

SCHOOL SYSTEM
20/20

THE REWARDS OF PERSEVERANCE ALDINE, TEXAS

The Power of a Systemwide Focus on Students, Teachers, and Leaders



20/20 CASE STUDY
MARCH 2016

SCHOOL SYSTEM 20/20

What Is School System 20/20?

ERS' School System 20/20 is a framework to guide district transformation so that every school succeeds for every student *because* of the system—not in spite of it. This framework can help district leaders identify and prioritize the system changes that are necessary to improve student outcomes. This case study explores Aldine's experience through the School System 20/20 lens.

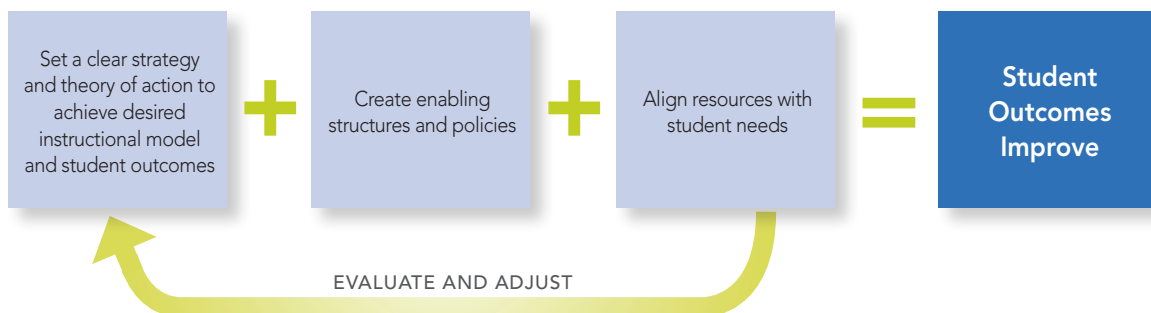
The School System 20/20 framework is made up of three parts:

- **A vision** of school system success, comprising seven key areas of transformation (as described on the following page)
- **A diagnostic** that includes qualitative and quantitative assessments to help districts measure and track their progress in creating the conditions that promote practices and resource use to support excellent instruction
- **A process** for reviewing those assessments, and collaboratively identifying changes to system conditions and practices that will lead to improved student performance

School System 20/20 is based on our years of experience working with a diverse array of school systems, our extensive collection of data from those districts, and published research on what works best for students.

When we engage with districts using School System 20/20, it serves as a data-informed, holistic framework for strategic planning, one that helps districts rebuild their school systems from the inside out. No two school systems that take the School System 20/20 approach will look alike. But each will be the kind of district that sets a clear strategy and theory of action, is willing to transform “legacy” structures and policies, chooses strategies to better align resources to student needs, and continuously evaluates and adjusts. We believe this process will lead to improving outcomes for every child, in every school.

The Strategic District Transformation Process



The School System 20/20 Vision

For this case study, we analyze Aldine's progress through the School System 20/20 Diagnostic. It serves as the lens through which ERS measures system improvement.

From this:

To this:

STANDARDS AND INSTRUCTION

Inconsistent standards that don't prepare kids to think critically, creatively, or collaboratively.



Rigorous, college-and-career-ready standards with effective curricula, instructional strategies, and assessments to achieve them.

TEACHING

Isolated job, limited opportunities for growth or teaming, and career and compensation paths unconnected to performance or contribution.



Selective hiring, development, and strategic assignment to schools and teams. Career path and compensation enable growth and reward contribution.

SCHOOL DESIGN

A one-size-fits-all learning environment with rigid schedules and class sizes that don't accommodate different learning needs.



Schools with restructured teams and schedules; personalized learning and support that responds to student needs and promotes instructional collaboration.

LEADERSHIP

Limited autonomy, flexibility, and support that do little to develop and promote strong leadership.



Leadership roles with clear goals, accountability and career paths, and the flexibility and support to achieve results.

SCHOOL SUPPORT

Central office focused on compliance and oversight rather than productive partnerships with schools.



A central office that serves as a strategy partner, leveraging data to increase efficiency and identify best practices.

FUNDING

Wide funding variances across schools, even after adjusting for differences in student needs.



Systems that allocate resources—people, time, and money—equitably, according to student and school needs.

PARTNERS

Schools struggling to provide the full range of social, emotional, health, and other services.



Partnering with families, community institutions, youth service organizations, and online instructors to serve students' needs.



“We have worked hard to recruit, retain, and support great teachers and leaders, and we are proud to recognize their extraordinary accomplishments. But we can’t let our success take our eyes off of the problems and questions that persist. It’s a continuous process.”

— Superintendent Wanda Bamberg
Aldine Independent School District

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Aldine Reforms at a Glance

Over the course of 20 years, the Aldine Independent School District (AISD) has taken a “systemwide” approach to reform, focusing on several School System 20/20 transformation areas in three distinct phases.

STANDARDS AND INSTRUCTION



SCHOOL SUPPORT



FUNDING



PHASE I ACTIONS

<p>Setting and Supporting Standardized Curriculum and Instruction</p>	<p>Set clear and specific curriculum and instructional standards that are aligned with state standards:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set benchmark targets for each subject area and grade level, and divided them into six- or nine-week sequences • Increased the level of rigor by moving toward more advanced competencies <p>Introduced data-driven instruction through an online curriculum and assessment system, TRIAND, that is implemented through teaching teams regularly meeting together</p>	<p>Provided greater and more customized support to schools:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Created four “verticals” of schools to improve instructional integration to follow students as they grow • Reduced number of school leaders reporting to each area superintendent • Implemented “horizontal” meetings to share instructional strategies 	<p>Provided greater transparency and flexibility in funding:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rolled out staffing formula to allocate funds to schools
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SCHOOL DESIGN



LEADERSHIP



SCHOOL SUPPORT



PHASE II ACTIONS

<p>Focusing on Leadership and School Support</p>	<p>Offered centralized strategy for Limited English Proficient (LEP) students, centered on targeted interventions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provided English immersion opportunities to higher-proficiency LEP students • Used same materials in LEP class as mainstream class <p>Offered districtwide Response-to-Intervention (RTI)</p>	<p>Strengthened districtwide staff development:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offered centralized training of principals to be better equipped as instructional leaders • Created three-year succession plan for principals to build strong pipeline of school leaders 	<p>Established performance measurement systems and processes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developed quarterly scorecards to be used by all key stakeholders districtwide • Started a turnaround strategy for higher-need schools
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STANDARDS AND INSTRUCTION



TEACHING



SCHOOL DESIGN



PHASE III ACTIONS

<p>Developing Teachers and Optimizing School-Level Practices</p>	<p>Raised performance standards at each school:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developed and use an assessment of instructional rigor for school walk-throughs 	<p>Supported teachers with a new evaluation system and professional development opportunities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduced a new teacher evaluation system: Invest • Created Professional Learning Community (PLC) opportunities 	<p>Offered master schedule to focus on core and make student-teacher assignments based on data:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Required high schools to have block schedules • Required middle to high schools to have 45-minute intervention period every day • Introduced data-based teacher assignment with the Giffin Model
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MARCH 2016

The Rewards of Perseverance

Aldine, Texas: Meeting Increasing Challenges of Rapid Growth and Change

Located 15 miles north of the city center of Houston, Texas, Aldine Independent School District (AISD) is a large, urban school district that has faced daunting challenges since the early 1990s. Over the past two decades, the district experienced a significant increase in the proportion of low-income and Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students. At the same time, it has faced the introduction of three increasingly rigorous, high-stakes state tests—TAAS (Texas Assessment of Academic Skills) in 1990, replaced by TAKS (Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills) in 2003, and by STAAR (State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness) in 2011.

Despite these challenges, AISD has shown impressive results. Though each new test brought an initial dip in student performance (which was also true statewide), for the better part of 20 years the district has steadily improved student outcomes, reducing achievement gaps and rivaling statewide test averages, even with a much higher-need population. In 2009, the district was awarded the prestigious Broad Prize for Urban Education to recognize its approach and student results.

AISD's overall student proficiency rate increased from 51 to 87 percent during the TAAS years (1994–2002),¹ and from 43 to 75 percent during the TAKS years (2003–2011)²—a jump of over 30 percentage points both times, which ended each phase on par with the state's average performance. The district's graduation rate has long been relatively high and has gotten higher, reaching 82 percent in 2014. During this same period, AISD reduced the achievement gap between white and African-American students from 31 percentage points in 1994 to 12 percentage points in 2014. These improvements were achieved while the percentage of AISD students who were economically disadvantaged also grew by 30 percentage points, from 55 to 85 percent.

The recent experience with the new STAAR test has been more challenging both for AISD and for Texas as a whole. Introduced in 2012, it was designed to be a more rigorous assessment of college- and career-ready skills than TAKS.³ Therefore, it is not surprising that districts and schools throughout the state, especially those with high-need populations, are struggling with the transition. Cutoff scores are scheduled to increase throughout the next decade, which will challenge all Texas districts to continue to improve the level of instruction they deliver.

Unlike the transitions to TAAS and TAKS, statewide performance on STAAR has been flat over the first several years of the test, staying steady at 77 percent from 2012 to 2014. In AISD, student scores actually dropped slightly from 72 percent to 69 percent over the same period. (We are not reporting scores for 2015 because the Texas Education Agency chose not to publicly release the math

results at a district level, due to concerns over new standards⁴). However, Aldine continues to have a much higher-need population than the state overall, and is performing on par with the state among economically disadvantaged students.⁵ Also notable, the achievement gap in AISD did not increase during the transition to STAAR, remaining steady at 12 to 13 percentage points between white and African-American students during this period.

Perhaps most promising, a number of individual schools have been able to adapt their structures and practice to increase support for teachers and students. Both Marcella Intermediate School and Shotwell Middle School have focused on teaching effectiveness—working to fill positions with the highest-quality candidates and providing job-embedded professional development through teaching teams—and on providing struggling students with additional instructional time in both math and ELA (see profiles on pages 10–11 and 22–23). Ninety-four percent of Marcella’s students are economically disadvantaged and 34 percent are English-language learners; 81 percent and 16 percent of Shotwell’s students fall into those categories. Yet in 2014, 78 percent of Marcella’s students and 72 percent of Shotwell’s students scored proficient or higher on STAAR. These schools are already outpacing the rest of AISD and the state in student outcomes. AISD has found it hugely valuable to learn from these positive examples, and in the last two years has put in place several initiatives aimed at providing additional support to struggling students districtwide. It will indeed be challenging to scale best practices across the district—but if the district’s track record is any indication, there is ample reason to be optimistic that it will rise to the challenge this time as well.

The Aldine Story: Charting a Path to Performance Improvement

AISD is the 11th largest urban school district in Texas, with 74 schools, 3,800 teachers, and 64,000 students.⁶ As part of the second-largest metropolitan area in Texas, Aldine has experienced a significant population increase, largely driven by new immigrants. Since the 1990s, AISD has experienced a 50 percent growth in its PreK–12 enrollment. During this time, the share of LEP students more than doubled, from 12 to 32 percent, and the share of students who qualify for Free and Reduced Price Lunch (FRL) increased from 55 to 85 percent. While AISD’s composition of students looked very similar to that of the rest of the state in the early ’90s, by 2014 this was no longer the case.

As these demographic shifts were taking place in the early ’90s, Texas introduced the new standardized state assessment, TAAS. This was the first time AISD students were measured using a statewide yardstick, and the results were sobering. In school year 1993–94, the first year of implementation, AISD’s passing rate was just 51 percent—5 percent below the state average.

The wake-up call of early TAAS results marks the beginning of AISD's journey to reform. From the start, this path to student performance improvement has been grounded in AISD's five Core Beliefs and Commitments. These speak to its primary focus on advancing student learning first and foremost, and then building a supportive, responsible, and development-oriented culture.

Aldine's Core Beliefs and Commitments

- 1. We believe each student can learn at or above grade level and will have an equal opportunity to do so.** We will provide equal access to a quality education, regardless of ethnicity, family income, gender, native language, special needs, or area of residence. We will allocate resources to ensure equity for each student to reach his/her full potential.
- 2. We believe AISD can achieve higher levels of performance through clearly defined goals that set high expectations for student achievement.** We will eliminate the achievement gaps between and within student groups.
- 3. We believe in the value of parents as the first and best teachers, and that the community must actively participate in the development of all children.** We will improve educational outcomes for our students by garnering support from parents, grandparents, caregivers, businesses, elected and appointed officials, civic and faith-based organizations, institutions of higher education, and medical and social service agencies, along with the district leaders, staff, and students.
- 4. We believe in the value of each employee, in his/her personal and professional growth, and in empowering each one to be accountable to make decisions aligned with the vision of the school district.** We will treat each employee with fairness, empower each employee to focus on high performance, and hold each employee accountable for results that contribute to student achievement.
- 5. We believe all environments should be supportive, safe, and secure.** We will ensure that the learning and work environments are safe and secure so that each student and staff member will achieve high levels of performance.

This journey has been aided by the fact that AISD has enjoyed stable leadership. Over the past 20 years, the district has had just three superintendents—M.B. “Sonny” Donaldson, Nadine Kujawa, and Wanda Bamberg—each of whom has led the district for at least seven years. This has enabled the district to sustain its unique culture, which it calls “the Aldine way.” This expression has come to mean focusing on continuous improvement; developing and promoting talent from within; and doggedly focusing on student needs, as conveyed in a slogan coined by Superintendent Donaldson: “Keep the main thing the main thing.”⁷

Stable leadership has also helped to sustain the district’s governance style, which is generally characterized as “top-down,” while providing school-level flexibility. As the Texas Education Agency’s Best Practices Clearinghouse summary noted, “even with a high degree of accountability and guidance, [Aldine’s] staff members at every level enjoyed flexibility and autonomy in making professional decisions and were encouraged to take risks in meeting campus and district goals.”⁸

District leadership has been very thoughtful about what should be held “tight” versus “loose,” based on what they believe requires consistency and scalability versus school-level flexibility. For example, given the relatively high mobility rate in the district, the district takes a highly centralized approach to curriculum and instruction. On the other hand, in recognition that school leaders are the best judges of needs within their own building, hiring and assignment of teachers at schools is handled entirely by principals. In addition, AISD often launches reforms centrally to test the approach, ensure quality, and support school leaders before extending them to the school level over time, as the reforms are better understood and schools have more capability to take them on.

This deliberate approach is evident in many of the district policies and practices examined in this paper.

Understanding Aldine through the Lens of School System 20/20

Guided by its Core Beliefs and Commitments, AISD leadership has continuously evolved district policies and structures to meet its changing needs over 20 years. In this case study, we use the ERS School System 20/20 framework as a lens to understand Aldine’s actions at the level of whole-system reform, and to help apply lessons learned to other districts. While Aldine did not base its reforms on School System 20/20, many of the principles are the same. Indeed, ERS did not work with Aldine until 2013–14, when we were engaged by the district to perform a targeted analysis of its resources, unrelated to School System 20/20.

But we believe that the School System 20/20 framework provides a common language that helps education leaders understand and compare the variety of ways that different districts have pursued system-level reforms over time, and achieved improved student results. In our first case study, “[Back from the Brink: A Case Study of Lawrence Public Schools](#),” we applied the School System 20/20 lens to understand how a deeply troubled district has made encouraging progress in just four years.

Aldine presents a different story in a different context—but one that is equally inspiring. For each case study, we interviewed district and school leaders, teachers, and others involved in the reform effort, and analyzed the district’s policies and actual resource use practices according to our [diagnostic assessment](#). Using the seven areas of transformation as a guide, we were able to bucket and contextualize the three phases of Aldine’s reform, which roughly tracked the three time periods of each new exam:

- **Phase I (1990–99): Setting and Supporting Standardized Curriculum and Instruction.** The starting place was instruction—supporting principals and teachers in meeting the new standards by providing central support, resources, and professional development.
- **Phase II (2000–10): Focusing on Leadership and School Support.** After the shift to the TAKS test in 2002, it was clear that instructional focus, while critical, was not enough. The district introduced clearer standards for school performance and focused on developing principal capacity. In addition, it launched district-led efforts to support the expanding ELL population and provide additional support to struggling schools.
- **Phase III (2010–present): Developing Teachers and Optimizing School-Level Practices.** With a strong and supported principal cadre in place and the introduction of STAAR in 2012, AISD took the next steps to improve teaching effectiveness in order to boost student outcomes. This phase focuses on measuring and managing teaching effectiveness, and on reorganizing people and time within schools to better meet the needs of struggling students.

What follows is a detailed description of Aldine’s path to student success, as well as an enlightening look at how it’s confronting the challenges it faces today.

Phase I (1990s): Setting and Supporting Standardized Curriculum and Instruction

In 1990, Texas introduced the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) exam, and within a few years AISD had to confront the difficult truth that its students were not prepared for the new era of higher expectations and accountability. After two consecutive years of Academically Acceptable rating (the second-worst performance category as rated by the Texas Education Agency), Superintendent Donaldson recognized this as a critical juncture for AISD.⁹ For the district to progress, he felt it needed to **redirect its focus on improving the curricular and instructional quality at every level**. His reform agenda during this phase aimed at fundamentally changing the district's quality of instruction by setting and communicating clear standards, and by reorganizing the support structure to schools. These reforms were so fundamental that all the actions taken during this time are still in effect today.

Standards and Instruction

✔ Set clear and specific curriculum and instructional standards

Given the new state assessment's shift toward testing academic skills versus minimum or basic-level skills and AISD's early weak performance on the assessment,¹⁰ Superintendent Donaldson prioritized improving curriculum and instruction standards first and foremost. Prior lack of attention to this area was evident in the fact that the deputy superintendent of curriculum and instruction position had been vacant for three years, until Superintendent Donaldson hired Nadine Kujawa to fill the position in 1995.¹¹ In this position, Kujawa, an Aldine native and a veteran of the district, created AISD's new districtwide curriculum, which was tightly tied to state standards for the first time. The new curriculum outlined benchmark targets for specific skills that every student was expected to master for each subject area and grade level, and divided them into six- or nine-week sequences.¹²

The new benchmarks also increased the level of rigor by moving toward more advanced competencies, such as applying or creating concepts, in keeping with the new state assessment standards.¹³ While each school still had the flexibility to deliver the curriculum in the way it wanted, the new benchmark targets provided teachers with clear guiding principles and standards for instruction.

✔ Introduce a process for data-driven instruction

At the same time, the district also introduced a comprehensive online curriculum and assessment system called TRIAND. The system contained a curated collection of model lessons and assessments, and it required teachers to submit weekly lesson plans that were then reviewed by their principals. TRIAND paved the way for a data-driven approach to instructional improvement. This process

was implemented through teaching teams that would work together on a regular basis to review assessment results, identify areas where students were not mastering skills or concepts, and then leverage the database to develop an instructional approach to address the issue.¹⁴

School Support

✓ Provide support to school leaders to ensure consistent use of standards-based instruction

With the introduction of new, more rigorous instructional standards, district leaders knew they needed to provide greater, more customized support to schools and school leaders. The district reorganized the school supervisory structure into four groups called “verticals,” each consisting of one high school and the elementary and middle schools that fed into it. This had the dual effect of reducing the number of principals reporting to any one central office supervisor (the area superintendent) and allowed for increased focus on instructional integration as students moved from one school level to the next. The new structure complemented the district’s efforts to standardize curriculum and instruction in that it allowed for deeper support and closer monitoring of principals’ actions, including their use of the newly established benchmark targets.

To ensure that the verticals did not lead to a segmented implementation of strategies, the district also instituted “horizontal meetings,” where area superintendents and school leadership from each vertical came together on a regular basis to plan and examine achievement data.¹⁵ These horizontal meetings facilitated districtwide sharing of instructional strategies and best practices in a more systematic manner. According to area superintendents and teachers interviewed, the new structure strengthened the partnership between the central office and school leaders, and fostered a collaborative culture.

“Verticals are focused on helping school leaders develop programs that are best suited for the needs of their students. Our job is to make sure that what you’ve decided to put in place is actually reaping success, that there is evidence of student learning and student growth.”

— Todd Davis, Area Superintendent¹⁶

Funding

✔ Provide greater transparency and flexibility in funding to empower school leaders



While not directly tied to improving instructional standards, Aldine instituted another important change during this phase, which was the way the district allocated staffing resources to its schools.

In the late 1990s, Aldine instituted for the first time a staffing formula to allocate personnel resources to each school. Previously, the district did not have a standard process that could ensure equitable and efficient allocation of staffing resources across schools. Instead, staff allocation decisions were made upon school leaders' ad hoc requests to the central office, typically based on their enrollment projections and/or enrollment changes over the course of the school year. This meant that school leaders were not expected to plan ahead to create staffing efficiencies in their buildings and, therefore, generally did not.¹⁷ With a more transparent and standardized process, the policy change allowed principals to gain a clearer sense of how much they actually had to work with, and also helped to incentivize principals to take ownership of their master schedule to create efficiencies with and optimize their staffing resources.

Policies such as these reflected AISD's approach to combining clear guidelines with school-level decision-making. This was also evident in a recent survey revealing that more than 90 percent of principals agreed or strongly agreed when asked if they had a clear understanding of how positions and dollars were allocated to their school.¹⁸

As shown in the summary table below, AISD made meaningful progress in creating enabling system conditions in the three focus areas of Standards and Instruction, School Support, and Funding with evidence-based strategies centered on student performance. These changes drove positive movement in practice and resource use.

SUMMARY OF PHASE I REFORMS

	From this:	To this:	Phase I Actions
<p>STANDARDS AND INSTRUCTION</p> 	<p>Inconsistent standards that don't prepare kids to think critically, creatively, or collaboratively. Insufficient resources for teachers to effectively teach these complex skills.</p>	<p>Rigorous, information-age standards. Effective curricula, instructional strategies, and assessments to help students meet those standards.</p>	<p>Set clear and specific curriculum and instructional standards that are aligned with state standards</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set benchmark targets for each subject area and grade level, and divide them into six- or nine-week sequences • Increase the level of rigor by moving toward more advanced competencies <p>Introduce data-driven instruction through an online curriculum and assessment system, TRIAND, that is implemented through teaching teams regularly meeting together</p>
<p>SCHOOL SUPPORT</p> 	<p>Central office staff focuses on compliance and oversight, hampering productive partnerships with schools.</p>	<p>A new approach to the teaching job focused on teacher development and opportunities, allowing all teachers to work in teams to deliver the best instruction.</p>	<p>Greater and more customized support to schools</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create four "verticals" of schools to improve instructional integration to follow students as they grow • Reduce number of school leaders reporting to each area superintendent • Implement "horizontal" meetings to share instructional strategies
<p>FUNDING</p> 	<p>Current practices that result in wide funding variances across schools, even after adjusting for differences in student needs.</p>	<p>Systems that allocate resources (people, time, and money) equitably across schools, according to student and instructional need.</p>	<p>Provide greater transparency and flexibility in funding</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roll out staffing formula to allocate funds to schools

School Profile: Marcella Intermediate School

SCHOOL AT A GLANCE (2013–14) ¹⁹		
Data Point	Marcella	District Average
Grades	5–6	N/A
# Students	811	N/A
Low-Income	93.7%	84.48%
At-Risk	48.5%	61.3%
English-Language Learners	33.8%	32.6%
Students with Disabilities	5.2%	6.8%
Student Mobility	26.4%	21.0%
Proficiency in ELA	74.0%	67.0%
Proficiency in Math	89.0%	71.0%

A high-performing school

Led by Principal Kathleen Sandoval since the school opened in the fall of 2007, Marcella is one of 11 intermediate schools in the district. It has consistently been one of Aldine’s high-performing schools despite having one of the highest percentages of high-need students. In 2012–13, it received two distinctions from the state for its academic achievements in mathematics and in student progress.

Data- and need-driven strategies and a “students-first” culture

Data plays a major role at Marcella, starting with teacher collaborative planning time. Teachers spend time with both their subject department colleagues and their grade-level teams. Marcella has also implemented Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), which occur once a week

and are led by skills specialists and the assistant principal. Teachers have more than five hours of collaborative planning time (CPT) each week, and they use this time to digest student data and plan their lessons around student need. This process is aided by the skills specialists, who are strictly dedicated to helping develop the teachers on campus (one specialist is provided by the district, while Principal Sandoval used a part of her Title I budget to hire three more). In addition to running CPT, the specialists disaggregate and analyze data, enter classrooms to support struggling teachers, and model lessons.

To generate the data, Marcella continues to test all students in all subjects every three weeks—well beyond the district average of twice a semester. These assessments allow Principal Sandoval to quickly identify struggling students and their areas of concern. Moreover, because Principal Sandoval has autonomy over her master schedule, she uses trends in the data to double-block subjects based on schoolwide needs.

Balancing this quantitative approach is a clear culture of “students first” woven throughout the school. Principal Sandoval is committed to creating a safe and supportive learning environment for all, where every student can and will meet or exceed high expectations. Teachers are held accountable to this vision and build strong relationships with students via the “hallway” system, where three core teachers (ELA, math, and science) instruct the same group of roughly 90 students. This facilitates strong relationships with teachers and parents, and allows the team

to discuss best practices and struggles of specific students. With a high number of at-risk students, Principal Sandoval also works extra hard to tackle school culture issues—such as bullying—quickly and directly, which helps both students and parents to feel more secure.

Additional innovations

Other important strategic initiatives at Marcella include:

- **Community partnerships²⁰**

For the past six years, ExxonMobil employees have generated hundreds of volunteer hours for mentoring at-risk students at Marcella through individual tutoring, community events, and communication during travel (e.g., sending postcards to students while traveling for work). In addition to mentorship,

the company also purchased bike racks and tables to provide a safe space for students and their mentors to meet and to foster a secure and welcoming environment for students.

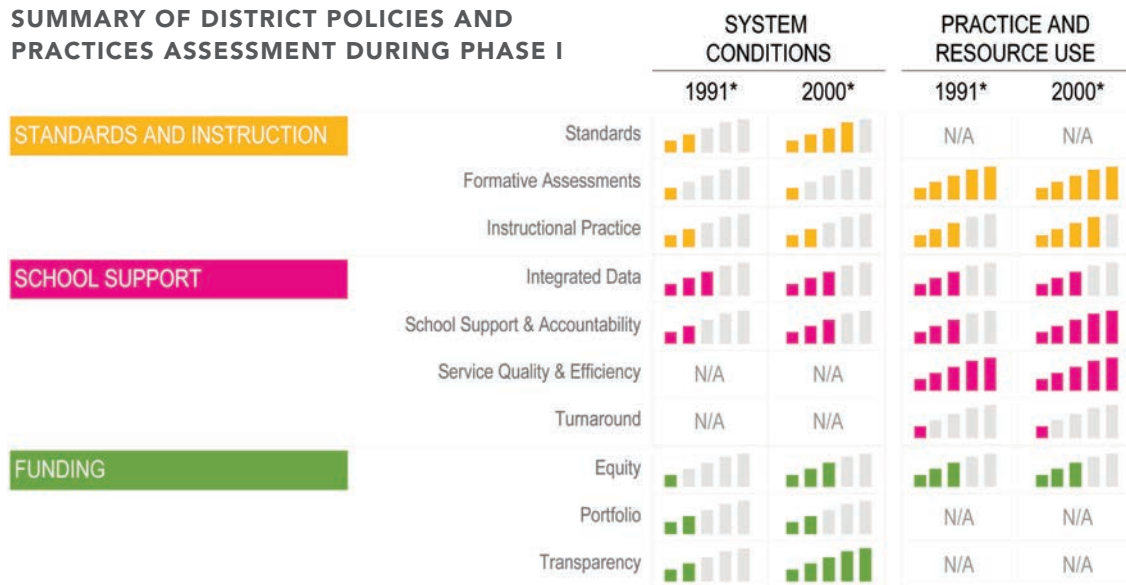
- **Unique staffing arrangements**

In addition to the “hallway” system, Principal Sandoval employs a job-sharing strategy. Because she has personally hired all of the staff in her building, she knows her staff’s capabilities. When two phenomenal science teachers were pregnant at the same time, Sandoval had each teacher work half days. This solution worked so well that, in the following year, the teachers returned and worked every other day. In return for her flexibility in this situation, this students-first solution enabled Sandoval to retain two excellent science teachers, rather than potentially losing one or both.



Phase I Results

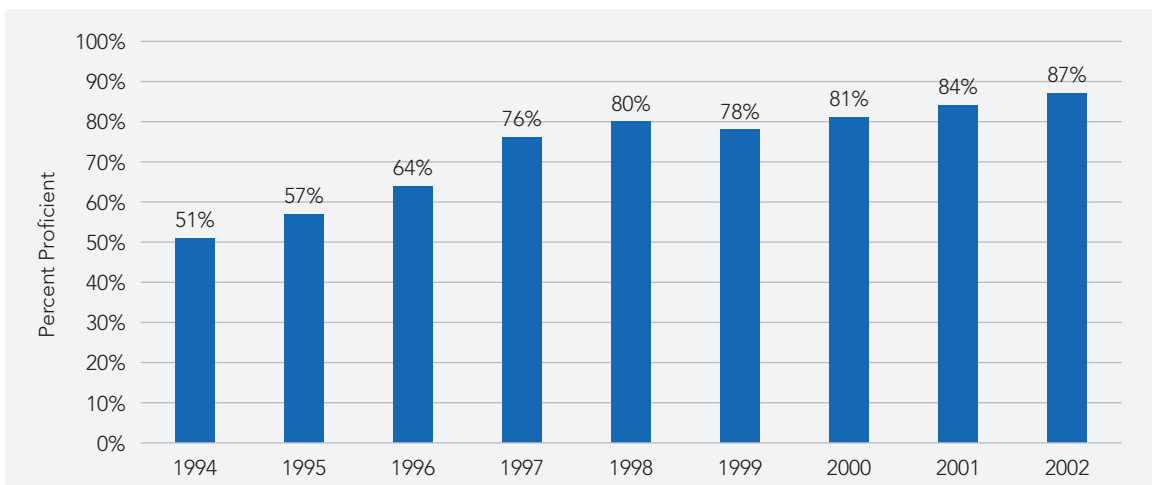
This chart summarizes progress made by AISD between the early 1990s and early 2000s as reflected by the School System 20/20 assessment tools.



* Because data for these years were not available, these reflect results only from qualitative questions.

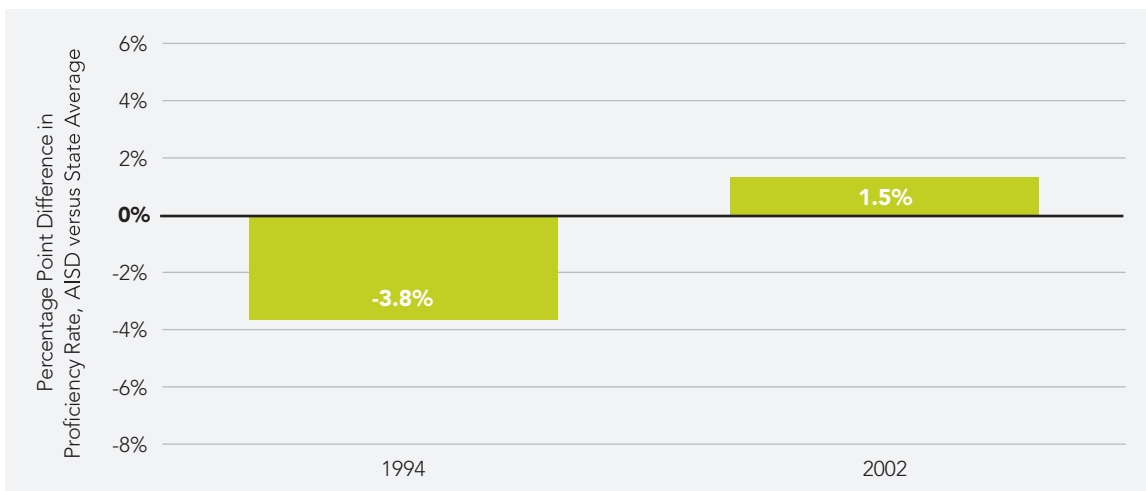
With these structural changes in place to improve the quality of instruction, and empower and support school leaders, AISD drove significant strides in student proficiency, improving from 51 percent proficient in 1994 to 87 percent proficient in 2002.

AISD TAAS PROFICIENCY, ALL SUBJECTS



While statewide TAAS scores increased as well over the same period, AISD improvement outpaced the rest of the state. Beginning in 1997, only a few years after these reforms were implemented, AISD started to catch up to the state average proficiency levels in both math and ELA, and by 2002 was outperforming the state average.

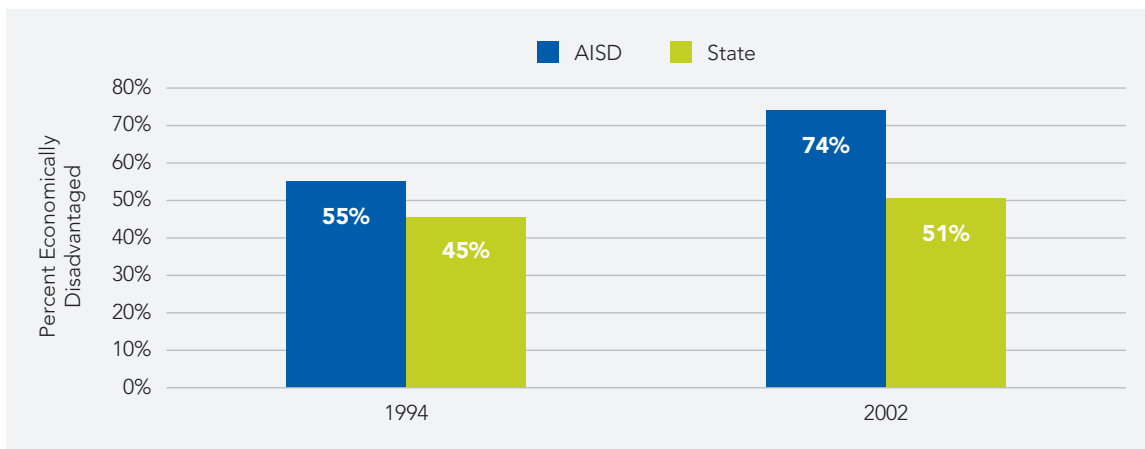
DIFFERENCE IN TAAS PERFORMANCE BETWEEN AISD AND THE STATE OVER TIME



Note: Each bar represents the difference between AISD and statewide proficiency on math and ELA tests only.

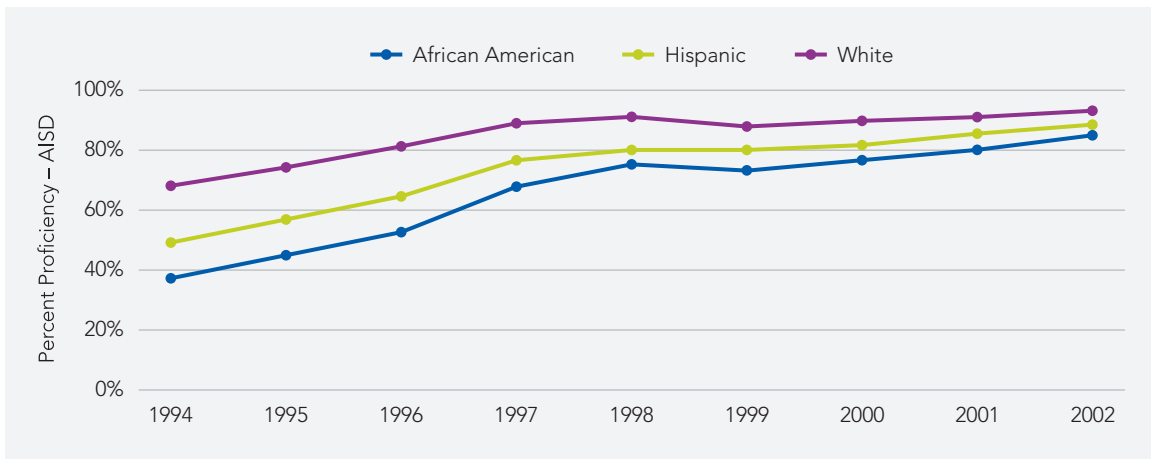
This improvement is even more impressive when viewed in light of the fact that from 1993 to 2002, the AISD population went from 55 percent FRL (versus 45 percent for the state) and 11 percent LEP (versus 12 percent for the state) to 74 percent FRL (versus 51 percent for the state) and 23 percent LEP (versus 15 percent for the state).

PERCENT OF STUDENT POPULATION THAT IS ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED



In addition, AISD significantly narrowed the achievement gap between minority and nonminority students. The gap in proficiency rates between African-American students and white students narrowed from 31 percentage points to 9, while the gap between Hispanic students and white students declined from nearly 20 percentage points to less than 5.

TAAS PERFORMANCE BY STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS



AISD consistently performed on par with the state until 2002, when TAAS was replaced by the new TAKS assessment. Although TAAS was the first time that more advanced concepts were being assessed, it was still significantly less rigorous than subsequent assessments, making it perhaps easier to quickly adjust instruction to meet the new TAAS demands.²¹ Nonetheless, the results were remarkable, particularly in light of the fact that AISD’s share of economically disadvantaged students had grown from about 50 percent of its student population to nearly 75 percent during this time—about 45 percent above the state average.

Phase II (2000s): Focusing on Leadership and School Support

By 2003, AISD had achieved the “Recognized” accountability rating from the state for seven consecutive years and had even become a finalist for the prestigious Broad Prize for Urban Education. Despite these gains, the district’s performance again dropped dramatically with the introduction of the more rigorous state assessment, Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), in 2003. During the first two years of TAKS, AISD underperformed the state by 8 percentage points. TAKS was much more rigorous and comprehensive than TAAS, and it was clear that with these new demands, efforts beyond setting clear instructional standards would be required to meet the new, higher expectations.²² The district also faced new questions, such as how best to serve the growing ELL population and whether it needed to provide additional support to schools with a higher concentration of need, given their growing share of high-need students.

Against this backdrop, the new superintendent, Nadine Kujawa, previously the deputy superintendent of curriculum and instruction, began the second phase of Aldine’s transformation. Having played a key role in developing and rolling out the more rigorous and standardized curriculum during the previous phase, Superintendent Kujawa turned her attention to **raising and sustaining the higher level of rigor by providing greater support and accountability to schools and school leaders. In addition, she focused on providing extra support to the needier students in the district.** Starting by rearticulating its goals and objectives, based on the Baldrige Education Criteria for Performance Excellence,²³ the district set clear benchmarks to work toward, and then focused on creating an effective support structure for school leaders and for schools with higher concentrations of need. AISD also focused on providing additional support and intervention for high-need students, initially targeting early grades and English-language learners.

School Design

Provide targeted interventions for Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students

By 2010, the share of Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students reached nearly a third of all AISD students. With the influx of immigrant families, the district took a centralized approach to support LEP learners, such as by standardizing the instructional calendar for the first six weeks of the newly implemented English Language Institute (ELI). This meant that new secondary students with a higher level of English proficiency were all placed in an English immersion environment for 150 to 200 minutes a day, with access to the same electives as general education students.²⁴

In addition, Equitable Integrated Instruction (EII) guidelines were introduced to support English proficiency. Based on the guidelines, AISD began to use the same materials in its LEP class as in its mainstream class and incorporated additional materials customized to meet the students’ special needs.²⁵

Initially, these interventions were directed using a centralized approach. Implementing these interventions centrally meant they could be rolled out quickly, giving school leaders the time to test them out and refine them for their schools, ultimately taking ownership as these initiatives became part of the school culture.

Through these programs, AISD was able to successfully narrow the achievement gap between its Hispanic and white students from 25 percentage points in 2004 to 3 percentage points in 2011.

Offer districtwide Response-to-Intervention (RTI)

During the late 2000s, Aldine also implemented districtwide Response-to-Intervention (RTI) as part of its commitment to “enhancing the capacity of schools by adopting a sustained, positive, preventative, and effective instructional approach to schoolwide discipline and behavior management.”²⁶ RTI is a program used by districts across the country entailing a three-tiered prevention process. All students receive support at the universal or Tier I level, and if the behavior of some students is not responsive, more intensive behavioral supports are provided, in the form of secondary or Tier II interventions or highly individualized intensive or Tier III interventions.²⁷ RTI has proven to be an effective alternative to immediately placing struggling students into special education. When discussing the implementation of RTI, the district was careful to emphasize that it is an important piece of a number of district initiatives focused on improving student performance at this critical juncture of rising performance standards.²⁸ The district firmly believes improving student performance will depend on how each of the initiatives works in conjunction with the others.²⁹ As a testament to this holistic approach, 90 percent of principals surveyed said their general education and special education teachers “usually” or “always” collaborate over content and students; only about 10 percent responded “occasionally.”³⁰

Leadership

Strengthen support for principals around instruction

AISD expanded its Phase I efforts to develop and support its school leaders by providing additional professional development opportunities and by raising their level of accountability for student learning. In line with its core focus on instructional quality, the district redefined the role of principals from primarily administrative to instructional leadership in support of their teachers. Centralized training was provided to equip principals to support their teachers more actively with lesson planning, even providing scripted lessons when needed.³¹ These changes led principals to view teacher and staff development as a top priority. According to the principal survey conducted for this case study, more than 92 percent of principals surveyed agree or strongly agree that the district continues to provide them with the support and training they need to be effective.³² And this principal support extends to general support for principal growth. Ninety-two percent of principals interviewed agree or strongly agree that “my current school assignment provides me the greatest opportunity to have impact and grow professionally” and that “effective school leaders within my district are given opportunities to grow with challenging assignments.”

Develop a strong pipeline of school leaders

As AISD focused its efforts on developing principals as instructional leaders, the district also began to rethink and realign its school leadership cultivation efforts. The district focused on developing a strong pipeline of principals from within the district. High-potential candidates were identified three years out, and were provided training and exposure to instructional leadership through principal academies. The district instituted a standardized career path for instructional leaders to become principals based on a multiyear succession plan: Year 1, Department Chair; Year 2, Skills Specialist; Year 3, Assistant Principal; Year 4, Principal.³³

School Support

Establish performance measurement systems and processes to increase accountability

AISD developed a new mission statement—“Produce the Nation’s Best”—and set four objectives for all employees, from the central office to the classrooms:

1. AISD will demonstrate sustained growth in student achievement.
2. AISD will recruit, employ, and retain a quality teaching, administrative, and support staff to attain excellence in student performance.
3. AISD will allocate resources to maximize excellence.
4. AISD will increase and improve stakeholder partnerships and satisfaction.

To help operationalize the new objectives, the district introduced a new performance measurement tool: a quarterly scorecard. Still in use today, the scorecards help align and focus the efforts of district and school leadership and key stakeholders toward common goals, while increasing their accountability to make progress against the objectives. The scorecards provided integrated data around district and school-level objectives, activities, and performance. By revealing where the district and individual schools may be falling short of expectations in a timely manner, they help to guide and prioritize concrete next steps.




Launch a turnaround strategy for the highest-need schools

Starting in the mid-2000s, the district also offered targeted support to high-need schools. The district identified two to three “Accelerated Schools” each year based on factors like poor TAKS performance, failure to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), or whether schools with new principals had higher-than-average teacher turnover.³⁴ While the Accelerated Schools did not receive additional funding, they were provided ample additional technical assistance. Program directors from the central office worked directly with these schools to develop a customized action plan to address the specific improvement needs of that school.³⁵ Examples of the support provided included helping teachers

to plan lessons, providing model lessons, observing classrooms, and giving feedback on instruction and instructional strategies to a group of grade-level teachers.³⁶ The district also offered targeted professional development (PD) to Accelerated Schools and tracked and documented their attendance of PD programs and follow-up assignments in a staff development summary linked to the school intervention plan.³⁷

During Phase II, AISD began to improve the learning experience of its increasing LEP student population, increased its support to school leaders for instructional leadership, and initiated a turnaround strategy for higher-need schools. All of these actions are transforming AISD toward becoming a more strategic district.

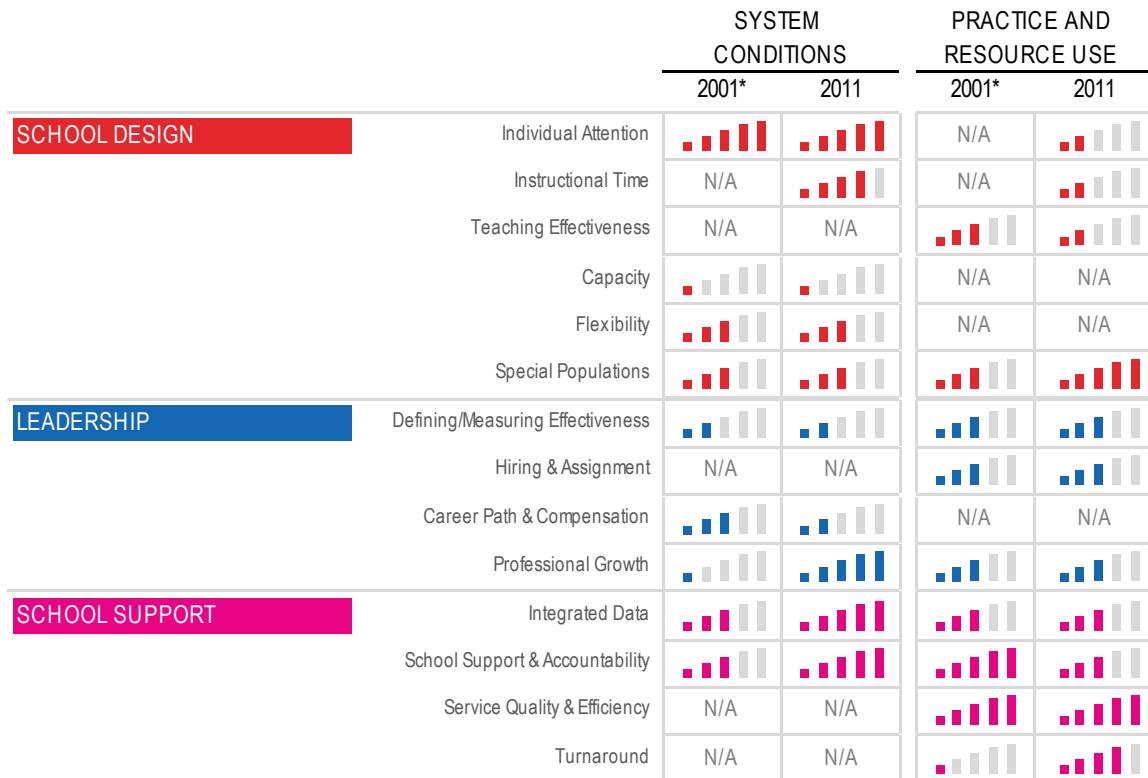
SUMMARY OF PHASE II REFORMS

	From this:	To this:	Phase II Actions
 <p>SCHOOL DESIGN</p>	<p>A one-size-fits-all learning environment, and rigid schedules and class sizes that don't accommodate a range of learning needs.</p>	<p>Restructured schedules and dynamic grouping strategies that respond to learning needs and create opportunities for instructional collaboration.</p>	<p>Offer centralized ELL strategy centered on targeted interventions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide English immersion opportunities to higher-proficiency ELL students • Use same materials in ELL class as mainstream class <p>Offer districtwide RTI</p>
 <p>LEADERSHIP</p>	<p>Limited autonomy, flexibility, and support that do little to develop and promote strong leadership.</p>	<p>Leadership roles with clear goals, accountability, and career paths, and the flexibility and support to achieve results.</p>	<p>Start districtwide staff development on instruction:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer centralized training of principals to be better equipped as instructional leaders • Create three-year succession plan for principals to build strong pipeline of school leaders
 <p>SCHOOL SUPPORT</p>	<p>Central office staff focuses on compliance and oversight, hampering productive partnerships with schools.</p>	<p>A new approach to the teaching job focused on teacher development and opportunities, allowing all teachers to work in teams to deliver the best instruction.</p>	<p>Establish performance measurement systems and processes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop quarterly scorecards to be used by all key stakeholders districtwide <p>Start a turnaround strategy for higher-need schools</p>

Phase II Results

This chart summarizes progress made by AISD from the early 1990s to the early 2000s as reflected by the School System 20/20 assessment tools.

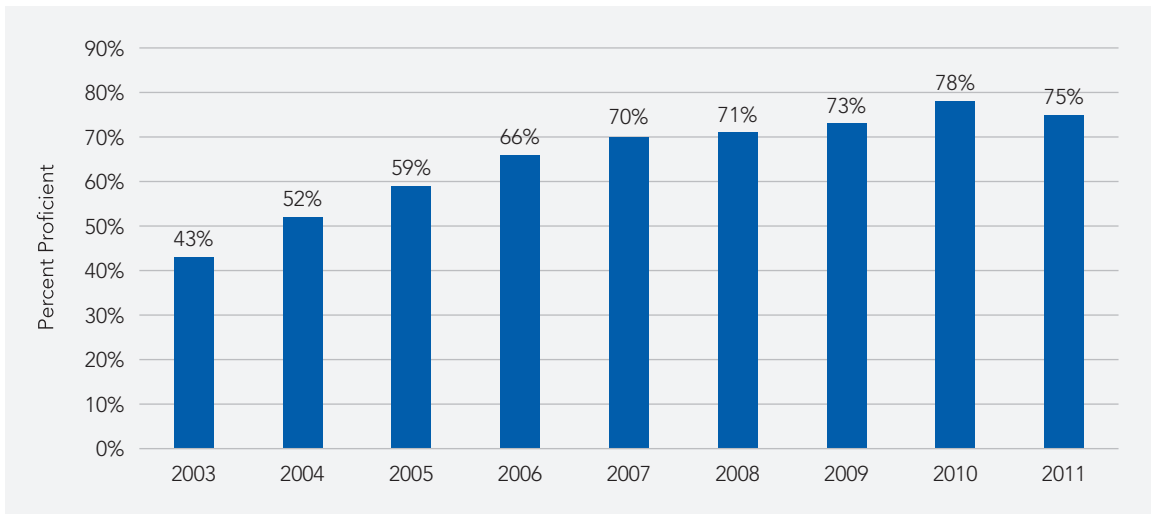
SUMMARY OF DISTRICT POLICIES AND PRACTICES ASSESSMENT DURING PHASE II



* Because data for these years were not available, these reflect results only from qualitative questions.

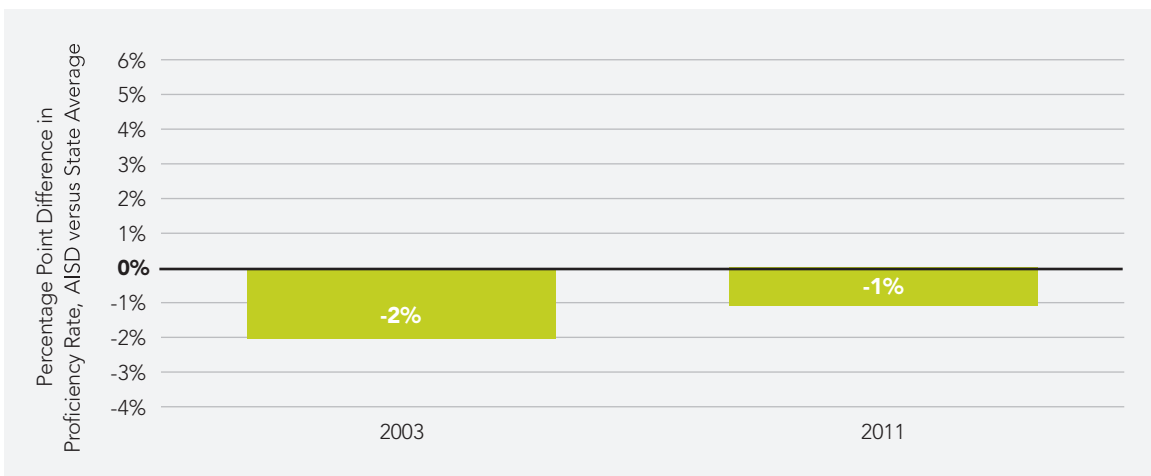
Similar to the pattern of the “TAAS years,” AISD struggled to meet the higher standards during the first few years of TAKS. In 2003, the first year of the test, proficiency dropped from the TAAS high of 85 percent to only 43 percent. But again, AISD’s focus on leadership, school support, and early intervention and ELL students resulted in a steady improvement.

AISD TAKS PROFICIENCY, ALL SUBJECTS



AISD was able to close the gap with state average proficiency levels beginning in 2006, about four years after TAKS was introduced, and the new vision and objectives were established by the new superintendent. By 2010, AISD’s performance had improved significantly to only 2 percentage points below the state average overall and even a percentage point higher in math.

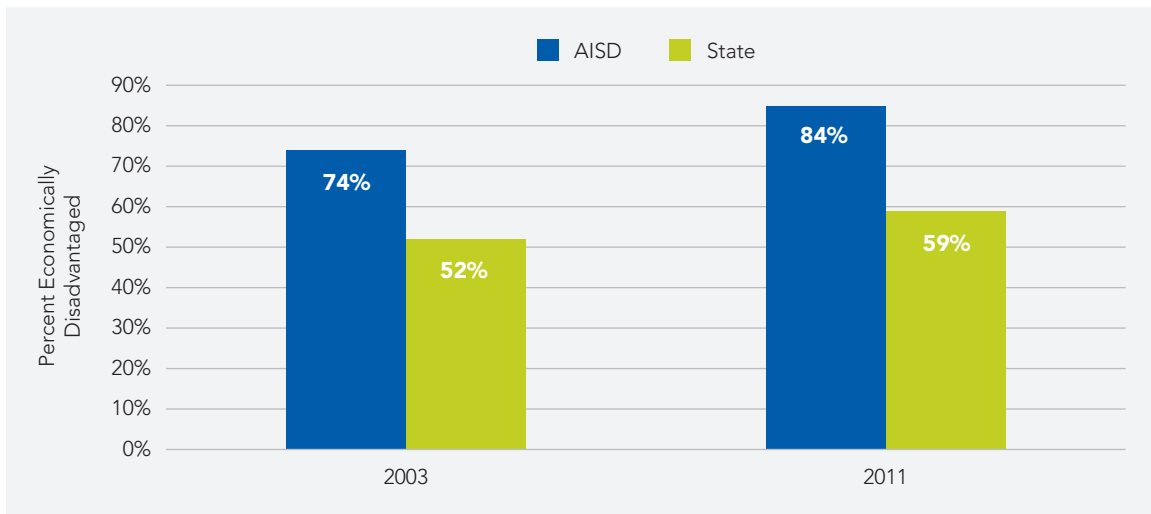
DIFFERENCE IN TAKS PERFORMANCE BETWEEN AISD AND THE STATE OVER TIME



Note: Each bar represents the difference between AISD and statewide proficiency on math and ELA only.

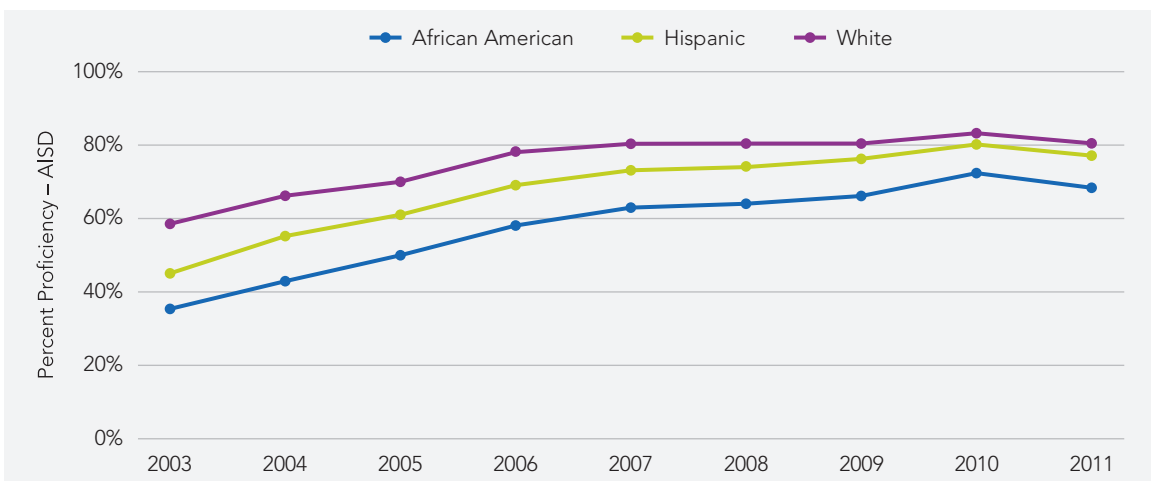
This is also in spite of the fact that AISD had a little over 40 percent more economically disadvantaged students than the state average.³⁸

PERCENT OF STUDENT POPULATION THAT IS ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED



Although the higher standards of the TAKS assessment originally resulted in increases in achievement gaps between minority and nonminority students from the lows of the TAAS years, the chart below shows new progress made from 2003 to 2011. Minority students' average rate of proficiency in math nearly doubled, and grew at twice the rate of nonminority students, who also demonstrated a strong 38 percent growth in average proficiency.

PROFICIENCY RATES BY STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS



Note: TAKS-Modified and TAKS-Alternate assessments are included in 2011 only.

School Profile: Shotwell Middle School

SCHOOL AT A GLANCE (2013–14) ³⁹		
Data Point	Shotwell	District Average
Grades	7–8	N/A
# Students	1,084	N/A
Low-Income	80.5%	85.4%
At-Risk	47.5%	61.3%
English-Language Learners	15.9%	32.6%
Students with Disabilities	7.4%	6.8%
Student Mobility	18.7%	21.0%
Proficiency in ELA	78.0%	67.0%
Proficiency in Math	78.0%	71.0%

High-achieving magnet school

One of AISD’s 10 middle schools, Shotwell has continued its tradition of success and excellence under the leadership of Principal Mable Holt. In fact, during the third year of Holt’s tenure in 2012–13, Shotwell received three distinctions from the state for its academic achievements in reading, mathematics, and in student progress. It is also a magnet school that provides International Baccalaureate educational opportunities to students.

High expectations, support, and needs-based instruction

These terms characterize the Shotwell strategy. Principal Holt has a “no excuses” philosophy for both students and teachers. This high-expectations culture is palpable throughout the school, where students, parents, teachers, and

administrators alike hold themselves and others accountable. These expectations are set and measured through assessments and subsequent data analysis, including formal benchmarks, short weekly quizzes in math/reading, and informal checks for understanding. All of this data is reviewed schoolwide to spot trends and guide broader interventions, and to identify individual needs requiring attention.

Support is widely available for all in the school. For teachers, there are ample professional development resources. Aldine runs an E-Portal system that organizes and lists the myriad PD opportunities teachers can attend for free. Teachers also support one another through Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)—daily, 45-minute meetings with content teams and skills specialists. These are mainly collaborative planning sessions that are led by the skills specialists, who develop lesson plans teachers can adjust based on their individual preferences and classroom needs. This planning process ensures that teachers are prepared to teach and know how to carry out the day’s lesson when they arrive at school each day.

The real hallmark of Shotwell is how the school uses its district-mandated, 45-minute intervention/enrichment period. This period is used to provide extra content time and support for struggling students, or enrichment time for those not struggling. The interventions are flexible and can change according to the needs of the student, identified through benchmarks or diagnostic exams. Holt also uses this data to drive the master schedule of the school. Based

on trends in academic data, she may double-block certain subjects to provide more time for students.

Additional innovations

Other important strategic initiatives at Shotwell include:

- **Effective communication with parents**
Parents have easy access to their children's performance information through a Parent Portal, which details absences, tardiness, missing assignments, and failed assignments. This communication structure helps build a sense of community among teachers and parents.
- **Administrative support for teachers**
Holt is willing to support her teachers in any way. For example, when content teams undergo the planning process, they create lists of needed materials and supplies, and turn the lists in to Holt, who purchases the requested materials as a demonstration of trust in her staff. She also ensures that her teachers have updated technology to support instruction.
- **Community partnerships**
Shotwell partners with Rice University and Houston A+ Challenge for assistance in curriculum planning, lesson and learning activity planning, extra co-teachers, and feedback on executed lessons.



Phase III (2010s): Developing Teachers and Optimizing School-Level Practices

By the time Wanda Bamberg became superintendent in 2008, AISD was no longer considered a low-performing district. The district had posted two consecutive years of overall student proficiency rates above 70 percent with an average reading proficiency at almost 90 percent, and had just about closed the gap against the state average proficiency rate. Aldine had also been listed as a finalist for the prestigious Broad Prize for Urban Education three times (2003, 2004, and 2008) and was the winner in 2009. However, in 2012, Texas introduced the STAAR (State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness), and AISD performance dropped, along with other districts in the state.

STAAR was designed to be more rigorous and focus on higher-order skills.⁴⁰ In the first years, statewide proficiency dropped significantly from its level in the last year of TAKS. In grades 3–8 ELA and math, statewide proficiency dropped 11 percentage points from 86 percent in the last year of TAKS to 75 percent in the first year of STAAR. AISD’s scores also declined, with grades 3–8 ELA and math dropping 13 percentage points from 84 percent proficient on TAKS in 2011 to 71 percent proficient on STAAR in 2012. Overall, AISD fell behind state average performance in grades 3–8 ELA and math by about 8 percentage points by 2014, and by even more if other subjects and high school end-of-course grades are taken into account.⁴¹ Given its track record, AISD’s initial STAAR performance was both surprising and frustrating. The widening gap between AISD’s performance and the state average, particularly in 2013 and 2014, rang alarm bells in the district.

In assessing the situation, Superintendent Bamberg recognized that while the district had focused on instruction, support, and accountability, schools were still relying on traditional job structures and school designs, and that those old “one-size-fits-all” ways of doing things were not sufficient to meet the more rigorous demands placed on both teachers and students. Student learning standards were now higher than ever before, and teachers were not only expected to teach to the higher standards and be held accountable for them, but were also expected to mainstream the growing number of high-need students *and* effectively conduct intervention periods.⁴² Reflecting these new priorities, the third phase of reform focused on **supporting and developing teachers and optimizing school-level resource use, such as students’ time and targeted support to struggling students.**

Standards and Instruction

✔ Clarify and raise performance expectations at each school

In 2010, continuing its efforts to raise and sustain high expectations for instruction in every school, AISD developed its first rubric to define and measure the level of rigor in schools. The new rubric is a standardized assessment matrix used by principals during school walk-throughs. It was hoped that by using the rubric, principals would develop the ability to quickly distinguish between rigorous and non-rigorous instruction.⁴³ The progress made by such efforts is evident in a recent survey, which showed that 95 percent of principals agreed that their school staff had a clear understanding of the learning and performance goals of their school.⁴⁴

Teaching

✔ Introduce Invest teacher evaluation system

With a renewed focus on better aligning the teaching job to meet the challenges of rising expectations, AISD set out to design a new teacher evaluation system. The district turned to Operation Public Education (OPE), an organization based at the University of Pennsylvania that helps districts with new teacher evaluation and compensation systems. OPE partnered with AISD to secure funding from three local foundations and to develop and implement the new system, dubbed Invest.⁴⁵ The new evaluation system focused on achieving three key goals:

1. Enable better differentiation of teacher practice
2. Increase teacher effectiveness
3. Reduce teacher attrition rates

AISD piloted the new system in 46 percent of the district's 75 schools in the spring of 2012 and rolled it out to the entire district for the first time in school year 2013–14. Invest is different from the previous evaluation system in that all staff are evaluated on two measures, observation and student growth, and it requires consistent and standardized use across evaluators and schools. The new system informed the district's approach to developing teachers by tracking them by their need: novice, experienced, or struggling.⁴⁶ With the new system, the district was able to offer more differentiated support to teachers, providing those identified as novice with more mentors/buddies and administrative support, while teachers identified as struggling are placed on a professional growth plan to receive more intensive assistance.

AISD designed Invest with the support of working groups of teachers and administrators, and assembled an advisory team that included both teachers and principals to help plan the Invest rollout.

After its first year of full implementation, 84 percent of principals surveyed agreed that they felt the evaluation system was accurate, and 88 percent agreed with the statement “The teacher evaluation process allows me to differentiate teachers (both best and worst),” while 78 percent agreed that “the rubric was easy to use and understand.”⁴⁷ Teacher reactions in the first year of the program were somewhat less positive. Teachers in Invest pilot schools on average rated the quality of the evaluation at 3.53 out of 5, and the fairness of the evaluation at 3.40. In non-pilot schools, these scores were 3.94 and 3.91, respectively.⁴⁸ While we do not have comparable teacher survey results for the second year of Invest, in a number of campuses, perceptions of Invest are reported to be high, and Invest is cited as helping to transform instruction. The district has been leveraging the lessons learned from these schools by featuring successful leaders and building out their central office support team with these leaders. The district has also recently developed an Invest specialist program to leverage teachers across the district to support with implementation.⁴⁹

Create collaborative professional development opportunities for teachers via Professional Learning Communities

While the district’s cabinet members had attended several workshops and seminars on Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) as early as a decade prior, AISD implemented PLCs districtwide for the first time in school year 2012–13. Until then, they had taken place at a subset of schools in the district largely at the discretion of the school leader. With districtwide PLCs, all teachers are provided with structured planning time to work together with a team of teachers who share content and an expert, such as a skill specialist, to plan lessons. In Aldine, PLCs rely on a “train the trainer” model. The central office has created curriculum directors—central office staff who offer professional development at each of the schools at the request of the principals on a wide range of activities, including leading teacher team meetings, modeling lessons, and direct coaching. Most importantly, the curriculum directors train the assistant principals and/or skill specialists at each school so that they are better equipped to support the professional learning of teachers in their building.⁵⁰

This approach seems to have taken hold well at the secondary level, but it appears there may still be opportunities for improvement in elementary schools. When asked whether their teacher teams have protocols and processes to organize time and be accountable for using the time well, principals at the secondary level overwhelmingly agreed with the statement (50 percent strongly agreed and 100 percent either agreed or strongly agreed), while those at the elementary level were less affirming (10 percent strongly agreed and 90 percent either agreed or strongly agreed).⁵¹

School Design

Restructure schedules to focus on core and to provide for struggling students

During this phase, AISD is beginning to provide more differentiated support, focused on struggling students. Between the 2011–12 and 2013–14 school years, the percentage of students scoring below proficient in the previous year who received additional time increased from 38 to 59 percent in ELA and from 22 to 40 percent in math. These students were given on average approximately two and a half hours of additional time per week in ELA and three hours in math. While this investment does not yet appear to have driven increases in proficiency, it provides a strong foundation on which the district can build.

Starting in school year 2014–15, AISD high schools were required to have block schedules, and middle school and higher grade levels are required to have 45 minutes of intervention period every day. The district provided a scheduling template to support schools through this process.⁵² The intervention period is to be used to provide struggling students with extra help in math or other academic subjects, while non-struggling students are provided with enrichment activities. During the intervention block, flexible student groupings are used to provide individualized attention. There is some flexibility for middle school grade levels and below to create a bell schedule that works for them, but they must have a solid justification.⁵³ While this is a positive trend for most schools, only 53 percent of surveyed secondary school principals reported they “deliberately place an intervention or enrichment block at least three times per week based on incoming proficiency.” This indicates there may still be an opportunity to pursue this strategy more fully.

There also appears to be room to provide more individualized support for struggling students and to build personal relationships with students. While 83 percent of surveyed elementary school principals reported they provide “struggling students with small-group tutoring regularly during or after school day” and have their students “regularly rotate through centers (i.e., different learning activities at different stations) to allow for small-group instruction,” only 43 percent indicated that students are regrouped across teachers regularly to target instruction to specific needs.⁵⁴ At the secondary level, fewer than 50 percent of surveyed principals reported that they use strategies to increase support to struggling students, such as double-blocking math/ELA or reducing class size in high-priority areas.







Data-based teacher assignment

In the 2014–15 school year, AISD piloted a new teacher assignment approach called the Giffin Model in four schools. The Giffin Model is based on the idea that teachers should teach subjects and students they are most successful with. For example, some teachers might be most effective teaching higher-level courses to higher-grade students, while others might be particularly successful with struggling students. The Giffin Model uses growth data to identify teacher strengths, and it maximizes their effectiveness by matching them with appropriate student groupings, while principals learn how to build layered curricula and individual student development plans.⁵⁵ In a recent survey, 52 percent

of elementary school principals and 71 percent of secondary school principals indicated that they assigned teachers to student groups with which they are most effective for the 2014–15 school year.⁵⁶ With room for growth in having strategic teacher assignment take place in every school, AISD is closely monitoring the progress of the Giffin Model implementation with an eye toward districtwide implementation in the future.

During Phase III, AISD focused on improving the resource use and standards in every school. AISD provided templates to be used to raise performance standards at each school, developed a new evaluation system to better support teachers, and offered a master schedule both to help increase time in core classes and to provide an intervention block to those who need it. A summary of these efforts is below.

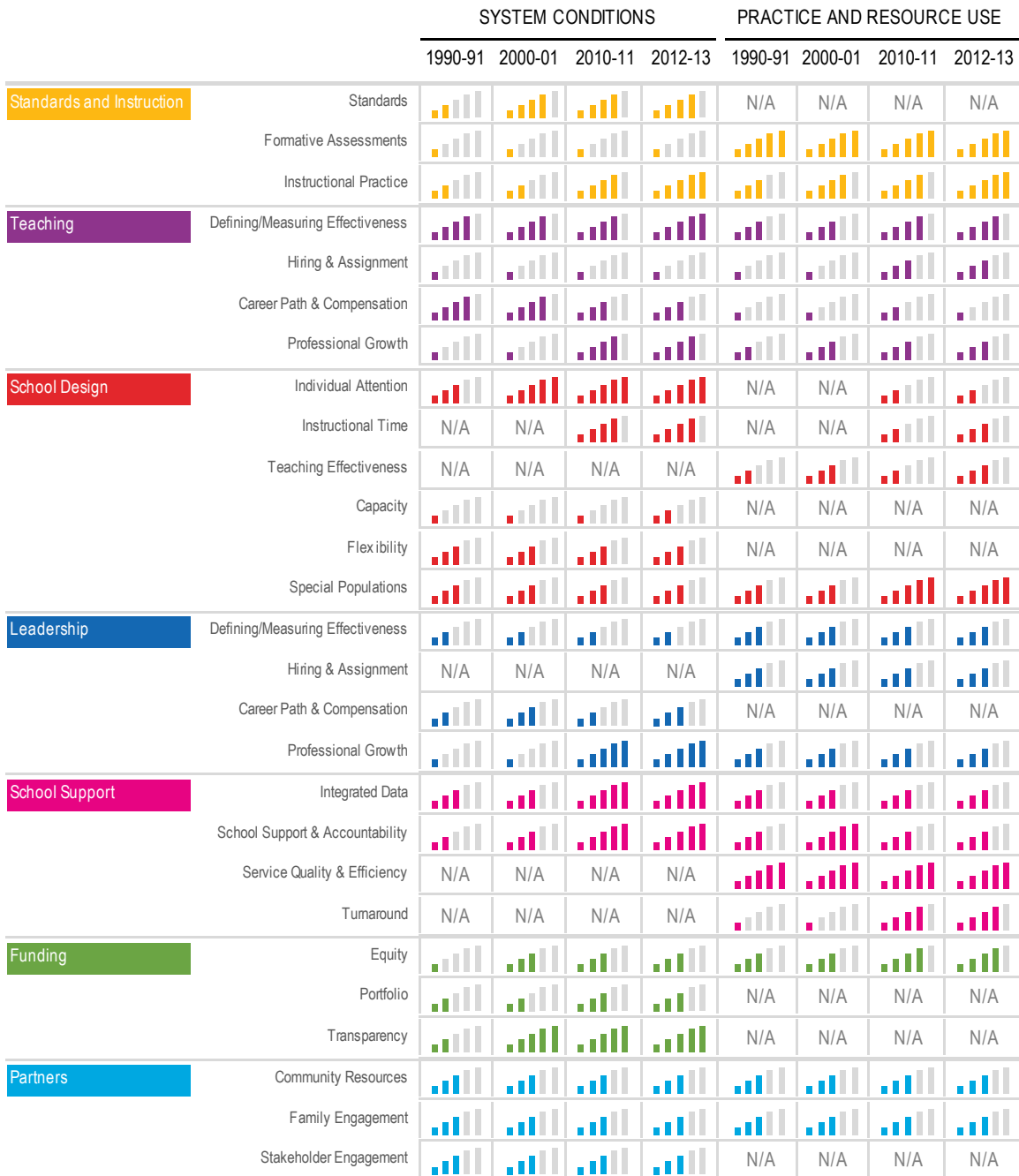
SUMMARY OF PHASE III REFORMS

	From this:	To this:	Phase III Actions
STANDARDS AND INSTRUCTION 	Inconsistent standards that don't prepare kids to think critically, creatively, or collaboratively. Insufficient resources for teachers to effectively teach these complex skills.	 Rigorous, information-age standards. Effective curricula, instructional strategies, and assessments to help students meet those standards.	Raise performance standards at each school: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop and use an assessment of instructional rigor for school walk-throughs
TEACHING 	Limited support, flexibility, and opportunities for teachers. Limited rewards for excellence; few consequences for poor performance.	 A new approach to the teaching job focused on teacher development and opportunities, allowing all teachers to work in teams to deliver the best instruction.	Support teachers with a new evaluation system and professional development opportunities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use a new teacher evaluation system: Invest • Create PLC opportunities
SCHOOL DESIGN 	A one-size-fits-all learning environment, and rigid schedules and class sizes that don't accommodate a range of learning needs.	 Restructured schedules and dynamic grouping strategies that respond to learning needs and create opportunities for instructional collaboration.	Offer master schedule to focus on core and make student-teacher assignments based on data: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Require high schools to have block schedules • Require middle and high schools to have 45-minute intervention period every day • Data-based teacher assignment using the Giffin Model

Phase III Results

SCHOOL SYSTEM 20/20 REPORT CARD: ALDINE INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

This chart summarizes the results of the School System 20/20 assessment tools.



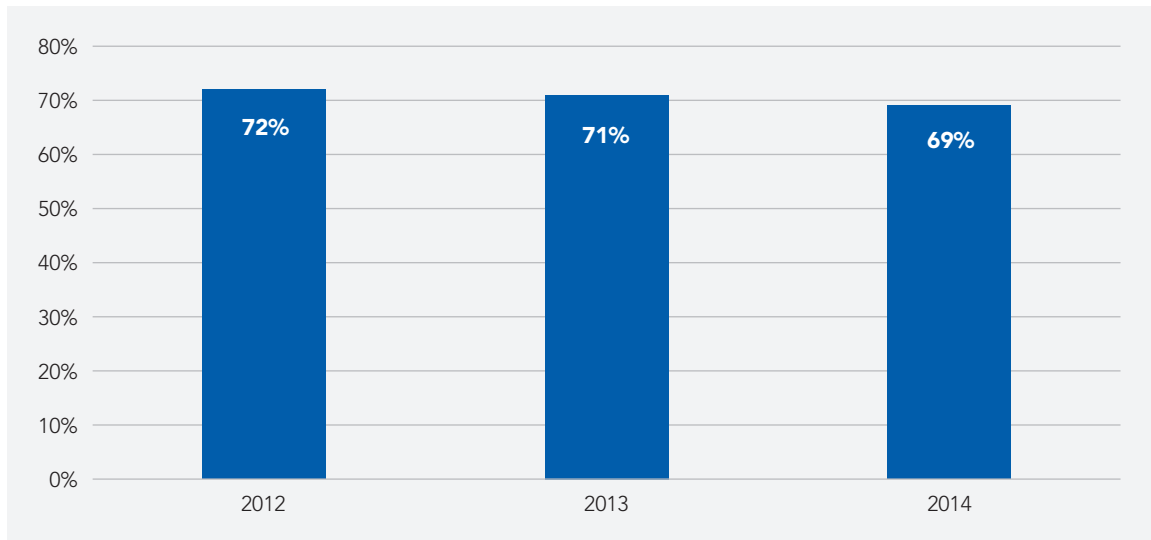
* Because data for these years were not available, these reflect results only from qualitative questions.

School System 20/20 assessment results demonstrate how much progress Aldine has made over the past two and a half decades in creating enabling conditions for strategic resource use. They also indicate areas of potential opportunity in translating those enabling conditions into consistent practice and resource use throughout the district, particularly in the areas of Teacher Hiring and Assignment, Compensation and Career Path, Differentiating Individual Attention and Instructional Time, and School Support. These areas were a focus of the district’s work in Phase III, and may not yet have taken hold broadly enough to be reflected in districtwide measures and student outcomes.

As noted in the introduction, schools in both AISD and across the state have struggled in the first four years of the STAAR assessment. While a dip at the onset of a new state assessment is consistent with past experience, the lack of progress in reversing that dip is concerning. It is likely that the increased rigor of the new standards is making it harder for schools and teachers to adjust—it’s not just a matter of “teaching to the new test.” Instead, deep changes in instructional practice and routines will be required to ensure that all students are learning these deeper skills.

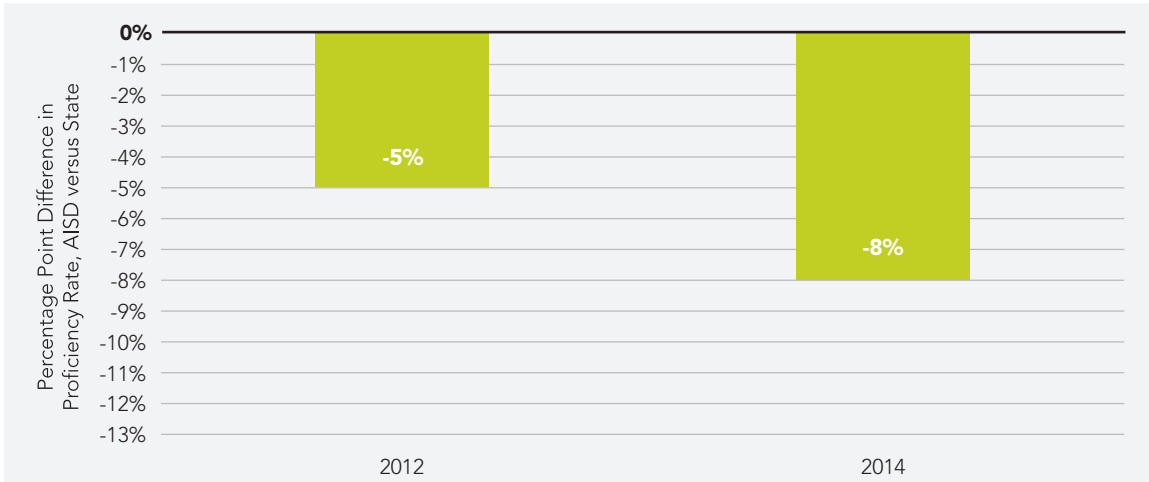
When STAAR was introduced in the 2011–12 school year, the assessments were rolled out only to grades nine to 11 and only to selected campuses within those grades. Assessments for lower grades began in the 2012–13 school year, and AISD results remained largely steady through the first three years of the test—dropping off slightly in 2014. Comparable results were not available for 2015, but reading results for AISD were similar to 2014.

AISD STAAR PROFICIENCY, ALL SUBJECTS



These results translated into an initial performance gap versus the state average for AISD that was on par with the original gaps in both TAAS and TAKS, but unlike with previous exams, this gap has continued to grow.

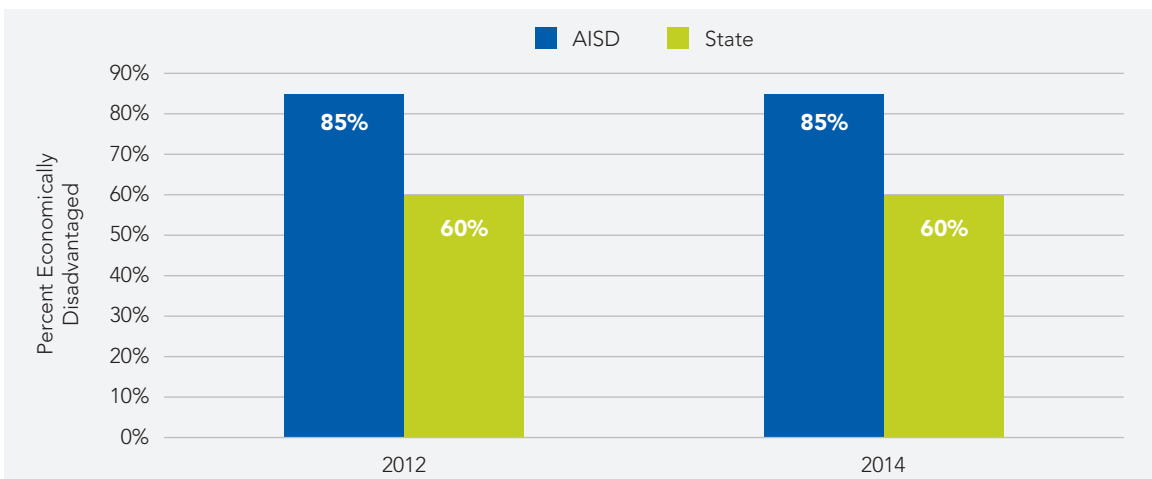
DIFFERENCE IN STAAR PERFORMANCE BETWEEN AISD AND THE STATE OVER TIME



Note: Each bar represents the difference between AISD and statewide proficiency on math and ELA tests only.

But AISD continues to have significantly more economically disadvantaged students than the state overall. And while the total percentage of those students in Aldine has stayed the same from 2012 to 2014, other factors indicate that need in Aldine may actually be rising relative to the rest of the state.

PERCENT OF STUDENT POPULATION THAT IS ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED

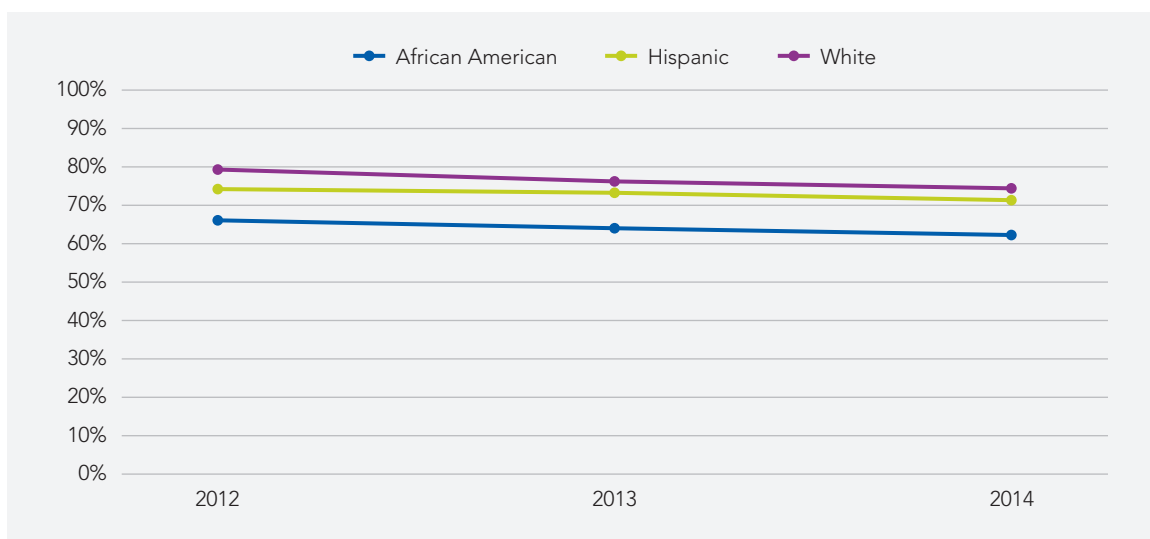


Between 2010 and 2013, median household income in Aldine decreased 5 percent, while it increased 5 percent across the state; and the percentage of families with children under 18 living in poverty increased 59 percent in Aldine versus 6 percent statewide.

Looking at only economically disadvantaged students, AISD performance is largely comparable to the state average overall.

It is also notable that, unlike with the introduction of the TAAS and TAKS assessments, the achievement gap in AISD did not widen in the first year of STAAR. Moreover, AISD was able to narrow the gap slightly after the first year. AISD saw a 1 percentage point drop in the gap between white and African-American students to 12 percent, and 3 percentage points between white and Hispanic students.

PROFICIENCY RATES BY STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS



Looking Forward

Over the past 20 years, AISD has steadily improved its policies and practices to enable more strategic resource use across the district. As the results of the District Policies and Practices assessment shows, AISD has been making progress in six of the seven School System 20/20 transformation areas.

There are likely a host of reasons why AISD is not yet performing at as high a level on STAAR as it did on the previous two assessments. Given the district's higher population of economically disadvantaged students and English-language learners, it is not surprising that the STAAR's focus on higher-order reasoning and problem-solving skills would be more challenging for Aldine teachers and students to adjust to.

A look at School System 20/20 measures of practice and resource use also reveals that while the district has made significant shifts in system conditions, in particular around teacher evaluation and support for schools, those changes in system conditions have not yet translated into significant shifts in resources at all schools. Diving deeper, it is clear that while the district is struggling overall, a number of schools have been able to more fully utilize the new supports and flexibilities implemented in the past several years and are already exceeding state averages and performances, even with student populations comparable to the rest of the district.

In keeping with the "Aldine Way," the district is already working on addressing these areas by continuing its efforts to improve student outcomes and build on its success to date. Specific opportunities include:

- **Maximize the impact of the district's strong teaching force.** Teaching quality is the single most important in-school factor in improving student performance, and Aldine is a national leader in evolving how it hires, assigns, evaluates, manages, and supports teachers.⁵⁷ Teacher satisfaction with working conditions in AISD, as measured by the national Student and Staffing Survey, is above average. For example, teachers' perception level of the support they receive in AISD scores 3.5 out of 5 versus a national average of 2.2; teachers' perception of the extent to which school fostered the development of a professional community is between 3.7 and 3.8 in AISD versus 1.8 nationally; and teachers' perceived level of control they had over their practice (e.g., curriculum, discipline) is between 3.6 and 3.7 in AISD versus 3.2 nationally.⁵⁸ In addition, AISD hires many of its new teachers from within the ranks of the district's instructional aides and other paraprofessionals, who have proven track records of success within the Aldine context. And the Invest teacher evaluation system implemented in 2012 provides teachers and school leaders with a rich data set not available to most districts. Aldine can build on this strong foundation to continue to improve teaching quality and better align teaching practice with the demands of the new standards by:

- **Leveraging teacher evaluation information to improve teacher assignment.** The School System 20/20 diagnostic completed for this case study was from 2013–14 and indicated an opportunity to more strategically deploy teachers based on their skills and expertise. For example, district leaders reported that the most effective teachers were not being systematically placed into the most challenging assignments. This was reinforced by data that indicates highly effective teachers are almost four times as likely to work in schools in the lowest poverty quartile than schools in the highest, and that below-proficient students are only 79 and 85 percent as likely to be taught ELA or math by a highly effective teacher as proficient students. The Giffin Model implemented in the 2014–15 school year represents a big step toward this goal and will hopefully begin to yield results in the 2015–16 school year.
- **Leveraging teacher evaluation information to improve teacher development and retention.** Aldine now has the opportunity to focus on retaining and developing strong performers based on better data on teacher performance, strengths, and developmental areas. The School System 20/20 diagnostic revealed that retention of the highest-performing quartile of teachers was 95 percent in 2010–11, but fell to 86 percent in 2012–13. Working with those teachers to provide them with career and other opportunities can help AISD drive this rate even higher. Potentially more importantly, retention of the lowest-performing quartile of teachers is consistently almost equal to retention of the highest performers. Providing these teachers with support to improve—and removing them from the system if they do not—will allow AISD, over time, to improve overall teaching quality even further.
- **Continue to focus on increasing value proposition for teachers.** Aldine has been thoughtful and deliberate about introducing the new teacher evaluation system slowly and with significant input from all stakeholders. With a robust teacher evaluation system now in place that has the trust of the teachers and administrators, Aldine is well positioned to incent and reward teachers supported by reliable data on teacher contribution and performance. In fact, in school year 2015–16, AISD began phasing in a performance-based compensation system that moves away from a single salary schedule and moves toward a system that rewards performance and contribution.⁵⁹
- **Provide additional support to teachers in making the instructional shifts necessary to meet the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) standards.** Unlike the TAAS and TAKS assessments, the TEKS standards and STAAR assessment call for fundamental shifts in instructional practice. These shifts require significant support for teachers, time for them to change their practice, and high-quality curriculum and materials. In Phase I AISD was a national leader in identifying high-quality curricula, assessments, and professional development for schools, and in instilling a culture of continuous, data-driven instructional improvement. The significant shifts required by TEKS and STAAR make this kind of support, as well as identifying instructional experts who can support teachers at every school in making this transition, even more critical.

- **Learn from high-performing schools.** Several AISD schools have been able to take full advantage of the support and flexibilities provided by the district to significantly redesign their instructional approach, assignment, and scheduling. While each of these schools has taken a slightly different approach, they share certain characteristics, including creating a culture of high expectations, devoting significant time to high-quality teacher collaboration focused around improving instruction, and providing struggling and high-need students with additional time and individual attention. As noted previously, several schools, including Marcella, Shotwell, Escamilla, and Stehlik Intermediate schools, are performing above district and state averages. These schools have been able to attract high performers to fill open teaching positions, and at three of the four schools, low-performing students are just as likely to have as many highly effective teachers as higher-performing students. All four schools are providing significantly more instructional time for struggling students in ELA and/or math. AISD can learn from the school leaders in these and other high-performing schools and leverage that information to support struggling principals or introduce additional support for schools that have not been as successful (see profiles on pages 10–11 and 22–23).
- **Leverage principal best practices in teacher hiring and development.** With support from ERS that was independent of this School System 20/20 review, AISD identified wide variation in the success of different principals in many aspects of human capital management, including hiring highly effective teachers, developing new teachers, developing experienced teachers, and matching teacher assignments to student needs. Interestingly, while a few principals were good at all of the aspects studied, most were outstanding in one or two areas and not as strong in others. Principals who were surveyed confidentially for this case study self-identified their schools as “high-performing” or not.⁶⁰ Principals at high-performing schools scored much higher on questions focused on teacher development and differentiated instruction than principals at non-high-performing schools. For example, 93 percent of principals in the first group reported leveraging teacher leadership positions versus 57 percent in the latter group. Principals reported other differences, such as:
 - At my school, teachers in core subjects (math, ELA, science, social studies, world language) have individualized growth plans that build on their strengths and address their weaknesses (3.43 versus 2.75 of 5).
 - My school’s leaders and teachers are trained and proficient in using data to inform school improvement and classroom practice (3.67 versus 3.17).
 - Teacher teams have protocols and processes to organize time and be accountable for using the time well (3.83 versus 3.25).

This highlights a tremendous opportunity for district and school leaders to learn from “best-in-class” principals in each area, and to integrate best practices across all schools.

- **Provide additional instructional time and individual attention to struggling students.**

AISD schools are starting to provide additional instructional time to more struggling students, and implemented an intervention block in the 2014–15 school year. However, our School System 20/20 analysis indicates that there are still over 50 percent of students who scored below proficient in math in the previous year who do not receive additional course time in math. The same figure is almost 40 percent in ELA. The same analysis showed that across the board in AISD, higher-performing schools were more likely to provide additional instructional time to low-performing students in ELA and math than lower-performing schools with similar student demographics.

Additionally, despite the introduction of the intervention period in high schools, there are still secondary school principals who report that struggling students are not placed in an intervention block. Twenty-five percent of principals at high-performing schools reported placing students in an enrichment/intervention block at least three times a week based on proficiency versus 15 percent at non-high-performing schools; and 41 percent of principals at high-performing schools reported that struggling students received additional instruction outside of school hours versus 13 percent at non-high-performing schools.

At the same time, teacher loads (the total number of students for whom a teacher is responsible) in high school went up significantly between 2011–12 and 2013–14, and the likelihood of a student who scored below proficient getting assigned to a highly effective teacher is lower than that of a student scoring proficient or above. Changes in master schedules and teacher assignment should help with this situation. In addition, employing other differentiation strategies, such as small-group instruction to help struggling students develop the higher-order skills reflected in the STAAR assessment, could help AISD regain its previous performance metrics.

Lessons from Aldine

Over the course of two and a half decades, Aldine has amply demonstrated the potential for transforming school and student performance by developing a clear vision for districtwide change, establishing the system conditions for that change, and aligning resource use with student and school needs. Despite some bumps in the road—and growing challenges posed by an expanding population of high-need students and increasingly rigorous state assessments—AISD has consistently worked toward improving key performance trends.

The Aldine experience highlights five important lessons for district leaders:

- **A clear vision and stable leadership matter.** Unlike many large urban districts, Aldine's last three superintendents have each enjoyed tenures of seven years or more and have developed their successors internally. They have also worked closely with school boards that have supported both their administrations and their succession plans. This has allowed the district to maintain focus on a clear vision and to evolve that vision as necessary to respond to student and school needs.
- **You can't do everything all at once.** Especially in chronically underperforming districts, leaders may be paralyzed by the feeling that everything is broken and find it difficult to know where to start. AISD was deliberate about focusing in each phase of its reform journey on a small number of highly leveraged areas—starting with clear standards for instruction, then building strong school leadership through support and accountability, and then moving to improve teaching quality, also through support and accountability, and now beginning to differentiate student support and teacher assignments. Importantly, in each phase, the district took on systemic, structural areas—redefining teacher evaluation, for instance—instead of just layering programmatic changes over underlying structures that weren't working.
- **Invest in getting the right people in place, then developing and retaining them.** Throughout the reforms of the past two decades, AISD has been steadfast in its commitment to building talent from within. The majority of AISD principals were previously teachers in the district, and a significant share of teachers are hired from other positions within the district. The trust and loyalty that this approach engendered have allowed district leadership to make more sweeping changes than otherwise might have been possible, such as introducing student value-added metrics into the teacher evaluation system.
- **Balance central support with school-level flexibility.** Aldine often launched reforms centrally to test the approach, ensure quality, and support school leaders before extending them to the school level over time, as the reforms are better understood and schools have more capability to take them on.

- **Identify and replicate best practices.** AISD's centralized approach with flexibility has resulted in wide variations in practices across schools, specifically in the area of teacher collaboration, the use of student data to adjust instruction, and scheduling and student grouping. This rich variation provides the opportunity for the district to identify successful practices and look for ways to broaden their adoption at additional schools.

AISD's focused and systematic approach has helped it to attain and maintain high levels of achievement among a high-need student population over more than 20 years. The challenges presented by the significantly more rigorous TEKS standards and STAAR assessments are daunting, and perhaps presage the challenges many other districts will soon face with the rollout of the Common Core State Standards. Aldine is well positioned to meet this challenge with a strong, happy teaching and school leadership corps, and many examples of best practices at individual schools. By building on these strong foundations, spreading these best practices, and ensuring that all schools are taking advantage of the enabling conditions created at the system level to design schools and instructional practices that work for all students, AISD can continue to lead the way.

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