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ABSTRACT

The efforts of the Austin (Texas) Public School District to improve the readability and usefulness of technical reports are reviewed. Coincident with, or consequent to, a 1977 letter by W. E. Jones to the editor of an Austin paper (the "Austin American Statesman") complaining about excessively lengthy (500-page) evaluation reports, the district began to separate technical reports and summary documents. Technical reports became in-house documents and final reports took on a more newsy reporting style, with more and simpler graphics, simpler language, suggestions of actions rather than direct recommendations, standardized report features, an executive summary, and design features to guide the reader to important elements. Positive features of an evaluation report should be: (1) succinct description of the study; (2) succinct description of the analysis, in an attachment rather than in the text; (3) succinct description of the results; (4) conversational language; (5) simple presentation of numbers; (6) single idea tables; (7) placing complex tables in attachments; (8) simple, single-idea graphics; (9) popular format; (10) attractive report covers; and (11) a descriptive or inspiring title. Attachments include four pages of before and after reports reflecting the new policies. (SLD)

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Glynn Ligon and Elaine E. Jackson
Austin Public Schools
Austin, Texas

A paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association in San Francisco, California, March, 1989.

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The letter to the editor: W. E. Jones is a physician in Austin, with an office on one of the major streets we travel. Each time we see his sign along the curb it is a reminder of his 1977 letter.

To the credit of the Office of Research and Evaluation staff, our reaction to his lambasting was positive. We made an office picture of us all standing in front of the newspaper clipping, pointing our fingers at *each other*, and even commissioned cartoons about "The Wonderful Report." The positive reaction was not that we were amused rather than irritated, but that we actually took Dr. Jones' message to heart. Now, do not get the impression that we wholeheartedly agreed with his comments. We disagreed mightily with his sentiment that the newspaper article had adequately reported the achievement test results in just a few paragraphs.

The message we received and follow today is that our public (including school board members) do not have the time, interest, or inclination to read more than a few paragraphs— much less a full-length, carefully crafted, research-style report. The major flaw in the letter's logic, that it is possible to condense the salient points into a few paragraphs, is evident to anyone who has attempted to write a report about student achievement test results. Each answer given raises several more questions that require more detail. The bottom line is that evaluators must answer as many questions as possible *in* the report, but provide additional data for other persons to study further.

Our ongoing battle is with headline writers. The local education reporters consistently claim that someone else writes the headlines. Those headline writers epitomize the negative nature of news reporting—namely, bad news sells papers. A more insidious problem with the news reporters is the pressure they represent to reduce all issues to a single number that can be highlighted, compared, and used as the bottom line in judging anything. In a larger sense, our elected officials and even our top administrators want to reduce all issues to a single statistic, a simple measure of a tremendously complex issue. This usually cannot be done, but often is attempted by selecting one from a number of key statistics.

This paper is intended to advocate relegating indulgence in description and analysis to technical reports, and avoiding oversimplification of evaluation summary reports. In so doing, we will present options for reporting at different levels to meet the needs of a range of audiences.

Austin American-Statesman August, 1977

letters to the editor

Who writes this junk?

I was interested to read July 14 about the achievement test results of our Austin school children. The poor performance is certainly a matter of concern. Your article concisely summarized the important facts of these test results, and any further expansion of these facts would make them no more (or less) interesting.

Therefore, I was annoyed to read that the School District Office of Research and Evaluation has prepared a 500-page report on these achievement test results which is to be presented to the school board. Does anyone really believe that the school board members will have time to read 500 pages of this statistical gobbledygook, and would they be better trustees even if they did read it?

Who writes this junk? You were able to condense the salient points into a few paragraphs; at how much more did it cost the taxpayers to have it expanded to 500 pages? Will anyone read it? Why would anyone want to read it?

This is a beautiful example of the type of government hogwash that has kindled the taxpayer revolt. We want teachers and discipline in our schools, not paper-pushing administrators.

W.E. Jones
3007 North Lamar Blvd.

After the publication of Dr. Jones' letter, but not entirely as a result of it, the following key trends began to be evidenced in our reporting.

1. Technical reports were completely separated from the shorter summary documents.

2. Technical reports became in-house documentation of data collection, storage, and analysis procedures.

3. Final reports, as the shorter reports are now called, took on a more newsy reporting style. Characteristics of this style are now evident.

   - More graphics
   - Simpler graphics
   - Huge tables with hundreds of numbers moved to the back of reports as attachments
   - Technical terms avoided or defined
   - Laborious conversion of numbers from a table or graph into text replaced by statements of trends or key numbers
   - Key findings listed at the beginning of sections of the reports

4. Findings were written to suggest action that needed to be considered—stopping short of making direct recommendations. (More on this issue later.)

5. Report features such as a table of contents, executive summary, and definitions were standardized, so a reader could begin to look for them in the same place in all reports.

6. An executive summary was included.

7. Headings, boxes, bullets, and other organizational features began to guide the reader to important elements.

Overall, either coincidentally or consequently, the letter to the editor ushered in a time of tremendous restructuring of our evaluation reports; a trend that reflected, or even impacted, to some degree, how evaluation reporting has evolved across the country.

Recommendations

Over the years, there has been a fascinating debate about the appropriateness of recommendations in an evaluation report. Locally, we began in 1973 avoiding any hint of a recommendation, believing strongly that the decision makers and the program staff have to decide on options and select from among them. During this time, there were other active offices of research and evaluation that were making clear and direct recommendations for action in their reports. Our history of recommendations moves from "none offered" in the 1970s to an attempt to write key findings that require action in words that call for action, and even make that action clear. After an internal debate, the staff decided in the late 70s to divide major findings into two categories:

1. **Major Positive Findings** and
2. **Major Findings Requiring Action.**

In about 1986, this dichotomy was dropped in favor of a single heading:

Major Findings.

This was partly a result of discovering that some programs had no major positive outcomes, and others had outcomes that were neutral.

From observations of the winning entries in AERA Division H's outstanding report competitions across the years, there is a definite tendency for the judges to select reports with strong recommendations—or at least direct statements about changes that are needed. The styles and range of recommendations that are evident in the reports entered in the AERA Division H outstanding publications competition across the years are summarized at the right.

The major caution that must be heeded whenever an evaluator makes a recommendation is whether or not the evaluator creates a situation in which his or her ownership in that recommendation biases future objectivity in evaluating the impact of any changes made—or even objectivity toward a recommended change that was not made. We still tend to shy away from recommendations that might create such ownership. Our preference remains to lay out options that are available for selection or to merely point out a situation that calls for change of some kind. The easy way out? Possibly, but often it is more difficult to describe several options than to grasp an obvious one that has been incompletely considered.

LEVELS OF RECOMMENDATIONS

1. No recommendations; major findings stated matter-of-factly as descriptions:

The achievement gains of students attending summer school were equal to, but no greater than those of similar students who did not attend summer school.

2. Categorizing findings to highlight those that require action:

MAJOR FINDINGS REQUIRING ACTION:
The achievement gains of students attending summer school were equal to, but no greater than those of similar students who did not attend summer school.

3. Stating findings that require action in terms that indicate the action:

Without revision, the summer school curriculum and schedule are not effective in producing achievement gains for summer school attenders greater than the gains made by nonattenders.

4. Stating options that should be considered:

The achievement gains of students attending summer school were equal to, but no greater than those of similar students who did not attend summer school. Options that should be considered include lengthening the summer school term; making structural changes such as matching the curriculum more closely to the regular year curriculum, eliminating field trips and other activities that are not direct teaching, and matching summer teachers with their regular students; or eliminating the summer sessions and redirecting the funds to regular year activities that have proven to be effective.

5. Recommending a specific action to be taken:

The achievement gains of students attending summer school were equal to, but no greater than those of similar students who did not attend summer school. Because summer school has consistently proven to be ineffective, summer school should be ended, and funds should be redirected to regular activities that have proven to be effective.

Readers will vary in their desire to see direct recommendations. Those wishing the evaluator to do their job for them undoubtedly want recommendations. However, this may be too strong a statement, because many readers who want recommendations may deem that to be the responsibility of the evaluator and a completely proper and necessary function of evaluation. The counter argument, which has prevailed here, is that it is the responsibility of the program staff to know the options available and to recommend from among them. Thus, we have almost always stopped short of level 5— recommending a specific action.

The Executive Summary

Executive summaries have been around for a long time. In fact, even in research, we have been writing executive summaries for ages and calling them abstracts. However, we think that the big break for executive summaries came when evaluators began calling them executive summaries and complimenting the reader for being an executive. If you think this is too cynical, then the following reasons might be more acceptable for why the executive summary is the key element of the effective evaluation report.

1. Decisionmakers today either do not have or are unwilling to invest the time to discover for themselves the key findings from an evaluation.

2. Decisionmakers are more willing to delegate to the evaluator the identification of key findings than to take the time to do so themselves.

3. The executive summary is an effective advance organizer for readers who need to be assisted.

4. The executive summary provides a well-thought-out set of summary statements that can be extracted for use in other reports or quoted.

An effective executive summary needs to:

- **Have the ability to stand alone**— to be separated from the full report and be a useful, informative, independent document.

- **Be only one page long.** All right, maybe two pages are appropriate at times, but the shorter the better.

- **Include a program description.**

- **Have print big enough to read** even though the evaluator held the length to one page.

- **Use bullets and highlights** to lead the reader to key points.

- **Reference the full report.**

The Evaluation Report

So, we have moved, over the past 15 years, away from the unpopular and unread research-style evaluation report. What were the features of those reports that proved so devastating?

1. Length of the description of the study
2. Length of the description of the analyses
3. Length of the description of the results
4. Jargon and technical terminology
5. Extensive tables
6. Complex graphics
7. Uninspiring layouts
8. Uninspiring covers
9. Uninspiring titles
10. Convoluted sentence structure
11. Third-person construction

Though the reader of this paper could translate these negative characteristics into the positive features of an effective evaluation report, good reporting calls for us to spell it out in a simple list.

1. Succinct description of the study
2. Succinct description of the analyses—in an attachment rather than interrupting text
3. Succinct description of the results
4. Conversational language

5. Simple presentation of numbers in tables

6. Single idea tables that avoid nesting and interactions

7. Moving complex tables to attachments at the end of the report

8. Simple, single idea graphics

9. "Popular" format like that in magazines and newspapers, with helpful headings

10. Report covers that are interesting and/or related to the topic

11. A descriptive or inspiring title

Utility of Familiar Features

When our audiences absolutely must deal with a stack of our evaluation reports, the least we can do is try to facilitate their treks through them. The best assistance we can offer is a consistent format that becomes familiar to them, allowing them to find their favorite sections or to skip over the sections they find less useful.

In addition, helpful features such as boxed highlights, definitions/glossaries, and side bars all aid their interpretation and memory of key elements.

Befores and Afters

Attachments A and B contrast executive summaries and report covers respectively, before formats improved and after.

Report Length

The graphic at the right violates our premise that readers prefer single-idea, simple graphics. However, the audience for this paper is more sophistocated and, if you have read this far already, certainly more motivated than most evaluation report readers.

Report Titles Through the Years

Final Evaluation Report (TITLE I ESEA) 1974-75

1974-75 ESAA Pilot Project Assist Teacher Attendance Formative Report

Analysis of the 1977-78 CAT Scores for SCE Identified Students

Bilingual Syntax Measure II - Comprehensive English Language Test Equivalency Study 1978-79

1980-81 Evaluation Findings

Cable Channel 8: Is Austin Watching?

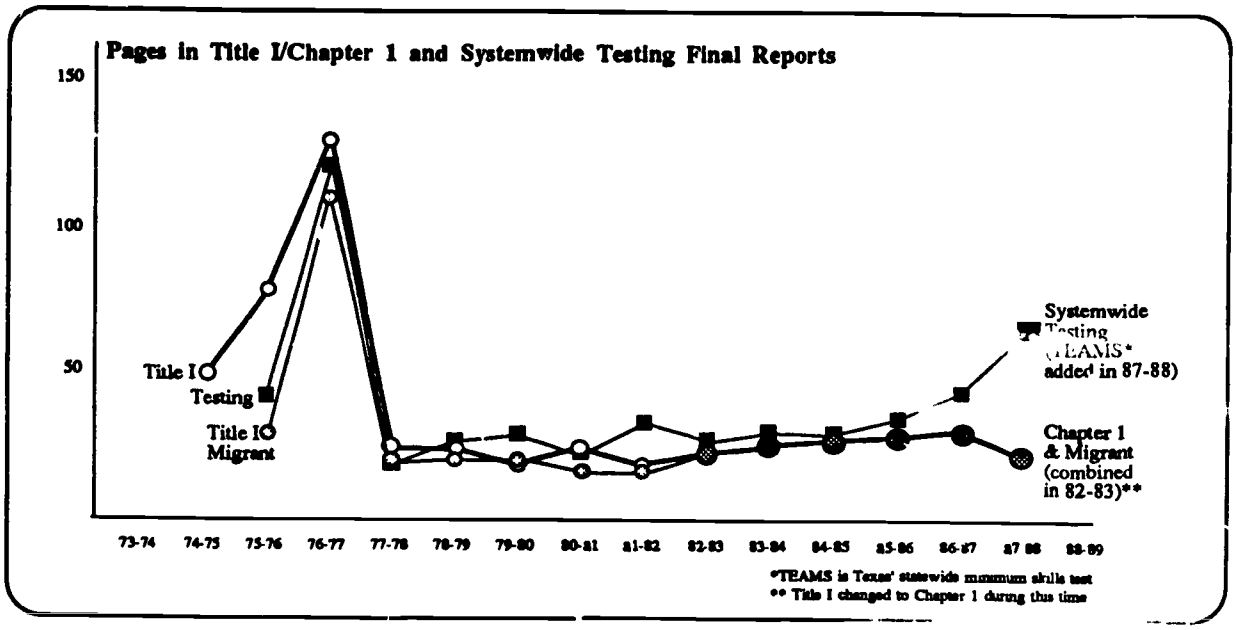
When People Talk, AISD Listens! ORE Districtwide Surveys, 1983

A Matter of Time: Retention and Promotion

Promotion or Retention: Have Policies Passed or Failed?

How Much Paperwork? *A Survey of Principals' In-Baskets, 1987*

"Mother Got Tired of Taking Care of My Baby" A Study of Dropouts from AISD



Pages

From 1974-75 through 1976-77, the length of our final reports grew dramatically. Then W.E. Jones wrote his letter. Since 1977-78 our summary reports have been considerably shorter. From 1977-78 through 1981-82, all of our final reports for a year were completed July 1 and bound together. They were introduced by a 6 - 12 page summary. Beginning in 1982-83, we published separate final reports with a separate summary report for the year. The first three of these summary reports contained only key findings; the next two years' publications included the executive summary from each evaluation. In 1987-88, the need to publish findings before the adoption of the District budget inspired *Preview*, a limited-circulation look ahead at findings to be reported.

Types of Final Reports and Findings Summaries

Separate Final Reports

- 1974 No summary document
- 1975 No summary document
- 1976 No summary document
- 1977 No summary document

Single Findings Volume
At a Glance Summary, Section 1

- 1978 At a Glance
  10 pages, Key Findings
- 1979 At a Glance
  12 pages, Key Findings
- 1980 At a Glance
  9 pages, Key Findings
- 1981 At a Glance
  6 pages, Key Findings
- 1982 At a Glance
  6 pages, Key Findings

Separate Final Reports, Boxed

- ORE Evaluation Findings, 1983
  4 pages, Key Findings
- 1984 At a Glance
  8 pages, Key Findings
- 1985 At a Glance
  8 pages, Key Findings
- 1986 At a Glance
  23 pages, Executive Summaries
- 1987 At a Glance
  25 pages, Executive Summaries
- 1988 Preview
  4 pages, Key Findings
- 1988 Overview
  40 pages, Exec. Summ. & Open Letters


YE GADS SHE'S
NO READING IT

The New Open Letter

A feature we tried this year with some success is the open letter. Evaluators had felt too restricted by our tight insistence that any conclusion or summary statement be substantially supported by data. The open letter provided a forum for the evaluator to draw upon personal impressions and to make judgements about trends across time. As can be seen, the open letter format also allows freer discussion of options for program improvement. The sidebar on this page shows a sample of an open letter.

Desktop Publishing

Among other innovations, our office moved to word processing and is now using desktop publishing. In 1976-77 there were final evaluation reports that not only were hundreds of pages long, but also originals that weighed double the weight of the same quantity of plain paper because of the taped and pasted pages.

Word processing gave us the ability to correct, change, and rearrange sections of reports, with only the graphs needing to be pasted in at the end. We could highlight, use italics, and underline at the touch of a keyboard. We could also catch typos - leaving us only "wordos," correctly spelled incorrect words. There were fewer excuses for errors, and sometimes even fewer errors.

Desktop publishing technology now allows us to gather word-processed text, computer designed graphics, data files, and practically anything else into a single document, use creative layouts, and print on a laser printer to produce documents that are near typeset quality. There is no longer any reason for an evaluation report to look like an evaluation report!

So What?

We would like to be able to report that all District evaluations are now read and valued by the staff who need the information. We would be pleased to report that there are no dull, homely looking, or repetitive reports. More realistically, we can report that our publications are improved, that our readers are better informed, and that we continue to search for better ways to communicate technical information.

Open Letter to AISD

Title VII Evaluation, 1987-88

In combination with other AISD programs, Title VII appears to be working, especially based on long-term results. Of course, as Cummins (1985) points out, English-speaking classmates are not "standing still waiting for them to catch up." Especially in AISD, where average performance tends to be above the national average, Title VII must enable students to "run harder and faster" to catch up and succeed. While Title VII does seem to be moving in this direction, the evaluation process did suggest some areas for possible improvement. Readers are invited to draw their own impressions based on the data in this report and their own knowledge of the program.

- Tutoring. National research has found that well-designed and implemented tutoring programs can be successful. However, across the three years of Title VII, positive effects of the University of Texas tutors have not been found. Students not tutored have shown patterns of growth similar to or greater than those of tutored students. The tutoring program appears to need revision. ...

- ESL Training. A total of 33 teachers in Title VII schools, plus 15 others, now have had ESL endorsement courses. Increased efforts to disseminate their names to appropriate school personnel could increase the number of LEP students scheduled into these classes. ...

- Parent/Family Involvement. Parent and family support groups provided through Title VII have begun to build a connection between the parents and the school....Child care, as provided at some meetings this year, is a positive step. However, home visits, perhaps by ESL teachers, could reach parents who would not ordinarily attend workshops....

Thus, overall, Title VII and AISD appear to be making positive strides with these students. Continued refinements could result in an even more successful program.

ABSTRACT

QUARTER SYSTEM EVALUATION, 1975-76

Description of Program

In 1971 the 62nd Texas legislature passed a bill calling for
tation of a quarter system in all Texas schools. This syste
mented in the Austin Independent School District beginning i
school year. The school year was broken down into three qua
two semesters. In addition, a fourth quarter was offered in
schools during the summer; however, tuition is required and
is not comparable to the other three in variety of courses
primary impact of the change to a quarter system has been a
level, where the change was accompanied by a major revision
The number of courses offered by the high schools was appre
in many areas the variety was increased greatly and sequen
and other prerequisites removed. This change was also acc
changes in the way registration takes place, the way teach
courses, and other administrative matters.

Evaluation Purposes

The quarter system evaluation was designed to assess the
changes of calendar, curriculum and other aspects of the
students and others. One primary purpose for the first y
collect data which could serve as a baseline for examini
effects these changes have; another was to pinpoint imple
which may call for special efforts from the district to
not the purpose of the evaluation during the first year
effect of the quarter system or the curriculum in depth;
this could more appropriately be done after the changes
effect for a time.

Evaluation Activities

The quarter system evaluation gathered data from a var
Fall and spring opinion data were collected from stude
parents, and administrators. Achievement and attitude
data were collected from students. A variety of diff
ing enrollment, attendance, and other student informa
gathered. These data were analyzed to provide fall t
parisons where relevant, and in some cases to compare

Evaluation Findings

On the whole the quarter
that the majority of stu
education in Austin. Ho
were many concerns, and
satisfied, a considerable
satisfied with one or mor

Concerning the student dat
which may be cause for con
be attributed to the quart
only a year, and it is too
new curriculum, etc., may h
to be watched. Data in som

Achievement

The average scores for AISD s
tional Progress (STEP) ranged
grade to below average in the
scores were below the national
however, there was an increase
of AISD students do about as w
bottom 25% tend to perform lowe
ing that the lower average scor
of students of low achievement.

One other indication of the acad
to go to college can be found in
scores of students from AISD. A
between twenty and thirty points
the verbal and the math SAT teste
the last three years, paralleling
The scores for 1975-1976 are not y

Preparation of Students for Post-H

There was general agreement that AI
preparing its students who are goin
that it is doing less well in prepar
Course enrollments and credits earned
fairly similar pattern of courses, primarily in required areas, regardless
of their post-graduation plans. For college-bound students some areas are
rather lower in credits earned by the end of twelfth grade than might be
expected--about 2 quarter credits in foreign languages and about six in
college-preparatory math and science, for instance. These are areas which
would normally be of value to students in college.

Advising and scheduling

This is an area in which a great deal of concern was expressed by all groups.
During the fall quarter the schools spent a considerable part of the first
quarter simply trying to get students into the proper courses. Data suggest
that the best source of advice for students is subject-area teachers; how-
ever, some concern was indicated also that there be someone responsible for
keeping track of a student's entire program and making sure it meets his
needs. During the spring much less concern was expressed about the sched-
uling and advising processes; familiarity which the mechanics and courses,
a new course guide with renumbered courses, and a reduced survey of course
interest form all probably contributed to this.

Curriculum

The new curriculum is probably one of the areas where feelings are most
divided. Many students and teachers are enthusiastic about the new
courses and the flexibility of the new curriculum. However, the variety
and flexibility are obtained at the cost of considerably more work on
the part of teachers and considerably more responsibility in course choice
on the part of students, as well as at the cost of many more incorrect
decisions being made. The curriculum is already decreasing in effective
size somewhat--by eliminating some courses from the course survey form,
the senior highs have reduced the number of courses available to students
from about 700 to between 400 and 600, depending on the school. About
30% of the courses in the curriculum are offered at fewer than 5 high schools.

An examination of enrollment patterns by sex and ethnicity indicates that
there are some definite differences in the kinds of courses taken by stu-
dents of different ethnic background, as well as definite discrepancies by
sex.

Communication with parents

This is an area where dissatisfaction came through very clearly in some in-
stances, although the majority of parents were satisfied with their commu-
nication from the school on various topics. However, a substantial minor-
ity felt that they did not know what was going on, whether in the schools
or with their children, and were concerned about it.

Year-round school

Teachers and others expressed an interest in year round schools; however,
most parents and students and nearly half the teachers would still want
summer off, suggesting that it might be difficult to run a four-quarter sys-
tem on a voluntary basis.

Attachment A
Before

87.52

NEW DIRECTIONS: ALTERNATIVES TO RETENTION, 1987-88
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

AUTHORS: Nancy Saenz, Patricia Hopkins

About half of all elementary retainees are first grade students. Retention rates rose dramatically for grades 7 and 8 in 1986-87 with the implementation of House Bill 72. AISD has therefore implemented programs to serve as alternatives to retention, including two evaluated this year:

- Elementary transition classes, designed for students in grades 1 and 2 who did not need to repeat a grade but who needed a non-traditional curriculum, and the
- Transitional Academic Program (TAP), for retainees and potential retainees (primarily eighth graders), to permit them to enroll in ninth grade courses while repeating failed eighth grade coursework.

The Academic Incentive Program (AIP), another alternative for retainees and potential retainees at the middle school/junior high level, is also described briefly and used to compare with TAP.

MAJOR FINDINGS

ELEMENTARY

1. In a study of four groups of low achievers, those who participated in the transitional first grade in 1986-87 and were then placed or promoted into Grade 2 showed the best overall progress on ITBS scores. Transitional first graders subsequently retained did not progress more than regular first grade retainees (over two years).

2. AISD had 18 elementary transition classes in 17 schools serving 282 first and second graders in 1987-88, a major increase from the four known transition classes the year before.

SECONDARY

3. Grade point averages, percentages passing all coursework, dropout rates, and the number of classes failed for TAP students all compared unfavorably with full-year retainees.

4. Dropout rates were lower and grade point averages higher for students in AIP than for TAP students.

While nearly all students appear successfully to complete all alternatives studied, long-term results are not as positive. Adjustments to these models could lead to greater success. Long-term support may be needed for these high-risk students.

87.58

No Pass—No Play: Impact on Failures, Dropouts, and Course Enrollments

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

AUTHOR: Glynn Ligon

In January, 1985, the rules changed. Since that time, secondary students who wish to participate in extracurricular activities must pass ALL courses each six-week grading period or lose eligibility for the following six-week period. The controversy surrounding this new rule focused upon several key issues. This report studies these issues as they impact the high school students in the Austin Independent School District.

MAJOR FINDINGS

1. Did students fail fewer courses under the influence of the no pass/no play rule? Yes. Especially during the fall semester when many extracurricular activities occur, the percentage of high school failing grades has declined from 15.5% in 1984-85 to 12.8% in 1987-88.

2. Was the impact greatest for students enrolled in extracurricular courses? Yes. The decline in failing grades has been greater for students who are enrolled in courses associated with extracurricular activities.

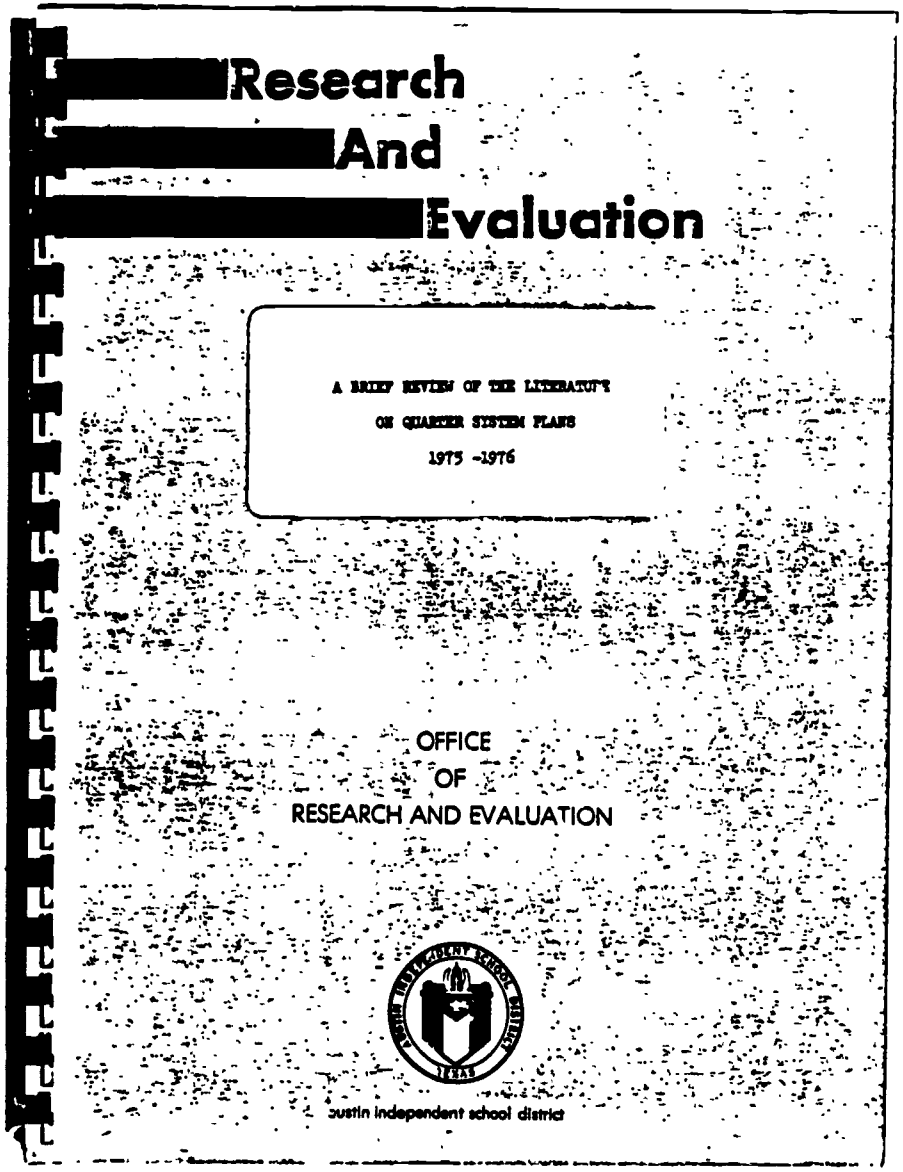
3. Did the dropout rate increase under the influence of no pass/no play? Overall, no. For students participating in varsity sports, the dropout rate may be increasing. For other students, the dropout rate may be declining.

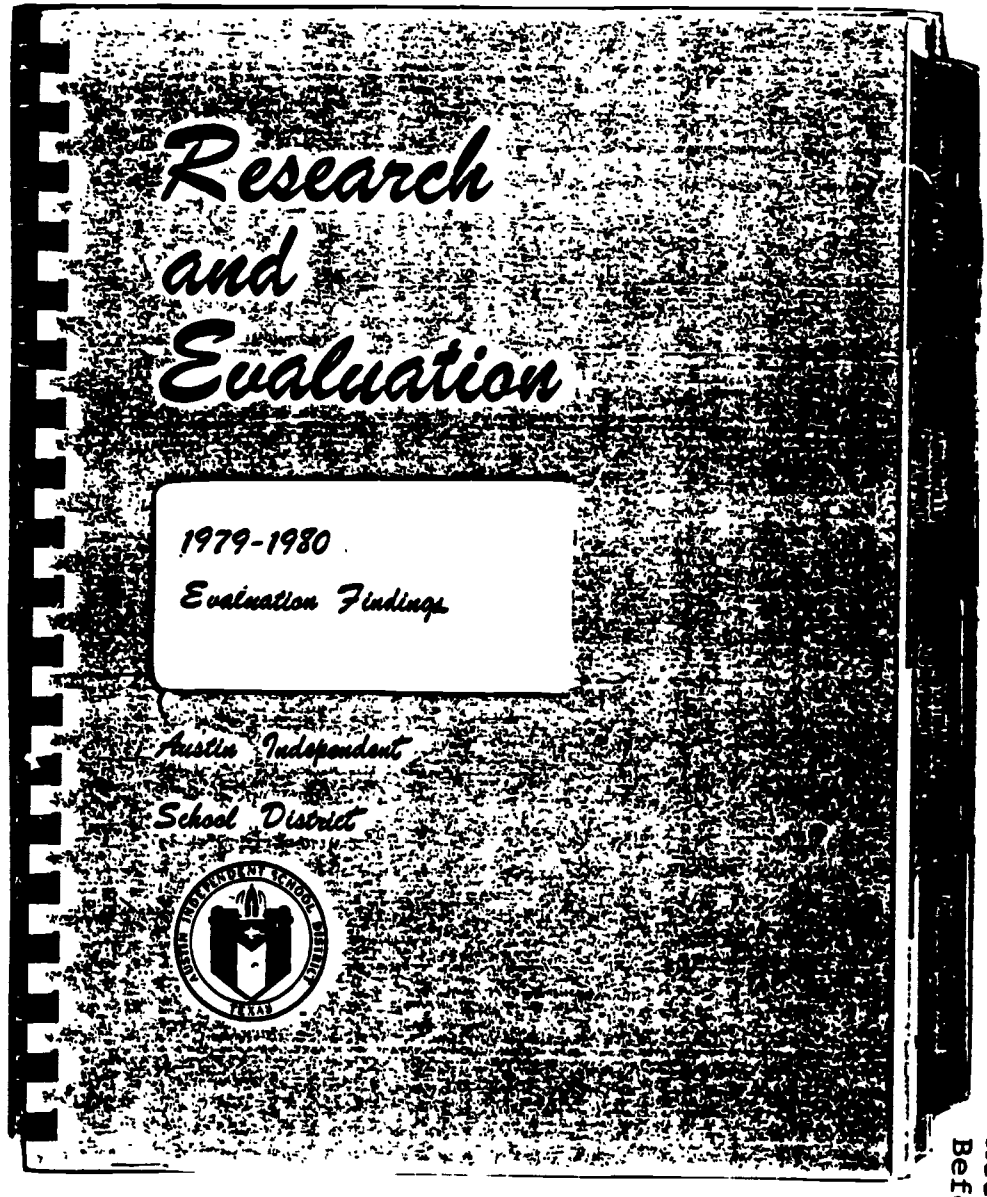
4. Did enrollments in honors courses decline under the influence of no pass/no play? No. Overall, the percentage of enrollments that are in honors courses has remained above 13%, growing from 13.6% to 13.9%.

5. Did students agree that the no pass/no play rule encouraged them to make better grades? Yes. For the first time in 1987-88, a majority of AISD high school students (52%) agreed that the no pass/no play rule encouraged them to make better grades.

On balance, the no pass/no play rule appears to have been a positive change. Clearly, because no pass/no play began during a time when many other changes were being implemented, we cannot conclude with assurance that this one rule change is responsible for these positive outcomes associated with failing grades, dropouts, and honors course enrollments. However, a negative impact of no pass/no play has failed to be evidenced in course enrollments or overall dropout rates.

Attachment A
After



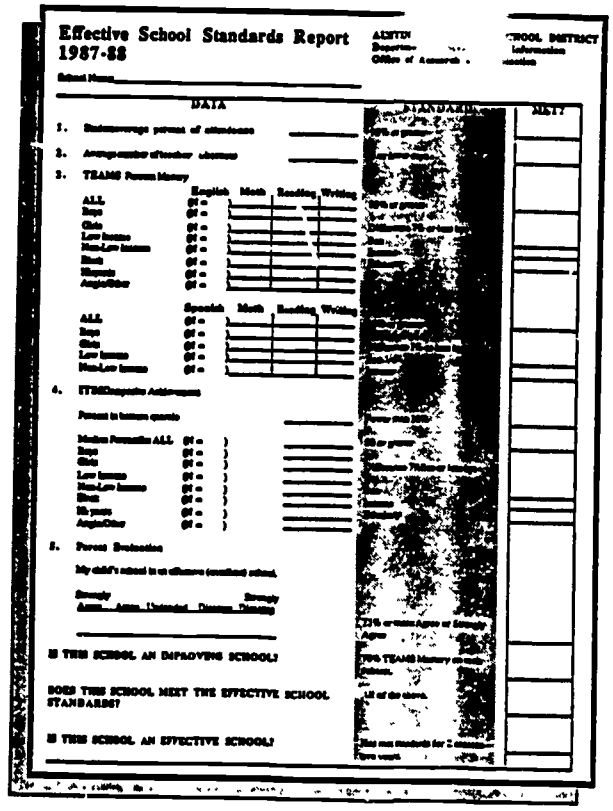


Attachment B
Before

No Pass—No Play: Impact on Failures, Dropouts, and Course Enrollments

Austin Independent School District
July, 1988

Priority Schools: The First Year



AISD 1987-88

Attachment B
After