important to assess a school's success and allow for greater discretion on a value-added basis. By that we mean that a school's success should be determined by how much improvement has occurred rather than by whether it has met or exceeded a predetermined standard that is applied to all schools, independent of the academic achievement levels at which students began the school year. Some schools, after all, teach a student population that is primed to succeed at the school game because the culture and language of the students' homes matches the culture and language of the school; other schools serve populations that have to learn how to negotiate a somewhat alien culture when they come to school and, even, at times, master a different language than the language they have learned at home. The former type of school should not be unduly rewarded when students do well but the school does relatively little, and the latter type of school should not be punished for working hard but posting less dramatic, but harder-won results. Both of these scenarios can be avoided by using a value-added approach to assessment.

Second, any decisions about the amount and type of discretion that a school should be accorded should be reconsidered on a regular basis. Here, too, decisions should be based on a value-added criterion. In other words, continuation decisions should be based on whether or not student performance is continuing to improve.

Evaluate the IPG/Benchmarking Process' Strengths and Limitations and Modify the Process in ways that are Consistent with Evaluation Findings

Even if the district adopts the recommendation to focus on results and provides greater discretion to schools that demonstrate positive results, the IPG/Benchmarking Process almost certainly will continue to be used in less successful schools and with less successful students. This is as it should be. The process does, indeed, give the district a much needed curricular scope and sequence and establishes procedures to ensure that the curriculum is covered and standards are met. The district administration and board should be commended for acting quickly to rectify a problem that had not been adequately dealt with prior to the development of the IPG/Benchmarking process.

Now that the process is in its third year of implementation, however, it seems appropriate to begin to identify what is working well and which parts of the process may need to be modified. We recommend, in short, that an evaluation be conducted that is formative in nature. As noted above, formative evaluations are geared toward generating ideas for improvement rather than the sort of thumbs up/thumbs down recommendations found in many evaluation studies.

We recommend using a particular formative approach that has been labeled a stakeholder deliberation approach to evaluation. This approach involves convening representatives from various stakeholder groups (teachers, school-level and central office administrators, parents and even, when appropriate, students) to study the problem. Some members of the stakeholder team should be predisposed to view what is being evaluated positively; some should be relatively neutral; and some should be at least somewhat critical. All members of the group, however, should be able to be persuaded to change their thinking by convincing arguments and solid evidence.

The group should have access to a team of professional evaluators who can gather data to address disagreements that emerge during stakeholder discussions that require empirical evidence to resolve. It may also be wise to hire a facilitator from outside the district to lead the group. In principle, a district employee could handle the group facilitation task, but the IPG/Benchmarking issue has been controversial and there are strong feelings on all sides of this issue; consequently, it seems appropriate to use a neutral facilitator with no district ties to insure that the evaluation process will be balanced and fair.

The precise questions the stakeholder group would focus on should be decided by the members of the stakeholder group if a deliberation approach is used. We anticipate, however, that the group might ask the following sorts of questions:

- Is the process that specifies that certain skills be taught at specified times sufficiently flexible to accommodate the needs of students who are far behind academically? Does it result in a curriculum that is both rigorous and relevant for students? If not, what modifications need to be made?
- Are modifications in the process required to better match the district's curricular scope and sequence with the nature of particular school subjects?

- Is there evidence that the IPG/benchmarking process has, in fact, improved student achievement in significant ways?

Examine Whether All District Staff Positions are Necessary or Whether the Dollars Currently Being Used to Fund Some District-Level Positions Could be Better Spent at the School Level

It appears as if the number of district employees has expanded in recent years, at least in some units, though it is difficult to completely validate this claim because of the ways that some who work in the district office are classified and *officially* counted. If the district staff has been expanded, this could aggravate attempts to find an appropriate balance between district-level direction and site-level discretion for two reasons: First, more district officials often mean more district mandates; second, even if the first scenario does not occur, the need to pay people who fill new positions uses up dollars that might be funneled to school sites for such things as providing professional development for sheltered class teachers.

We recommend that the size of the district staff be studied from a *de facto* perspective—that is, by counting who is actually working at the district office rather than at a school site—and that the responsibilities of district staff members be reviewed with an eye to determine whether the work done is essential to improving student achievement. If a *de facto* district position does not appear to be truly essential, either (a) the person filling the position should be relocated to one or more school sites and assigned the job of providing assistance to the school(s) where he or she is assigned or (b) the position should be eliminated and the dollars that were used to fund the position should be reallocated to schools. Site-level leadership teams should be consulted before a decision about which of the two above options is selected. No reassigned district employee should be forced on a school staff, in other words.

Issue # 4

The Need to Improve Communication and Relationships

Overview of the Issue

The fourth and final issue to be discussed in this report relates to communication difficulties and the relationship problems that result, at least in part, from these difficulties. This issue was raised, in one form or another, by interviewees from all stakeholder groups.

Perceived communication problems between district office personnel, on the one hand, and teachers and administrators who work in high schools, on the other, already have been discussed in the prior section. In addition the section on English Language Learners alluded to within-school communication difficulties that sometimes occur between counselors and members of a school's administrative staff. Even if there is something

more than communication breakdowns at work in one or both of these situations, as some interviewees suggested, breakdowns in communication undoubtedly are at least a part of the problem. Indeed, it would be hard to imagine a district the size of Austin or schools the size of each of Austin's twelve high schools that were not experiencing some "failure to communicate."

District and school size also seems to factor into many of the communication and relationship difficulties parents alluded to, and, most certainly, the large size of high schools contributes to the within-school communication and relationship problems between teachers and students that high school staff members and students both talked about. One principal, for example, spoke about how size tends to impact the relationship between administrators and teachers, on the one hand, and the students they want to help, on the other:

My passion is how can we really support kids, how you build relationships to know kids well in our big high schools, the traditional model is really a factory model... our product isn't a widget, it's a real kid with real feelings with real things going on and no matter how that kids presents himself or herself, how much they act as though they don't care, how much they act as is they don't want to learn, they, you know all that stuff, that is all mostly a cover up for a vulnerable child underneath and it's easier for us as school people to label them or to say they don't want to learn. That excuses our responsibility and then we don't have to worry about how to deal with the real issues and if we can get to the place where we can talk with kids one on one, most of those facades come crumbling down.

A student echoed these same sentiments, albeit a bit more succinctly and by posing a rhetorical question: "How can they [the teachers] teach me if they don't know me?" The inescapable subtext here is that many teachers did not know this student.

Another school-level employee suggested that the size-related problems often were aggravated by the structures that have been created to manage the large number of students in our high schools:

When we have to see kids in 47 minute increments and 150 to 175 [students] a day...it is virtually impossible to know every kid at that appropriate level and spend the time to get to know them, to connect with the home, to make appropriate decision and so...we're losing too many kids and we're losing kids that we don't count as lost....kids who make it through our system but who aren't doing it at the levels that they could be doing it and ought to be doing it if we had the structures in place to support them better.

While structures such as the 47-minute period aggravate communication problems *within* schools, the absence of communication-fostering structures outside of the school seems also to be a problem. Of course, creating an array of different sorts of forums to improve communication within the district is, at best, a necessary not a sufficient condition for improving communication. A principal identifies one additional current problem that

needs to be corrected if communication difficulties are to be minimized and more productive working relationships are to be established:

We are not very good in our district and in our schools at listening. We are not good at listening to our principals, to our kids, to our teachers, to our parents. We very much still have an autocratic talk-down kind of [interaction] structure....and the new high school structure is very controlling and it disturbs me greatly.

Recommendations

Reinstitute a Modified Version of Block Scheduling

One rather obvious (though admittedly modest) way of personalizing education within the high schools we currently have is to reinstitute block scheduling—i.e. scheduling a class for two back-to-back periods during one semester rather than for a single period for the entire year. Like almost any other strategy in education, block scheduling is no panacea. However, when teachers have to teach fewer students in the course of a day and when they have them for longer periods of time, the stage has at least been set for better communication between teachers and their students.

District administrators have assured us that they do not object to the use of block scheduling as long as the use of this strategy does not require that additional personnel be hired and, hence, that additional resources be used to support the block scheduling process. This expectation can be met if only some classes in the 7 period day are taught in a block format while others continue to be taught in a single period format. There are, in fact, some fairly compelling educational arguments for teaching some subjects in single periods throughout the entire school year rather than in a double-period block for half a year. Foreign languages—which seem to require extended time to master—may be the best examples.

Experiment with Transforming Large High Schools into Small Schools-Within-Schools

One of the few truly promising reforms in the area of high school restructuring is the small schools movement. This movement emphasizes implementing a number of interrelated reform strategies, but, as the movement's name suggests, its centerpiece idea relates to school size.

The small schools movement argues that a high school should attempt to serve only several hundred students rather than a thousand or more, as is currently the case in most places. If it is not feasible to build such schools—and it normally is not unless a district is responding to a population explosion—the recommendation is to subdivide a district's existing high school buildings that were built to accommodate large student populations into schools-within-schools, i.e. a number of individual "schools," each with its own clearly articulated focus (e.g. technology, the arts, business, etc.) and a relatively small student population, that operate in different parts of the same building.

To be sure, a part of the current enthusiasm for the small-schools movement is the millions of dollars the Gates Foundation has provided to support this endeavor. Money—especially in the amounts that have been doled out by the Gates Foundation—has a way of getting people on the bandwagon. We encourage districts officials and the Board to also try get the district a seat on the Gate’s bandwagon—and to get a chunk of Gates funding—if possible.

The recommendation, however, is not based solely or even primarily on the possibility of acquiring additional funding for the district. Indeed we already have gone on record as being opposed to going after money for its own sake and to throwing money and programs at problems. Rather we recommend experimenting with the small school concept because it has much more than the Gates Foundation’s money to recommend it. There is some credible evidence, for example, that reducing the size of schools positively impacts student achievement, especially when students are classified as being at risk and, consequently, are likely to require a more personal learning environment. A smaller size cannot guarantee a more personal learning environment, of course; a small size seems to be a necessary, even if not a sufficient, condition for creating schools where “everybody knows your name,” however.

A smaller size also increases flexibility; a small faculty, for example, need not be held hostage by a master schedule that cannot be changed without considerable computer programming work. Furthermore, in the Gates version of small schools, at least, there is an emphasis on giving those who work in a small school considerable authority in running that school (contingent on achieving results, of course). The importance of giving discretion to those who work at the site level has been emphasized in study after study ever since the now famous Rand Corporation’s study of successful and less than successful educational innovations first alerted us to the importance of this variable in the mid-1970s.

Consequently, even if Gates funding is not available, we recommend the district reallocate resources so it can begin experimenting with converting large schools into smaller ones. A logical starting point would be to study what has happened in the district high schools that have received Smaller Learning Community Grants. This study should ask the following sorts of questions: Has something positive resulted from the work these grants supported? If not, what have been the barriers to progress?

Once the lessons that can be learned from studying the relatively modest experimentation that has occurred through the Smaller Learning Community Grants are documented, larger-scale experiments should occur in places (a) that serve student populations that could most benefit from a smaller, more personal school environment; (b) where the conditions are such that the experiment has a reasonable chance of being successful relatively quickly so the site can quickly become a model for other large high schools in the district that wish to subdivide into small schools within the existing school building; and (c) where strong within-school and external community support can be generated for a small-schools initiative.

Create Forums that Promote Communication

The final point in the previous paragraph needs to be highlighted. It makes little sense to impose an innovation like the small schools initiative on a school and community without persuading those who work in or send their children to the school that the innovation is worthwhile. Some schools, after all, may be quite effective and their students may be able to negotiate a large, somewhat impersonal school environment with great success. But even if this is not the case, a concept like schools-within-schools cannot be implemented successfully unless the school people responsible for implementing the idea and the community in which the concept is being implemented have “bought into” the change. Nothing good happens in education without honest to goodness enthusiasm.

The need to bring people on board with the small schools issue—and not go forward with implementation if those who must implement it do not buy the concept—is merely an example of a more general recommendation that we are making: The district and individual schools need to create forums that promote communication across different stakeholder groups. The purpose of these forums should not be public relations but, rather, the emphasis should be on generating a variety of perspectives on a problem, on a proposed solution, or on a solution that has been implemented. When people have a chance to have their say and what they say is seriously attended to and, when appropriate, accommodated, the public relations issue usually takes care of itself.

For real communication to occur at any forums that are created by the district or by individual district schools, those in charge must listen more than talk. When those who have convened a meeting do talk, their emphasis must be on explaining and persuading rather than on the sort of “autocratic talk-down” kind of talking alluded to by the principal quoted above.

One additional point: The focus of the sorts of forums we are recommending must be on solving problems rather than on promoting or justifying predetermined solutions. In order to keep this sort of focus, school people must check their defensiveness at the forum door and welcome honest feedback, even when the feedback challenges ideas and initiatives in which they have invested a great deal of time, effort, and psychic energy. School people, in short, must be committed to solving problems and finding the best solution to problems rather than to any particular pet solution.

CONCLUSION

Recently, many people associated with Austin’s schools have begun using the new three “Rs”—Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships—to think and talk about what should be happening in the district and in the district’s schools. This report certainly has had something to say about rigor (for example when we recommended that high achievement should be rewarded by the granting of greater site-level discretion). The report also addresses the relevance issue in a number of places; one example is the rationale we provided to support our recommendation to revitalize workforce education within the district’s high schools. The bulk of this report, however, is about the third “R”: Relationships. From our perspective, an array of relationship problems must be confronted and addressed if the district’s high schools are to have any hope of providing an education that is both rigorous and relevant to students.

There is one additional “R” that we believe must be attended to if the district is to be successful in reforming high school education: Resource Alignment. A not-so-subtle subtext throughout most of this report has emphasized the need to prioritize goals, to eliminate (or at least minimize) initiatives that address goals that are not a high priority, and to limit the number of new initiatives the district undertakes. This sort of discipline is necessary to ensure that resources are not spread too thin or even squandered. A less-is-more approach also will help insure that initiatives that do address high priority goals will have the resources and support required to be successful.