Department of Research and Evaluation
AUSTIN INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

AISD REACH Program Update: 2013–2014 Participant Feedback

Introduction

As part of the ongoing evaluation of the Austin Independent School Districts' (AISD) strategic compensation initiative, AISD REACH, evaluation staff conducted a survey of teachers at all 38 participating schools and a series of 21 focus groups at 18 REACH schools in Spring 2014. The Spring 2014 Employee Coordinated Survey (ECS) included an array of questions assessing general attitudes toward REACH, as well as more specific opinions regarding student learning objectives (SLOs), peer observation, and the influence of specific REACH program elements on teachers' decisions to remain at their schools. A total of 620 staff responded to the Spring 2014 ECS, representing 32% of all REACH teachers. Focus groups were conducted at the 18 schools that entered the REACH program in the last two implementation cohorts (i.e., 2011–2012 and 2012–2013). These schools were of particular interest because it was possible to speak with staff who had been at their schools prior to the implementation of REACH and who could provide feedback about how REACH had influenced their work. Researchers invited 315 randomly selected teachers, instructional specialists, librarians, counselors, and assistant principals who had been at the school prior to the implementation of REACH to participate in the focus groups. A total of 149 attended (47% of those invited), representing 50% of REACH schools and less than 8% of the total REACH population. The focus groups ranged in size from four to 12 participants. Facilitators asked a series of questions (see Appendix A) about the participants' general impression of the program, as well as their thoughts about two key program elements: peer observations and SLOs. The results of the survey and focus group analyses[1] are presented in this report.

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[1] Facilitators took written notes and audio-taped the discussions of each session. After all focus groups were completed, the facilitators met to discuss the participants' responses and to identify common themes for each question. Two members of the research team then reviewed the transcripts of all the focus groups and organized responses for each question into major and minor themes.

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Key Findings

In Spring 2014, evaluation staff conducted a survey of teachers at all 38 participating schools and a series of 21 focus groups at 18 REACH schools that entered the REACH program in the last two implementation cohorts (i.e., 2011–2012 and 2012– 2013). Results from REACH participants' feedback are summarized below.

REACH Impact

- Altogether, participants indicated the program helped them focus on their planned objectives and enhanced professional collaboration on campus.
- Nearly two thirds of ECS respondents felt their teaching improved as a result of having taken part in the SLO process, and that the student achievement results of SLOs were worth the extra work.
- When asked which components of REACH should be carried forward if new funding were obtained, participants most frequently indicated the novice teacher mentoring, the SLO (including team and individual), the professional development units, and the peer observation.

Student Learning Objectives

- Many participants indicated they selected their SLO goals based on perceived deficiencies in their students' knowledge, and based on anticipation of what knowledge or skills students would need in future grades.
- Teachers were equally inclined to use one of a list of vetted assessments or to construct their own.
- Regarding important factors for meeting their SLO goals, teachers frequently mentioned the need to focus on their objectives throughout the year, the importance of extensive practice, and the need to ensure that all students comprehended the material before transitioning to new lessons.

Peer Observations

- Eighty percent of ECS participants indicated they considered the feedback they received in the post-observation conference when planning and conducting their daily work, and 78% felt students benefited from the feedback they received from their peer observer.
- Many focus group participants agreed that observers gave unbiased and helpful feedback that helped them improve their teaching.
- Some participants felt the peer observation experience was stressful and depended on their ability to establish a connection with the observer.

General Attitudes Toward REACH

Across REACH schools, 75% of ECS respondents stated that participating in REACH had been a positive experience for them (Table 1). Attitudes were particularly favorable toward mentoring and peer observation. The large majority of principals (88%) agreed it was valuable to have the AISD REACH mentor(s) on their campus, and 84% of teachers agreed peer observation was a good idea (Table 2). Similarly, 80% of those surveyed were confident in the accuracy of their peer observer's ratings, and 79% were satisfied with the

Table 1. Percentage Agreement With General REACH Questions on the Spring 2014 Employee Coordinated Survey (ECS)

Strategic compensation (i.e., a performance based pay system) is a good idea.	65% (*n* = 593)
Participating in AISD REACH has helped me to make better use of student data.	69% (*n* = 614)
Participating in REACH has been a positive experience for me.	75% (*n* = 620)
Participation in AISD REACH has helped teachers at my school to make better use of student data.	71% (*n* = 555)

Source. Spring 2014 Employee Coordinated Survey (ECS)

support they received from their peer observer. Ratings of SLOs (Table 2) and of the program's overall influence on teachers' data use and instruction (Table 1) were slightly less favorable than were ratings specific to mentoring and peer observation, but roughly two-thirds of ECS respondents agreed that participation in REACH had helped them make better use of student data and that their teaching had improved as a result of having taken part in the SLO process (Table 2). Overall, a majority of teachers reported positive benefits from the program and agreed the student achievement results of SLOs, whether team or individual, were worth the extra work.

Table 2. Percentage Agreement With Questions on the Spring 2014 Employee Coordinated Survey (ECS) Regarding Student Learning Objectives (SLOs), Mentoring, and Peer Observation

Student learning objectives	Using student learning objectives (SLOs) has improved my teaching.	64% (*n* = 592)
	I often consider my SLOs when planning and conducting my daily work.	73% (*n* = 603)
	The student achievement results of using an individual SLO are worth the extra work.	69% (*n* = 580)
	The student achievement results of using a team SLO are worth the extra work	68% (*n* = 569)
Mentoring	It is valuable for me to have the AISD REACH mentor(s) on my campus.	88% (*n* = 40)
Peer observation	I am confident in the accuracy of my peer observer's ratings.	80% (*n* = 595)
	Peer observations are a good idea.	84% (*n* = 596)
	I often consider the feedback that I received during my post-observation conference when planning and conducting my daily work.	80% (*n* = 599)
	My students have benefited from the feedback that I received during my post-observation conference.	78% (*n* = 581)
	I am satisfied with the support I receive from the peer observer on my campus.	79% (*n* = 583)

Source. Spring 2014 Employee Coordinated Survey (ECS)

Reflective Teaching Practices of REACH Teachers

REACH teachers reported they were engaged regularly in a variety of reflective teaching behaviors. For example, 60% of survey respondents indicated they frequently contemplated past teaching experiences to inform lesson plans, and 55% indicated they frequently adjusted their instructional strategies based on student assessment results (Table 3). Ten percent or fewer reported engaging in these practices only sometimes or rarely. Collaboration with other teachers was less frequent, although almost 70% of respondents reported working with other teachers either frequently or often to improve teaching even when they felt their teaching was going well.

Table 3. Frequency of Reflective Teaching Practices for Teachers Responding to the Spring 2014 Employee Coordinated Survey (ECS)

	Frequently	Often	Sometimes	Rarely
How frequently do reflections on your past teaching experiences influence your lesson plans?	60% (*n* = 365)	33% (*n* = 198)	6% (*n* = 36)	1% (*n* = 8)
How often do you seek out collaboration with other teachers to improve a lesson plan that did not go well?	37% (*n* = 224)	36% (*n* = 217)	22% (*n* = 132)	5% (*n* = 32)
How often do you work with other teachers to improve your teaching even when it is going well?	34% (*n* = 207)	35% (*n* = 211)	23% (*n* = 141)	7% (*n* = 45)
How often do you adjust your instructional strategies based on student assessment results?	55% (*n* = 335)	35% (*n* = 215)	9% (*n* = 55)	1% (*n* = 4)

Source. Spring 2014 Employee Coordinated Survey (ECS)

Relative Influences of REACH Program Elements on Retention Decisions

Elements of the REACH program appeared to influence decisions to remain on a particular campus. For example, 86% of survey respondents stated that the retention stipend had a positive impact on their decision to stay on their campus (Table 4). Interestingly, even though SLOs were less popular in general, compared with peer observation, teachers were more likely to assert that it had a positive impact on their decision to stay, second only to the retention stipend. Although none of the program elements appeared to strongly facilitate decisions to leave, roughly 1 in 7 teachers claimed that team SLOs and participation in peer observation had a negative impact on their decision to remain at the campus. Teachers indicated the influence of many REACH program elements was surprisingly equal to or greater than the influence of other campus working conditions on their decision to remain at the campus.

Table 4. Percentage of Teachers Reporting Positive, No, or Negative Influence of REACH and Other Factors on Retention Decisions, Spring 2014

"Please rate the extent to which each of the following factors impacts your decision to remain at your campus."

	Factor	Positive impact	No impact	Negative impact
REACH	Stipend for peer observation	75% (*n* = 307)	17% (*n* = 70)	7% (*n* = 30)
	Participation in peer observation	69% (*n* = 264)	18% (*n* = 68)	14% (*n* = 53)
	Stipend for individual student learning objectives (SLOs)	83% (*n* = 385)	9% (*n* = 41)	8% (*n* = 36)
	Participation in individual student learning objectives (SLOs)	74% (*n* = 330)	11% (*n* = 50)	15% (*n* = 67)
	Stipend for team student learning objectives (SLOs)	81% (*n* = 365)	9% (*n* = 42)	9% (*n* = 42)
	Participation in team student learning objectives (SLOs)	72% (*n* = 308)	10% (*n* = 44)	18% (*n* = 76)
	Stipend for professional development unites (PDUs)	61% (*n* = 196)	30% (*n* = 95)	9% (*n* = 30)
	Opportunity to participate in professional development units (PDUs)	63% (*n* = 191)	27% (*n* = 81)	11% (*n* = 33)
	Stipend for campus Basket of Measures	72% (*n* = 275)	19% (*n* = 72)	9% (*n* = 33)
	Participation in campus Basket of Measures	66% (*n* = 236)	22% (*n* = 78)	13% (*n* = 45)
	REACH novice teacher mentoring	61% (*n* = 187)	28% (*n* = 87)	11% (*n* = 33)
	REACH retention stipend for staying at your school	86% (*n* = 381)	9% (*n* = 38)	6% (*n* = 26)
Other	Campus leadership	61% (*n* = 305)	6% (*n* = 32)	33% (*n* = 167)
	Campus procedures for student behavior management	50% (*n* = 248)	7% (*n* = 34)	43% (*n* = 210)
	School facilities and resources	64% (*n* = 296)	9% (*n* =41)	27% (*n* = 126)
	Parent involvement	42% (*n* = 178)	16% (*n* = 66)	42% (*n* = 177)
	Relationships among campus staff	77% (*n* = 392)	6% (*n* = 29)	17% (*n* = 89)
	Class sizes	64% (*n* = 292)	11% (*n* = 52)	25% (*n* = 112)
	Available time to collaborate with colleagues	67% (*n* = 302)	12% (*n* = 55)	21% (*n* = 96)
	Expectations for employees' use of non-instructional time	48% (*n* = 210)	17% (*n* = 75)	35% (*n* = 151)
	Teacher leadership opportunity	61% (*n* = 254)	17% (*n* = 72)	22% (*n* = 94)

Source. Spring 2014 Employee Coordinated Survey (ECS)

Note. Respondents used a sliding scale to select a response ranging from –5 (negative impact) to +5 (positive impact).

Change as a Consequence of the REACH Program

The focus groups were intended, in part, to explore perceptions of change, both at the teacher-level and the campus-level, as a result of the REACH program. When participants were asked about the consequences of REACH, many claimed they were better able to focus on planned objectives throughout the school-year and to ensure their students met objectives as a result of the program. One teacher said, "[It] makes it that much more of an incentive to communicate the information to [students] and make sure that they learn it well." Indeed, 73% of all REACH teachers who responded to the ECS claimed to have considered SLOs when planning their work (Table 2). Moreover, many teachers appeared to have adapted their teaching practices as a means of achieving their goals. For example, an elementary music teacher shared the story of how she used to teach songs through echoing (she sang the song, and the students sang it back), but after collaborating with another teacher on a team SLO that focused on a reading objective, she wrote the lyrics on the board and required students to read them. Data from the ECS supported this claim, with 55% of teachers frequently adjusting their instructional strategies based on student assessment results (Table 3). Some members of the focus groups reported, however, that REACH created more work for teachers at campuses where staff were already stretched thin, ultimately contributing to student neglect. A librarian stated, "[On] a campus that has a lot of requirements from the district, this is another thing that people have to do...If you create something where more work is involved, I don't know how that can help. It's more time away from the kids." Yet, many reported that REACH had helped bring their faculty together, and described increased collaboration. One participant said, "We're more in unison and [are] collaborating and working together as this big team." When asked in the ECS, roughly three-quarters of REACH teachers who participated reported to have sought out collaboration with other teachers either frequently or often to improve a lesson plan that had gone poorly (Table 3). Many also cited an increased frequency of participating with those with whom they would not normally collaborate. An

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Student learning objectives (SLOs)

SLOs are targets for student growth that teachers set at the beginning of the school year and strive to achieve by the end of the semester or school year. They are designed to assist teachers[2] in focusing their instruction on a particular area of student need, tying specific instructional practices to that area of need, and monitoring students' progress in order to inform adjustments in practice. Teachers and support staff generally submit one individual and one team SLO, but those for whom team participation is not feasible due to subject area limitations or extenuating circumstances can submit two individual SLOs. SLOs must be approved both by a teacher's principal and by REACH program staff. To be approved, SLOs must meet a series of criteria, including standards of rigor for both performance targets and assessments of student performance. Pre-assessments are administered before SLO targets are set, and post-assessments are administered in the Spring (or end of the semester) to determine if teachers made their goals. Teachers are compensated for meeting their SLO targets ($1,500 per individual SLO and $2,000 per team SLO).

For more information about SLOs, visit http://www.austinisd.org/reach/learning-objectives

[2] Although we refer to teachers throughout the report, the term is used loosely and includes all those who participated in creating SLOs (e.g., instructional specialists, librarians, counselors, and assistant principals).

elementary school librarian, for instance, expressed appreciation for being able to contribute to the goals of the school, and others in the room agreed it was nice to view her in a different role. Finally, many believed that teacher retention was affected as a result of the REACH program. Some said the monetary incentives associated with the program had contributed to their decision to stay. ECS data bore this out, with at least 60% of teachers claiming their decision to remain on their campus had been positively affected by at least one of the various program elements (Table 4). When focus group members were probed, however, some claimed they would stay regardless of REACH because their school felt like family.

Factors Affecting Topic Selection for SLOs

Even though REACH provided guidelines regarding SLOs, teachers had latitude to shape the design of their SLOs with regard to topic selection and assessment type. Teachers were allowed either to select an assessment from a district "vetted and approved" library or to develop and vet one they created with a team of colleagues. The freedom with which teachers were allowed to construct assessments and even select objectives was dependent upon the home campus, however. Although many teachers were granted extensive latitude, others played a smaller role in the decision-making process. Administrators at a few campuses told staff what the focus of SLOs would be, and some required teachers to choose assessments from the district library. Consequently, SLO topics were sometimes determined by what was available on the vetted and approved list.

To understand the extent to which this freedom was expressed, facilitators asked focus group members to elaborate on the process by which they chose their SLOs and how they were assessed. With regard to objective selection, teachers most frequently described an attempt to fill deficiencies or gaps in learning they identified through the exploration of past student data (e.g., State of Texas Assessment for Academic Readiness [STAAR] grades and end-of-year benchmark scores) or the analysis of current student need. One teacher stated, "[W]e pull scores from the previous year, whether they are English as a second language or bilingual, and we look at what may have been [a] problem and try to address it." Almost as common was the identification of needs by a team of teachers, based upon material students would be expected to know in the future. Typically, teachers focused on what was likely to be tested on STAAR at the end of the school year, but some collaborated with teachers in upper grades to, in the words of one teacher, "figure out what the need will be." A few mentioned attempting to marry the two strategies by considering both current student need and future objectives. In the words of an elementary school special education teacher, "I consider [Individualized Education Program] IEP goals, current competencies, and what they need to know, and align them together." A very small number of teachers claimed to have selected their assessments based upon the extent to which high scores or large gains were attainable.

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Many teachers expressed frustration at the difficulty of choosing an appropriate objective. For example, elementary art and music as well as physical education teachers mentioned the limited selection of vetted assessments, which ultimately constrained topic choice. Teachers at most schools, however, were free to create their own assessments. Similarly, many support staff, specifically librarians and counselors, relayed feelings of frustration with the process; one participant said, "[They] don't have [Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills] TEKS, [they] don't have curriculum," making it difficult to select an objective.

Vetted Versus Teacher-Developed Assessments

With the exception of teachers in a few schools, most teachers were allowed to determine whether they used vetted assessments or developed their own to address a student need. The district database contained district-approved teacher-developed assessments whose aim was to address the most critical areas of district need, as originally identified by the Curriculum Department. On the whole, teachers seemed equally inclined to opt for either type (i.e., vetted or newly developed), with each option having unique advantages and disadvantages. Many teachers who elected to use vetted assessments cited reasons of convenience and selection. One teacher noted, "[We] liked the ones on the SLO website. We thought they were good." Another stated, "[My] preference is for the vetted because of time." Many reported using vetted assessments because creating assessments was "labor intensive" and required approval of both the principal and the REACH program staff. Even though the vetted assessments were generally more convenient, focus group members noted some challenges. Some stated the vetted assessments were of poor quality (primarily the Spanish ones), while others said too few options were available for particular subjects, especially non-core areas, and these options did not fit the needs of the student population. One teacher stated, "I have a range of student ability…. so it was difficult for me to find an appropriate assessment that would fit everyone." Due to these limitations, many teachers elected to develop their own assessments, which permitted them to customize according to student need. This, they believed, contributed to the authenticity of the experience. In fact, teachers on one campus became disgruntled when administrators informed them they must use a vetted assessment, causing them to report that "individualization to campus needs" was lacking. Although most teachers claimed to have used either vetted assessments or teacher developed ones, a few mentioned having tweaked the vetted measures to better serve the needs of their student population. Many expressed a desire to see the approved assessments they had developed and those of their colleagues included in the vetted test bank to expand future options. A process for including these assessments into the library did exist, but teachers appeared to be unaware of it.

"I have a range of student ability... so it was difficult for me to find an appropriate assessment that would fit everyone."

Multiple-Choice Versus Performance Assessments

When asked whether they used performance-based questions or multiple-choice type questions as a means of gauging students' growth, the majority of focus group participants said they used multiple-choice exams. Justification for employing this type of assessment ranged from the desire to prepare students for something "STAAR-like" to the ease of grading multiple-choice tests. Others expressed discomfort with the subjectivity of performance assessments, because they thought personal biases hindered the fair evaluation of students. Moreover, a few teachers mentioned that they had used performance assessments previously, but switched to multiple-choice the next year because of the work involved. Those who used performance assessments did so because it was easier to gauge students' comprehension, and some claimed it provided a more accurate assessment of students' ability. One focus group member stated that performance assessments allowed teachers to "learn more from their students." Moreover, performance-based tests were seen as more conducive to some non-core areas (e.g., physical education, art, and music). Several teachers claimed to have used a combination of both performance-based questions and multiple-choice items, thus taking advantage of the strengths of each while simultaneously minimizing their weaknesses. Teachers most likely to employ both

tended to be in non-core areas (e.g., the fine arts). Interestingly, teachers may be more likely to meet SLO targets with performance-based assessments, given that students can be awarded partial points for demonstrated work.

Factors Affecting Successful Meeting of SLO Goals

Questions about factors affecting teachers' ability to meet SLO goals produced a variety of responses. To successfully meet their goals, teachers most frequently discussed the need to focus on their objectives throughout the school year, which was achieved through a variety of means. The importance of "practice, practice, practice" and continually teaching the material was most commonly mentioned. One teacher said, "Each week as we plan, we ask how are we addressing this TEK that's on the SLO. We develop homework sheets that go home every day that are what we're trying to do." Some also tried to incorporate objectives into lessons in novel ways. For example, one teacher mentioned liking how the counselor did a read aloud with her group of students, so she "incorporated it with what [she did] and some of the concepts that [she taught] with reading." Others mentioned the importance of ensuring that all students comprehended the material before transitioning to new lessons. One elementary school teacher stated, "I make sure that 100% of all of my students can do it. In the past, there may have been a few who weren't quite getting it….Now I'm doing a lot more [to make sure all of them get it]." This involved strategies such as increased tutoring, interventions, or putting students in small guided groups. Still others spoke of the need for collaboration with other teachers to target and help those most in need by, in the words of the teacher, "letting the other staff know what they should focus on with [a] student." In some cases, this meant pulling students from classes to provide them with extra support for certain lessons.

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Teachers also noted pre- and posttest timing was a relevant factor affecting their success. Some felt that the window for testing, in general, was not large enough. Consequently, teachers had to be strategic about when they taught material. One prekindergarten (pre-K) teacher confided being upset about having to wait to introduce certain lessons until later in the year for fear of affecting the pre-test scores of her students. It should be noted that although teachers may have needed to wait to gain approval for teacher-developed assessments, no pretest window existed, so teachers could administer pre-tests as early as they wished if using vetted assessments. Many also felt that the post-test was scheduled too close to the STAAR exams, thus feeding into students' testing fatigue and making accomplishing the SLO more difficult. The testing window for Spring 2014 extended over a 7-week period (March 24th to May 9th), however. A few teachers cited the importance of experience with the process itself as contributing to their success. One teacher stated, "I think, too, when you do it several years in a row, you get better, you know what to expect, unlike STAAR. When you know what it's going to look like, you know what to teach, how to do your group."

Special area teachers tended to exhibit frustration with various components of the process. Many felt that meeting their SLO goals was particularly difficult, given their limited time with students. One teacher said, "[We] have a hard time because [we] only see [our] students every 3 days, so it often takes 2 to 3 weeks to complete their SLO pre- and post-tests." Similarly, many special area teachers and support staff expressed misgivings about the extent to which they were able to provide meaningful assistance for their team SLO

because, in the words of one participant, "they realistically can't do what the team does." This made them feel blamed or guilty when the team failed to achieve its goals or feel resented when they were successful because, as one participant stated, "they get the same money as the team who worked on the goal everyday with the students." Moreover, some staff faced additional difficulties due to the wide range of abilities within their student population. One elementary school life skills teacher reported, "I struggle every year. I have a heterogeneous class. [As a result], I kind of struggle to have a blanket statement that would work for everyone." This issue could have been mitigated, though, by using individual growth targets, which the REACH program allowed.

Unfortunately, many teachers felt that the ability to meet their SLO target was seemingly determined by factors out of their control, such as "luck" and the characteristics of the students they served. Factors such as difficult home environments, high mobility, and student attendance issues were frequently raised during the focus groups. Many also reported the timeline for diagnosing students' disabilities and language proficiency was such that pre-tests were administered before the identification of appropriate accommodations or modifications. Consequently, these students were required to exhibit growth on tests not suited to their ability or language. One elementary school teacher stated, "You're teaching them, and they are making progress, but they just aren't making the same amount of growth. They need the modified test to show the appropriate amount of growth." The SLO manual, however, specified that all students should receive modifications and/or accommodations, as required by their IEPs, 504s, and English language learner status. Thus, posttests could and should have reflected any changes in students' testing requirements identified after the initial pretest.

Many teachers found fault with the required minimum target,[3] which some called "arbitrary." Numerous others expressed frustration that even though their students experienced growth, sometimes substantially so, it was not enough to make their goal. One teacher said, "When a kid starts very low, like in the 20s, the kids will show growth, but what is required is very high for these students. I was happy with how my kids were improving, but they didn't meet the SLO." Similarly, another teacher stated, "I have kids who doubled their scores, but still didn't meet their goal." As a result, teachers suggested the importance of having a different sliding scale to accommodate students starting low. Although the REACH program required a minimum amount of student growth, the program did allow teachers to establish targeted goals for students based on their pretest scores, which could have addressed some of these concerns. These teachers may have been unaware of the policy or may have been at schools where the administration did not permit this type of growth target.

"When a kid starts very low, like in the 20s, the kids will show growth, but what is required is very high for these students. I was happy with how my kids were improving, but they didn't meet the SLO."

Also, some reported inequities between teachers, and noted that those with fewer students were penalized to a greater extent when they did not make a goal. One special education teacher stated, "Only two of my five passed. It felt unfair to me because I only have five kids, and there is no room for error." In this situation, every student counted 20% toward the final SLO goal, whereas each student contributed only 4% toward the final

[3]To receive SLO stipends, REACH required that at least 75% of students achieve teachers' SLO targets, and that targets reflect at least half the distance between pre-test scores and perfect scores. However, some principals established more rigorous decision rules regarding SLO achievement requirements for stipends.

SLO for a teacher with a classroom of 25. To address this issue, special education teachers had the option to "mirror" general education teachers with whom they worked.

Peer Observation: Overall Impressions

Participants expressed a range of opinions about the contribution of peer observations to teachers' experience and practice. A proportion of participants reported that the peer observations were positive and helpful; however, a similar proportion of teachers relayed concerns about the program. Both positive and negative comments were communicated at all levels (i.e., elementary school, middle school, and high school).

Teachers from many campuses agreed that the observers gave useful feedback that helped them become better teachers. For example, a music teacher described how the peer observer "helped [her] out with ideas from a regular classroom and set [her] up to do a walkthrough with another music teacher at a different REACH campus." Another teacher stated that the observer's feedback "changed my teaching practice. I now teach based on the rubric." Furthermore, participants from several schools indicated that peer observations provided a new and unbiased perspective, and that they enjoyed receiving feedback from someone who was not familiar with their everyday experiences. One teacher stated, "[W]hen they don't know how long we have been here, the observations are neutral and give us a perspective that we may not have seen." These comments corroborated the ECS results from teachers across all REACH schools. Across school levels, 80% of survey respondents indicated they considered the feedback they received from observers when planning and conducting their daily work, and 78% believed their students benefited from that feedback (Table 2). In addition, 84% of survey respondents agreed that peer observations were a good idea, and 73% thought the program should be expanded to include coaching (Table 2).

However, some teachers in focus groups indicated concerns about different aspects of the peer observation process. For example, participants mentioned that the peer observation experience was "stressful," especially with regard to the unannounced visits. One teacher mentioned that having a window for when observers would visit would help ensure that "their visit won't conflict with other activities that are not opportune for addressing the various components of the rubric, such as test day or when introducing a new topic [requiring more teacher centered instruction]." Both of the examples this teacher cited referred to situations not conducive to some behaviors represented in the peer observation rubric, such as student collaboration. Interestingly, a system was in place for teachers to notify their observers of times and dates they would be testing or when they would be doing other nontraditional classroom activities, such as field trips.

How teachers felt about the program seemed to be associated with their particular experience with the peer observer. For example, several teachers mentioned they had different peer observers in the first and second years of the program, and their impression of the program changed drastically from one year to the next. Teachers at one school reported greater satisfaction with the program in the current year because their current peer observer was more focused on "instruction" and gave "great advice," as compared with the previous year's observer. However, teachers in another school had the opposite experience: in the first year, they saw their peer observer more as a mentor and in the second more as an evaluator. Dissatisfaction with the program seemed to occur when teachers felt the observations were more focused on scoring and judging their performance than on discussing both strengths and points of weakness and on sharing ideas for improvement.

It is interesting to note that when comparing the group of teachers asked to participate in the focus groups (i.e., teachers who had been at the campus since before REACH's inception) with teachers who were not asked

to participate (i.e., teachers who joined the campus after REACH's inception), data from the ECS indicated that focus group participants had less confidence in the peer observers than did teachers who were not invited to the focus groups. Teachers asked to participate were significantly ($p < .05$) less likely to express confidence in the accuracy of their peer observer's ratings than were teachers who were not asked to participate in the focus groups. This result corroborates observations from a prior report (Schmitt, 2013), in which novice teachers were more likely than their more experienced peers to agree that peer observation was a good idea. Interestingly, nearly 80% of Spring 2014 ECS respondents across all REACH schools indicated confidence in the rating they received from their peer observer (Table 2).

Peer observation

In 2011–2012, REACH implemented peer observations as a component of the program. Each year, teachers are observed and rated by trained observers, using a rubric that identifies best practices in teaching. The peer observers hold a pre-conference with each teacher to familiarize him or her with the rubric and expectations, and a post-conference to provide feedback about the observed strengths and weaknesses. Teachers receive a stipend if the ratings from the observations meet the predetermined criteria.

For more information about peer observation, visit http://www.austinisd.org/reach/peer-observers

Participants reported more positive experiences when they identified and shared a common background with the peer observers than when they did not share a common background. One teacher stated, "I really liked her. She sent me some behavioral stuff that I implemented in my own classroom, and I saw a big difference." In addition, various teachers felt that feedback was dependent upon the ability of the observer to establish a relationship with the individual being observed. For example, one participant indicated she viewed her relationship with the peer observer as a partnership stemming from similar backgrounds, but was not sure that her colleagues had the same experience.

"When they don't know how long we have been here, the observations are neutral and give us a perspective that we may not have seen."

In addition, participants from eight campuses indicated that for peer observers to be helpful, they needed content area knowledge and experience in similar work and community environments as the teachers being observed. For example, an elementary school teacher mentioned it was readily apparent that his observer was from out of state, thus implying that the peer observer lacked the Texas context. Others expressed similar frustration that observers did not understand the background and needs of the students within their school. A math teacher indicated that it was "difficult to respect what others say about [her] teaching when they [were not] comfortable with math," and another teacher thought peer observers should "know what elective teams do, whether they are specifically for band, physical education, or career technology, or other areas." However, all observers in the program had previously taught in the state of Texas. Additionally, in pairing peer observers and teachers, REACH staff prioritized matching background and content knowledge; therefore, it was surprising that some participants felt observers lacked context or content knowledge.

Another set of concerns expressed by participants in several schools revolved around the length and frequency of observations, and the appropriateness of the rubric used. Various teachers thought that the rubric was inappropriate for their subject or grade level, or forced them to change their lesson plan to accommodate the observation time. For example, a physical education teacher explained that he had a "hard time" accommodating the rubric because it was a physical education class, and therefore students should be active:

"They weren't doing the same kinds of things that they would be doing if they were in a classroom." To mitigate this issue, one participant suggested there should be a "different rubric for each subject area." Another participant suggested having an N/A option rather than a zero if the rubric did not apply to a lesson, such as when "evidence of student work is expected for a beginning lesson where there isn't any student work yet." (However, the N/A option was not feasible due to grant requirements). Concerns about the appropriateness of the rubric were not shared by staff in the Office of Educator Quality, who described the extensive vetting and approval of the rubric by district content area supervisors. They suggested teachers review the video resources and examples available on the peer observation website.

> "I really liked [my peer observer]. She sent me some behavioral stuff that I implemented in my own classroom, and I saw a big difference."

Various participants also said that two observations of 45 minutes were not enough time and did not provide a good representation of their teaching. For example, one participant explained that the scoring sometimes felt subjective because "you can't see in 45 minutes all of the areas the she [the observer] wanted to see." Another participant suggested that "for peer observation to be helpful, it would have to be more than just two times a year" and that "just getting an observation at the beginning and end of the year was not very effective."

Interestingly, when comparing individuals who were asked to participate in the focus group with those who were not asked at the same school, data from the ECS indicated that focus group participants were significantly ($p < .1$) less likely to agree that they were satisfied with the support they received from the peer observer than were non participants. In fact, 79% of all teachers responding to the survey indicated they were satisfied with the level of support they received (Table 2), suggesting those invited to focus groups were among those least favorable toward peer observation.

Elements of REACH to Keep

Participants were presented with a fictitious scenario in which a new grant proposal was to be written to fund a few aspects of REACH. When asked what components should be included, participants indicated that several parts of REACH were valuable to their practice and therefore should be kept. For example, teachers from 11 of the 18 campuses indicated that mentoring was important for novice teachers. Furthermore, various participants said that mentoring helped not only the novice teachers but also other teachers in the team, and suggested that mentoring should be expanded to support veteran teachers on a need basis and to support, in the words of one participant, "teachers who make a change to a different teaching assignment."

Teachers from 13 campuses indicated that individual and/or team SLOs helped them improve their teaching and therefore should be kept. Various participants indicated that they liked their SLOs because of the "collaboration," and one teacher with students across different grade levels claimed it helped her to be aware of what the various students needed to know. On a similar note, a science teacher believed SLOs worked well across subject areas, and stated, "You can get the kids to do the reading strategy because there is a science passage they need to read and understand." Expanding on this topic, a few teachers suggested that, going forward, parts of REACH could be combined to improve SLOs. Participants on one campus voiced the opinion that it would be helpful to incorporate a mentor in the team SLO, whereas participants on another campus suggested that peer observers could be combined with individual SLOs.

Teachers from 12 campuses indicated professional development units (PDUs) should be kept. Many of those participants indicated that PDUs would be useful because they were, in the words of one teacher, "a way of doing a study that teachers would not find the time to do otherwise." Another teacher mentioned that PDUs allowed teachers to develop professionally, which was likely to have a positive impact on students. Some suggested that the process would be more beneficial if they were given dedicated time and resources (e.g., material or staff help), as well as advisors to help with the creation of team goals. In addition, participants from eight campuses indicated that peer observation was worthwhile and helped them improve their teaching. However, some of those teachers also indicated that it would be more helpful if peer observers had more context knowledge and awareness of local student needs.

Lastly, participants from six campuses indicated that even though some of the REACH incentives were not the most important aspect of the program or the most influential factor keeping them on their campuses, retention stipends and other financial compensation helped with morale, and consequently should be kept. Expanding on this topic, one teacher suggested that a retention stipend should not be tied to an evaluation, and that there should be a "blanket bonus for all teachers working in the high needs population." Another teacher proposed a "retroactive stipend based on how many years the teacher has been at the school." Many were particularly upset that the current retention stipend had recently been tied to SLO achievement; one teacher stated that it felt as though he "wasn't good enough for [them] to want to retain" because he did not make his SLO.

"For peer observation to be helpful, it would have to be more than just two times a year."

Conclusions and Recommendations

Altogether, participants indicated the REACH program helped them focus on their planned objectives, and enhanced professional collaboration on campus by creating more opportunities for teachers to interact with educators from other areas, with whom they might not have worked otherwise. The majority of participants felt that these benefits outweighed the additional work that REACH added to their already stressful jobs, and indicated the ways in which they felt the program could be improved to better support their work. Many participants expressed gratitude for the opportunity to provide feedback about their experiences. Based on this feedback, we offer the following recommendations.

Continue to expand the number and types of SLO vetted assessments, and provide feedback to teachers about the vetting process. REACH program staff offer summer assessment writing workshops wherein a group of REACH teachers attend assessment writing professional development sessions and then create actual assessments that, upon approval, will become part of the "vetted and approved" assessment database for use by all REACH teachers. The number of and types of vetted and approved assessments grows each year and the quality of tests improves over time as more teachers use them and provide feedback about any areas of concern. Because of the amount of time and work building a comprehensive assessment database takes, however, assessments are not yet available that address the universe of potential SLOs. To facilitate expanding the database, during their review of SLOs, REACH staff identify high-quality, teacher-made assessments that are appropriate for inclusion in the database. However, during the focus groups, many teachers expressed confusion and frustration about whether it was even possible to submit their own assessments for consideration, and did not know that such a review process already existed. REACH staff should communicate

the method used for this process so that teachers recognize their efforts are potentially used to benefit all teachers in the future.

Clarify framing of the peer observation rubric for teachers. The peer observation rubric is extensive and includes behaviors that foster learning and should be present in successful classrooms. However, some teachers reported that the rubric (intended to cover all subjects and levels) included items that were not appropriate for some subject areas or some grade levels. For example, various participants related that some items on the rubric did not reflect behaviors natural to children at the kindergarten level or were not applicable to non-core areas (e.g., physical education). Although observers have been trained by district staff regarding the ways the rubric does apply to all settings, it would be beneficial for peer observers to be mindful of the fact that some teachers struggle to understand the application of the rubric and continue to share examples of what each item means for different subject areas and grade levels. These translations should be clear and well-documented to the extent possible. Additionally, observers should regularly remind teachers about the video examples available on the website.

Clearly communicate the objectives of the peer observation Despite efforts to instruct peer observers to focus on constructive observations and to pair observers and teachers by content area, results indicated that peer observations in the 2013–2014 school year were perceived by teachers across several campuses as being more evaluative and less supportive than in the past. Various participants reported that, in contrast with the previous year, when they felt that the peer observation process was focused on success and was aimed at school improvement, this year's observations seemed to focus on what was not observed and on deducting points from teachers' observation scores. In addition, participants felt that some observers lacked content knowledge and teaching experience in AISD or in schools with similar needs.

Several steps may be considered to address these issues. First, observers should be strategic when they share their teaching experience and other credentials and focus in particular on helping the teacher understand how their background allows them to observe and provide feedback that can complement and contribute to the teacher's practice. This may be helpful in alleviating some concerns teachers have about the relevance of their observers feedback. Second, observers should clearly communicate the purpose and objectives of the program (i.e., supportive not evaluative) to the teachers with whom they are partnered, and this message should be calibrated across observers. Finally, to explicate the role of the peer observer and to monitor the consistency and effectiveness of the peer observation program, REACH program staff should consider creating a rubric outlining the function and work of peer observers (similar to the MICAT used for the REACH mentoring program). This would be a valuable training and evaluation tool.

Appendix A. Items on the Focus Group Protocol

Introduction

Hello, everyone. My name is _____ and this is_____, and we work for the AISD Department of Research and Evaluation. AISD has been evaluating the REACH program since it started in 2007 –2008, and that includes periodically checking in with teachers to understand their experiences in the program. We are going to be taking notes and recording our conversation so that we are sure to capture the things you share with us, but your name will not be used when we report what you have shared.

For this focus group, we want to get your feedback on three areas: your impressions for the program in general, then we'll discuss your thoughts on the SLO process, and end with your ideas about peer observation.

It's a lot to cover, but we will be sure to get you out of here on time. Great, let's begin.

General

1. To those who were here before REACH, what changes did you notice on your campus when REACH started?

Student learning objectives

1a. What factors do you consider when selecting a learning objective for your SLO?

b. What factors do you consider when selecting a type of assessment for your SLO?
   i. Performance vs. multiple choice
   ii. Vetted and approved vs. teacher developed

c. What factors do you consider when selecting a growth target for your SLO?
   i. Standard vs. more rigorous

2. What factors contribute to your success in meeting your SLO goal?

3. What can be done to improve SLOs to increase their impact on students?

4. How do you use your SLOs to inform your teaching practices?

5. How did you monitor progress on SLOs?

6. Do you learn how to improve upon your scores? Is this important to you, to learn this?

7a. Would you approach SLOs differently if there were no money attached?

b. How would you feel if SLOs were part of the appraisal system?

Peer observation

1. In your experience, what need does the peer observer fill? What do peer observers contribute to your teaching experience, to the school –wide experience?

2. Who benefits most from peer observation?

3. How would you feel if peer observation was geared only toward teachers who needed extra support?

General

1. How do all of the elements of REACH influence your instruction, data analysis, student progress, professional development, collaboration, and retention?

2. Even though we just discussed some of the more specific elements we would like to know your opinion on what you consider the most important components of REACH overall. If the district could write a grant proposal to support the continuation or expansion of certain parts of REACH, which parts of the program would be most critical to support? Here's a list of the elements (show list). Why?

Conclusion

Thanks so much for your honesty and for helping us to document how things are going so far with the REACH program. We'll be providing a narrative summary of the themes that have emerged from our focus groups, the results of which will be available on the REACH website. Thanks again!

List of program elements

Individual SLOs

Team SLOs

Professional development units (PDUs)

Peer observation

Novice teacher mentoring

Basket of measures

Reference

Schmitt, L. N. T. (2013). *AISD REACH Program Update, 2013–2014* (DRE Publication No. 12.89). Austin, TX: Austin Independent School District.