

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE FUTURE OF AUSTIN'S HIGH SCHOOLS

This report focuses on four issues that have emerged from a study conducted by 22 students from the University of Texas-Austin's doctoral program for future superintendents and some of the faculty and staff who work with that program. The focus of the study was the condition of Austin's 11 high schools at present and the possibilities for high school education in the district in the future. The students in the Superintendency program interviewed 436 administrators, teachers, parents, and students from each of the district's eleven high schools during the 2003-2004 academic year. Four hundred and five of these individuals also filled out questionnaires that were analyzed and used to triangulate interview data.

Faculty and staff involved with the program conducted additional interviews of their own, including interviews with the district's 11 high school principals. The authors of this report also conducted a final round of interviews with teachers, principals, and central office administrators immediately prior to the preparation of the final draft of this report to clarify issues and to get feedback about the accuracy and appropriateness of the contents of earlier versions of this manuscript. All totaled, more than 500 administrators, teachers, parents, and students were interviewed for this study.

The study generated a wide array of findings that are contained in an interim report prepared by the students in the Superintendency program. These findings included many positive comments about the district and those who work within the district. Because focus is no less important in acting on the findings of a report than it is in running a successful high school, this report highlights only four issues that emerged in the study. These issues were selected because they focus attention on fundamental problems that must be addressed if the district's high schools are to improve in significant ways. The four issues are: (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.

Issue # 1: The Need to Redefine Leadership Roles

Overview of the Issue

The data suggest that principals often feel as if they must be—or, at least, appear to be—superheroes. As a result, they become “lone rangers” who are afraid to ask supervisors, peers, or even members of their own staffs for assistance, even when assistance is required. Consequently, many of the principals who were interviewed spoke of feeling

lonely and isolated, and they described approaches to leadership that are not well matched to the needs of a large and complex organization like a high school.

The assistant principal role appears to be equally problematic, at least for assistant principals who aspire to be principals some day. Currently assistant principals function as specialists and technicians. Consequently, they have limited opportunities to learn about the organization as a whole or practice the sorts of leadership skills needed by principals.

Finally, some interviewees spoke of the lack of attention being paid to developing teacher leaders. Designated teacher leaders could help lighten the almost impossible load that administrators are currently expected to carry, especially in the instructional leadership area, as long as the school has a clear focus and encompassing a limited number of goals and all school leaders—including teacher leaders—stay focused on and work together to achieve the school's goals.

Recommendations

- **Actively Challenge Traditional Thinking about the Principal-as-Superhero**
- **Establish Leadership Development Schools that Experiment with and Model Alternative Approaches to Leadership**
- **Redefine the assistant principal role, either by developing and experimenting with alternative conceptions of the role in Leadership Development Schools, or, if the above recommendation about establishing Leadership Development Schools is not implemented, in some other way.**
- **Think in terms of administrative teams rather than on individual administrators when doing such things as hiring and providing professional development for administrators; and, whenever possible, think of leadership at the school level even more broadly and work with leadership teams composed of teacher leaders and counselors, as well as school administrators.**

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

Overview of the Issue

Teachers, in particular, 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 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 at-risk for many different 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).

The district has recently adopted a number of initiatives to respond to the needs of English Language Learners including establishing so-called sheltered classes for students with limited English proficiency who attend regular district high schools and establishing the International High School for International Students as a school-within-a-school at Johnston High School. The data suggest that the shelter class initiative was implemented without providing professional development to the teachers assigned to shelter classes. It is too early to assess the success of the International High School initiative, though recent, well-publicized problems with the school suggest that successful implementation may be more difficult than anticipated.

Recommendations

- **Target high priority needs, including the need to support English Language Learners and other special needs students, and reallocate resources accordingly.**
- **Conduct a Formative Evaluation of the International High School for Recent Immigrants for the purpose of program improvement.**
- **To increase the relevance of the high school experience for students who have difficulty getting engaged in traditional academic programs, revitalize Workforce Education programs, in part by consolidating existing programs and housing them in a single high school.**

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

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 eleven 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 policies—especially 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.

Teachers and principals, however, talked about the difficulty of trying to respond to the often unique needs of students while having to adhere to district policies. The tension those who work at the school site feel is understandable: While students are unique and often have unique needs that must be accommodated, policies and programs are, by definition, general. They are written and 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. Consequently, even a much-needed policy (e.g. the district’s IPG/Benchmarking policy that finally gave the district a much needed curricular scope and sequence) may be problematic in certain situations and with certain individuals.

Thus the challenge is to develop procedures to modify truly problematic aspects of district policies and, if possible, to anticipate major problems in advance. And, since even the most thoughtful and carefully crafted district policies will never be able to accommodate the unique needs of certain students, the challenge is also to find the correct balance between district level direction (in the form of top-down mandates) and site-level authority for decision making.

Recommendations

- **Focus on results and give increased discretion to schools that continue to improve.**
- **Conduct a formative evaluation of the IPG/Benchmarking process that involves key stakeholders and focuses on formally identifying the many strengths of the process, as well as adjustments that may need to be made.**
- **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.**

Issue # 4
The Need to Improve Communication and Relationships

Overview of the Issue

The fourth and final issue discussed in the 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. Administrators and teachers, for instance, talked about the chasm that separates district personnel from the people who work in schools; at least some of this chasm has been produced by communication problems.

Communication problems also occur on a daily basis within schools. Both staff members and students, for example, talked about the difficulty of really knowing students in a large high school.

Clearly, one source of communication difficulties within both the district and the district's high school relates to district and school size. Within schools, according to some interviewees, the size problem is only magnified by some of the structures schools attempt to manage large numbers of students. The 47-minute period was a frequently cited example.

Communication difficulties involving the community, on the other hand, had less to do with the structures that have been created and more to do with the fact that there are very few forums in which parents and community members can be heard. The forums that do exist, often appear to be more a tool for public relations than a mechanism to promote honest communication.

One additional communication problem was identified: a tendency in the district to not listen and to engage in what one principal referred to as "an autocratic talk-down kind of" way of communicating.

Recommendations

- **Reinstitute a modified version of block scheduling that will not require the hiring of additional personnel and, consequently, will not require additional funding.**
- **Experiment with transforming large high schools into small schools-within-schools.**
- **Create forums that promote honest communication, especially prior to deciding whether to initiate a large-scale, complex initiative such as the small schools initiative.**

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 something to say about rigor and relevance. The bulk of the report, however, is about the third "R": Relationships. 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 Reallocation. 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 insure 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.